

# LAUGH AFTER DEAF

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Shawn Lovley I'll start things off by telling you why laughing is good for both your body and your spirit. And then I'll turn it over to our panelists, who will tell us what laughter means to them and why they believe in its healing powers. Our panelists will then share their thoughts about the benefits of laughter and tell funny stories about their life after deaf. And then I hope the audience members will also share their stories with us, because I know we all have them.

Let's kick things off by looking at the benefits that laughter provides our bodies and spirits. We'll start with the physical stuff. First thing, laughter strengthens our immune system. If you laugh, you feel better. It also stimulates your circulation. There is a joke about a newly married man who complains to an older male friend who has been married for years. He complains that his wedding ring is cutting off his circulation. Well, the older man says, that's exactly what it is suppose to do, it's supposed to cut down on your circulation. Well, laughter doesn't do that. Laughter makes it easier for the blood to travel and definitely does not cut off your circulation. It's good for you.

Laughter can also lower your cholesterol level. It feels great and is calorie free! And it can also help our respiratory system so that we breathe better. When we breathe better we have more energy. And that's no joke. In addition, laughter helps us feel less stressed out because it reduces stress hormones. Stress leads to tense muscles, and laughing helps them to relax. And if you have aches or pains, then you might want to try a good laugh. I know that. After my last brain surgery, I laughed a lot because it made me feel so much better. It reduces pain in a big way.

It used to be really common for people to describe something they liked as "killer." For example, there were "killer" clothes, "killer" movies and so on. Well, here's a killer fact: laughter increases the number and activity of natural killer cells in our bodies. The bottom line -- laughter is great for our bodies. It's kind of like exercising without having to work up a sweat.

Several years ago, Norman Cousins, who used to edit *The Saturday Review* (italicize), contracted a deadly disease that was supposed to kill him. Well, he refused to accept that death sentence. He wrote his own prescription, which included lots of laughter. And that helped him recover from his illness. Afterwards, he wrote a wonderful book about his adventures with the disease called, Anatomy of an Illness (underline) in which he said: "It has always seemed to me that hearty laughter is a good way to jog internally without having to go outside."

Laughter isn't good for just our bodies though. Our spirits can benefit from it in a big way too. A second ago, I talked about laughter helping to reduce the physical symptoms of stress. Well, it's good for mental stress, too. And we all have that.

Laughter reduces anger and anxiety in a big way too. I defy you to try to feel angry or anxious while you're laughing. Try it. You can't do both at the same time. It increases our sense of joy and aliveness. Finally, it creates a more positive optimistic mood and increases our sense of control.

People have known for a long time that laughter is good for our spirit. Mark Twain once said, "The human race has one really effective weapon and that is laughter. The moment it arises, all our hardness yields, all our irritations and resentments slip away and a sunny spirit takes their place." I'm definitely: in Twain's camp. I find that when I'm laughing, I'm too busy having fun to worry about the bad things that are part of life without hearing. I'm not denying that life after deafness is a real challenge. It is. As a late-deafened friend of mine said a while ago, hearing loss is serious business. And it is. We all know that. But not all the time. There are plenty of things to laugh about. And laughing can help us feel better both physically and emotionally.

But, now I want to find out what others have to say about the power of laughter. And what it means for them. So I'm going to turn things over to our panelists.

Lori Heir: I am known for mixing up my signs, because when I am hungry, I go like this, and it means I am horny. And that is not good to mix up. And I mix up perfect and pissed off. So that is not great either. I started losing my hearing about ten years ago and at first I didn't have the ability to laugh at myself. You know, that made everything a lot harder because I was so focused on understanding people that I couldn't understand. I became very stressed and it just became harder. But then after becoming involved in ALDA, I gained a lot of confidence and began interacting with all of you wonderful people. I learned that when I let down my guard, and, didn't feel so stressed laughter became synonymous with relaxed. As a result I started to feel like I could communicate so much better. I began to do that in every part of my life even outside ALDAcon. So I'm here today to tell you that laughter not only has had physical benefits for me, but that I'm now able to really enjoy myself.

Some things have happened to me since I lost my hearing that are really hysterical, and I have a story to tell you today that happened to me while I was at the SHHH convention in New Jersey last year. I was there with my boyfriend. He joined me for the weekend and we were staying at a nearby hotel. The hotel was not one that was prepared for access for me as a deaf person. It was early in the morning and I had to go to the conference at the other hotel, and my boyfriend was still sleeping. So I went into the lobby at the front desk and asked the woman working behind the desk if she had any ADA kits with the alarm clock, with the flashlights when somebody Knocks on your door or the vibrator for your bed. And she said she wasn't sure and she would check it out for me. In the meantime, I had to be at the SHHH convention. So I left the hotel and left my boyfriend sleeping. Later on that day he joined me at the conference. He says "I got this strange phone call while you were out. The phone woke me up and it was a woman from the front desk and she was calling to me that she didn't have any of the vibrators that you requested." So, he said, "Excuse me, just what was it were you asking for?"

Larry Littleton: As Shawn said, life after deaf is serious business. However, there is a lighter side to our life. And I'm here to tell you about my communication breakdowns. Things that strike me as very very funny and I hope they make you laugh, too. When I first started dating my current wife she did not sign. And it was right after we got married when there we are lying in bed in the evening and, of course, we have light overhead, and we are snuggling and she says to me, what I thought was, "good night, Charlie" and then she turned off the light. And said, wait a minute I said, "who the HELL is Charlie? I'm Larry." She said "No, no, no, I said 'Larry darling.' I said, 'good night, darling.' " So, from that point on, Charlie has been my darling, my sweet darling. And at first, I said, wait a minute, who do you think you are sleeping with, anyway. We learn to laugh about things like that.

Another interesting thing is I do have a cochlear implant. I was working as a private security guard for a music festival. I do have police envy. I've always wanted to be like a secret service agent and have that little walky-talky. Well the implant does not allow me to understand spoken language yet. So I was there as a security guard and this was a huge concert. Paul Simon and Brian Wilson. So it was a big deal. Well-known singers. So this woman walked up to me and she said, "I heard Paul McCartney is back stage. Can you find out?" Well, I did this. (Takes out Implant Processor box) I said, "Calling Paul McCartney, are you there, are you there?" and I put my cochlear implant back in and said, "Sorry, he is not there." You learn how to make things funny and enjoy the laughter. She had no clue, but for you and me it was hysterical.

Cheryl Heppner: This is my hearing dog Dana. She is my exhibit A, because my story is going to be about humor related to hearing dogs. Some of you may know that I am the director of the Center for Deafness in Virginia. And I get to travel all over the country. At any rate, one time I was involved in a very long conference, a long involved conference, and I was just exhausted. After five days of that I was ready to go home. So I went to the airport, found my flight, and as a person with a hearing dog, sometimes the airlines will allow me to pre-board. So, I took advantage of that. And I did what I always do with Dana, I set her up with half of her under the seat in front of me and half of her sticking out. And then the rest of the people start to board the airplane and the flight took off eventually. As we were flying I became very drowsy. Now, Dana is very smart. She knows exactly when I'm not paying attention. She is very tuned into me,

and she realizes when I start breathing more slowly and so as I got more and more drowsy, I nodded off. Now, the woman that was sitting in front of us had a box of cookies. And it was under her seat.

Now, picture this -- now, my dog is very professional and she is a very creative girl. And that box was right up in front of Dana's nose and it was full of cookies. And she could smell every one of them. The aroma must have just paralyzed her. She waited until she sensed that I was asleep and then tried to lift the lid of the box with her nose. Now, the woman in front of me, she's sitting there, you know, doing her regular thing. And then all of a sudden, she feels something under her seat beating up against her legs. And she is quite puzzled by this -- she starts to put her hand down under her seat, and all of a sudden, feels fur and she screams. Now, I, of course was sound asleep through this all. But then the moment that the woman screamed, I woke right up. And then all of a sudden I felt the whole atmosphere in the plane change. It was like a bolt of lightning went through the airplane, and everybody is looking at me, and I'm going: "I didn't do anything." And that is the expression that I had on my face. So, needless to say, after that, I was always very careful any time I got on an airplane to let the person sitting in front of me know that a dog would be under the seat. Because that poor woman. God only knows what she thought. She must have thought, "Oh, my god there is a rat on the plane." You know, she probably just wanted to jump out of the airplane.

Mark Dessert: I kind of learned the same lesson that Shawn learned over the years when I became deaf. Actually all my life -- there are many things in life that we have no control over. We cannot influence these events, but we always have control over our own attitude in terms of how we respond to them. And really, you know, if you can find humor in a situation that gives you a lot of control. And my progressive hearing loss was about 11 years from when I had perfect hearing until I was profoundly deaf, excuse me, 16 years, and the first late-deafened person I met was the co-founder of ALDAcon Karen Avina. And she had become deaf in a period of two or three days. And we were discussing our experiences one time. I had had a long time to prepare for deafness, but for her it was really quick. And I thought about that, and I said, gee, 16 years of progressive hearing loss, that is like slaughtering a steer by pulling its hairs out one at a time.

We all know that whether you use sign language, lip-read or depend on residual hearing with a hearing aid or cochlear implant that when you get tired, it's harder to understand when you are communicating. Well, when I was 39, I went back to college. I entered Gallaudet University, Washington, DC. That's the only four-year liberal arts college for deaf and hard of hearing students in the world. It is the end of my senior year, final exam week, a time for serious study for final exams. Now in the dorms were students who were flunking out and know they will not come back next semester, and they want to have fun. They wait until 1:00 in the morning and pull a false fire alarm. The dorm empties out and nobody can go back in until the fire department comes and inspects every room. So with each false alarm, you will be out of the dorm for about an hour and a half. Then you go back in, fall asleep, and 30 minutes later, another false alarm. That happens every night during final exams. Nobody sleeps. Well, my major was social work. And the social work department was having an awards luncheon where they had several awards for achievements and I didn't know it but I was getting an award for having the highest point average. I was really tired, am sitting with my field supervisor, and my eyes are like half-closed. And the presentation is going along, but I can't follow it at all. It was all I could do to keep my eyes open. And then all of a sudden everybody in the room was looking at me. And I'm thinking, "Oh, poop, was I snoring?" And I got really scared. And I thought, "Oh no, I need to do something." So I got up and started walking to the front of the room and I'm getting scared shitless. And I looked and saw my name was on the award. Boy, was I relieved.

I became deaf in October of 95, about four days before my first ALDAcon. Two months before that, you know, very little hearing left, I still think I can lip-read. You know, I'm still in denial after 16 years. I went to visit a friend. She had done her master's thesis on the ADA and I wanted to borrow the background information she had. We are eating lunch and she asked me a question, and I thought I had lip read her right. And my jaw just dropped and she said, "Mark, what is wrong?" "Did you just ask me for sex?" I replied. "No, dummy, I asked if you wanted coffee." So, lip reading can be dangerous. But, over the years I found out if I can really find humor in a situation and laugh I don't feel so out of control. You know, and laughing, is a lot more fun than crying.

I'm Carolyn Piper. I've had a progressive hearing loss, due to a bout with measles when I was 3, and have been totally deaf for the past 15 years or so. And the story I'm going to tell you today illustrates one reason I am so very very grateful to ALDA because before ALDA, I don't think I would have been laughing because it is through meeting wonderful people such as we have here today that I learned to laugh again.

First, I want to tell you a bit about where I live and what my life is like. I live in Vermont, in a very rural area. There are no other houses around and we are located on a dirt road. It is really pretty isolated. Mostly cows and chickens are my neighbors. And we don't lock our doors. In fact, I don't know where my front door key is. On the day this happened I was alone, my husband being at work. And often I enjoy going into a back room where it is fairly dark and I have a meditation rug and I lie down and I meditate. I also sew in that room, and on this day, after a bit of work, I decided to do a bit of meditating. So I closed the curtains, took off my cochlear implant and glasses and lay down on the floor. Now at that time we had a dog and she was about 13 and not very energetic, or alert. So I am lying there on the floor, a box of pins on my stomach, a dog that looks like she has already passed on by my side, my eyes are closed and I am sinking down within my mind pretty deeply. Suddenly, a light flashes brightly in my eyes. I didn't have my glasses on. I am blind as a bat without my glasses. So I open my eyes and there is a gun in my face. I laugh at this now, but at that moment when I opened my eyes and saw a vague outline of two dark-clad men holding flashlights and guns, I jumped a mile into the air. The pins when flying as I tried to scramble to my feet and tripped over the dog all the while screaming at the top of my lungs, as I am not, to put it mildly, a calm person by nature. "My eyes, my eyes" I yelled "where are my eyes? My ears. I need my ears!" Scrambling backwards I managed to finally grab my glasses and putting them on I clearly saw two policemen about to have fainting spells of their own.

After everybody calmed down we sorted out what had happened. I have two children, boys, who in their earlier years like to play James Bond-type games. Now I have to 'fess up here and tell you I am not a good housekeeper, and about ten years prior to this they had been playing and had written on one of the living room windows the words "HELP ME" with a candle. I never cleaned it off. Our friends are well aware of my deficiencies in this department, but unfortunately the Jehovah's Witnesses who come around now and again are not. I am in the back room and I didn't have the cochlear implant on and they are knocking on the door. I don't hear them. So, for some reason, they decided to peer in all the windows and they come to the window that says "help me!." And they decide that there is something very strange going on here. So they get in their car and run down to the local store and call the state police. The state police come up knocking on the door, I'm still unconscious on the rug. And they come in with their flashlights, and they see what looks like a dead woman and a dead dog on the floor, pull out their guns, and as they are reaching out to take my pulse, I suddenly come to life.

MARK DESSERT: I mentioned before that I cannot read lips to save my life. Tuesday during the self-help leadership training we had a little break, and I was talking about how I have problems with this especially in stores and so forth. And I was telling them how I went to a museum and could not understand something and asked them to write. It is always frustrating. People also expect all deaf people to read lips. Well, during the break on Tuesday, the interpreter gave me a wonderful one liner, the next time somebody asks you to read their lips, tell them if you write on your lips, then I can read them.

SHAWN LOVLEY: I love these stories so much. One day I was watching TV. There was a person on a talk show who was talking about a recipe that he loved, and he mentioned Parmesan cheese. But the captions didn't say Parmesan cheese, they said "pair Shawn" instead. Later, after I told my wife about what I had seen on the captioning, and after we had stopped laughing, you should have seen the look on her face as she said "Shawn, I don't know if I would be able to handle two of you. One is plenty." But enough from me. I want to hear some stories from the audience.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have a classic bluffing story. Several years ago when I was still hard of hearing and I was still using hearing aids my girlfriend and I were out in a singles bar. There was a very big crowd and music loud, and some men invited us to sit at their table. They were buying the drinks and one man took a particular interest in me. And he was talking, talking, talking, I understood nothing. I am just going: "yes, yes, yes" and he stands up suddenly and hurries. Fine. My girlfriend says: "Do you know where he went?" "I don't know, I don't care. I'm not interested in him," I answered. She said, "He asked you if you

wanted to get a room in the hotel. And you nodded and smiled and he has gone to get a key." I grabbed my bags and went 'boom!', out of there.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Once when my daughter asked me a question I thought she asked me how to define a transsexual and it turned out she wanted to find a train schedule.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Here in the hotel, I was really tired after traveling and after first waking up, went back to bed. My family got up and dressed and left. They did not put the "do not disturb" sign out. So I am laying in bed sound asleep, when somebody just rips my covers off. I jumped right up and saw the poor maid. I think she was more startled then I was. Fortunately, I had long pajamas.

The last thing that I want to share with you is a way that humor has really helped me that I haven't seen so much. I am kind of funny looking. For one thing I can't smile. So I find when I'm working with people if I can crack a joke, or a one liner, and, of course, the subject that I most often use is myself, and make them laugh, they are a lot more comfortable with me. And so, that really, really helps.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Humor helps us get through life and also helps others get over others' discomfort and the assumption that we're very sensitive about our hearing loss or our deafness. A couple of years ago I was visiting my aunt and uncle for a weekend and I was the first one up and decided to make the coffee. I am minding my own business, making the coffee and went outside to get the newspaper that was delivered and when I came back in, my uncle came down stairs and there was a look on his face that I didn't recognize. Apparently in my wandering down stairs, I set off the burglary alarm, and the alarm is going, and the sirens are blaring, and I had no clue. I am just minding my own business drinking coffee and reading the newspaper. So my uncle came down and he was really very concerned about my feelings. And this happens. I said to him, "I am 44 years old. I have had hearing loss for the last 30 years. I have had no sound for the last 10. If you honestly think this is the first time something potentially embarrassing happened to me because of my actions related to my deafness, you've got a impression of me that is incorrect." I think he was uncomfortable. I thought it was hysterical.

**Mark Dessert** woke up deaf on October 1, 1995 after sixteen years of progressive hearing loss. His hearing loss was first detected during his discharge physical from the Navy. He has a bachelor's degree in social work and is on the staff of the ALDA News. [mdessert@ix.netcom.com](mailto:mdessert@ix.netcom.com)

**Shawn Lovley**, a former ALDA secretary, was diagnosed with a brain tumor in 1987, which took his hearing four years later. He was supposed to live five or six years after the tumor was discovered, but through laughter and other survival skills he is still around to bug people. [shawnlovley@earthlink.net](mailto:shawnlovley@earthlink.net)

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**Carolyn Piper** has a BS in Occupational Therapy from Columbia University. She lives in northern Vermont with her husband and has two grown sons and has been deaf for some 25 years due to a childhood illness. A longtime member of ALDA, she is the editor of the Proceedings and serves on the Editorial Board of ALDA News. [wicwas@wcvr.com](mailto:wicwas@wcvr.com)