

COVID-19: MENTAL HEALTH

Healing with Laughter



Local therapist adopts laughter therapy as means of treating one's mental health in times of chaos

By **NANCI HUTSON**
The Daily Courier

In the true-to-life film "Patch Adams" that starred the late comedian Robin Williams, the power of laughter and humor is showcased as a means to heal and help people cope with serious illness.

Most folks at one time or another have heard someone profess the phrase credited to 1300s surgical professor Henri de Mondeville, "Laughter is

the best medicine."

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, local, state and national public health leaders have adopted the need to laugh and pursue happy ventures to counterbalance the chaos this virus has inflicted on people's lives.

"I love laughter," declared Christine Hayes, the program director and a certified laughter therapy mental health counselor at Southwest Behavioral

See **LAUGH**, page 12

ABOVE PHOTO: Southwest Behavioral & Health Services Program Director and certified laughter therapy professional counselor, Christine Hayes, standing next to her agency's sign in the front hallway – complete with her bright red clown nose. Another is of her at her desk showing off one of her laughter exercises. (Nanci Hutson/Courier)

• Laugh

From page 1

& Health Services in Prescott Valley. "Laughter gets you in the present moment. Laughter, literally, impacts our emotional health, our physical health, and our social health all in one. I use it in everything."

Laughter therapy is a healing art, one Hayes first encountered in about 2011 when she was conducting research as part of earning her master's degree in professional counseling at Grand Canyon University after an undergraduate psychology degree from Arizona State University.

She said she connected with an oncology nurse in Phoenix who was conducting laughter therapy workshops to help counselors bolster healing and comfort in their clients.

"Everyone loved it. Everyone left feeling a little better about the situation they



Christine Hayes with her "Ride the Wave" support surfboard next to lyrics from "Winnie the Pooh" scrolled on the walls of their two-story headquarters on Florentine Road in Prescott Valley. (Nanci Hutson/Courier)

were in," Hayes said of that experience that dates back to around 2011.

At Southwest, Hayes said laughter therapy is one of the group counseling options offered to clients. Due to COVID-19 protocols, the "Healing with Laughter" group Hayes facilitates is temporarily on hold. The principles, though, still

apply, she affirmed.

Some may be skeptical, but usually clients find value, and fun, in the scientific approach that relies on laughter exercises with the teaching and daily practice of life principles - giving and receiving compliments; flexibility - learning how to "ride the wave;" gratitude perspective; kindness and blessings; forgiveness of others and of one's self. Weekends are then for "chocolate," otherwise known as self-care, she said with a chuckle.

"I'm a very positive per-

son and value giving someone hope to people wherever they are on their journey. I do it with my own family," said Hayes of her home life that includes four adult children and one newborn grandson. "My kids see me come home in a mood, and they'll do a laughter exercise for me. Even in the job, I'm a big proponent of positivity and teamwork.

"I use (laughter) in everything," she said.

Not to say that life is always a laugh fest.

On her own life journey, Hayes has wrestled with some tough times. Her face, though, ignites into a broad smile as she nods to a bright purple "Ride the Wave" Styrofoam surfboard mounted in her office. Hayes' staff delivered it to her with inspirational penned messages this spring when she was hospitalized for colon cancer.

The now "cancer conqueror" said the funny, uplifting notes on that board offered her the gift of laughter when she needed that brand of healing most.

"It's something we can

control," Hayes said of the need to incorporate silly play into daily routines as they help build up one's immune system and provide perspective when times are tough.

National laughter therapy guru, the late Annette Goodheart, embarked in the practice in the 1960s, writing a book that incorporates her version of "cathartic laughter."

Goodheart's four basic steps were to use laughter to get in touch with feelings, to release them, to rethink the situation or experience associated with prior feelings that laughter has made possible by a chemical rebalancing in the body; and then taking sensible action to move forward.

For 36 years, Goodheart used laughter therapy to treat cancer, AIDS, depression and other illnesses.

A Stanford University psychiatrist, Dr. William Fry, is counted as the father of "gelotology," or the science of laughter, who in the 1960s also explored how laughter is a physical exercise that decreases respiratory infec-

tions and enables the body to produce natural painkillers, better known as endorphins.

In Hayes' practice, laughter exercises are part of the therapy, with the amiable, and easy-to-laugh, therapist engaging her clients in simple activities where they can make "Ho, ho, Ha, Ha, Wooh!" sounds as they do such things as mimic brushing teeth.

"Adults need to play," Hayes said. The laughter exercises free them from being too serious and enabling them to embrace "what they have."

Laughter "strengthens the immune system," Hayes said. "It gives your body positive emotions when you need to fight. It strengthens you."

Amid the pandemic, Hayes said laughter is a means to reduce the anxiety that can otherwise consume one's energy.

"We can't control the wave, but we can control our response to it," she said. "Laughter puts you in the present so you're not worried about hours from now, or yesterday. Laughter is awesome like that. It resets us."

