THE AGE OF DISSONANCE /

Comic Relief

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At a downtown party for a new self-help guide called "CANCER101," a gamin in black wore a motley head scarf to cover her baldness. My friend Marissa, who is receiving mild chemotherapy after the removal of a lump last May, but isn't going bald, admired the scarf and the look, which was very Saint Laurent in a way.

"It makes me think I should be getting the stronger chemo," she said.

She was joking, of course. But then, like so many other women on chemotherapy these days, she jokes about her condition most of the time. She is even working on a cartoon about breast cancer for Glamour. "I might as well have fun with it," she said.

And why not? Norman Cousins pushed laughter as medicine more than 30 years ago in his book "Anatomy of an Illness," and in 1989 the Journal of the American Medical Association acknowledged that humor helps patients with pain. Since then, the cancer laughs keep coming. Rosie O'Donnell wrote a jokey book, "Bosom Buddies." Organizations like Comedy Cures and Humor Heals aim to have people in stitches, sometimes even while they're in stitches.

Playing off Broadway right now? "Last Easter," a cancer comedy.

Pink ribbons, yellow bracelets and all manner of campaigns like the current Breast Cancer Awareness month have taken the secret stigma out of what used to be quietly called the Big C. At a bold time when bold women are allowing themselves to be glib and ironic about the disease (some even tell me with gallows humor that it's chic), I sometimes feel the urge to join in the fun by contributing a quip or one-liner of my own. Then I stop myself, unsure of the etiquette. Must the rest of us still be so serious about cancer? Yes, until we are asked not to be.

"The last thing I wanted was people treating me like I was one foot in the grave," said Monica Knoll, who wrote the self-published "CANCER101" — and joked that the apple martinis at her book party were chemo cocktails. "But friends and family have to feel it out."

In other words, when she was bald and wrapped in bandages after her mastectomy, and singing "I Feel Pretty" to her mother, sobriety wasn't what was needed.

Another woman, Saranne Rothberg, had "chemo comedy" parties for video watching while undergoing treatment for advanced breast cancer four years ago.

"It was a way to fight my cancer in an open, cathartic way," she said.

The experience inspired Ms. Rothberg to start Comedy Cures, a nonprofit organization that helps the gravely ill laugh. It even has a joke hot line (888-424-2424).

"But if you don't have cancer," she said, "you have to sit on your humor until you get the go-ahead. It's important to listen for cues and not deliver the first joke."

Of course, not everyone thinks jokes are in order, saying they can offend rather than mend, or mask deeper feelings that may need to come out.

Julia Sweeney, who wrote and performed "Julia Sweeney's `God Said "Ha!" ' " — a 1996 play about getting cancer while she was caring for a brother with cancer — wonders if the humor is now out of control.

"There's all this pressure to laugh at cancer now," said Ms. Sweeney, a former "Saturday Night Live" comedian, who thinks that friends and family members should be the audience, not the entertainment, around people with cancer. "And don't tell patients about how stress causes cancer or how humor or eating nothing but carrots can make it go away," she said. "It's awful when people suggest you can control cancer."

She said she would like to start a group called "Let's Stop Laughing About Cancer."

"Laughter isn't always the best medicine," Ms. Sweeney said.

Still, it seems to be helping my friend Marissa. When I stopped by the hospital on Monday during her most recent chemotherapy session, she was joking with nurses and doctors. What else to do but start joking, too?

"Whenever I have this chemo drip in my hand," she said, "I want to talk to the funniest people I know." I'll take that as a compliment and a marching order.

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