



SAY CHEESE and SMILE

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“Say cheese and smile.” How many times have you heard that phrase before the camera flashes? We all want to be remembered wearing a smile, but that may not be a simple request to follow if the Parkinson’s mask or “masked fascias” is one of your symptoms.

I must confess that my apprehension of potentially losing my smile and the ability to show emotions was almost as strong as my concern about the possibility of needing a wheelchair. I felt people would easily recognize the necessity for a wheelchair if my legs wouldn’t move; but what if my face wouldn’t move due to the same stiffness and rigidity? Would my lack of facial expression be interpreted as my being indifferent, sad, angry or unintelligent?

Then my 36-year-old daughter reminded me that, although she was only six years old when my father-in-law passed away, she lovingly remembers him with a smile—even though a stroke had affected his face before she was born. Smiles can come from within! The “mask” does not have to hide the person behind it, nor do you have to hide or withdraw from life because your appearance has changed or you’re unable to do the things you did previously.

Living with Parkinson’s can be a constant battle. As a 17-year veteran, I feel strongly that the more we fight to help ourselves, the slower the progression will be. So, what can we do? First and foremost, I believe attitude and exercise are most important.

- ☺ If people misunderstand your expression or stare, Instead of being self-conscious, use your symptoms as an opportunity to educate. Explain about Parkinson’s to anyone who will listen. If speaking is a problem, use your imagination. Make up a joke or write a poem and put it on business cards you could hand out.
- ☺ Develop the part of your face that is most expressive. HAPS speech therapy classes can help you exercise your facial muscles. Try the following: raise your eyebrows, roll your eyes, and puff your cheeks out with your tongue. Practice different exaggerated facial expressions such as happiness, surprise, anger, sadness, etc. before the mirror. And, if you see me making funny faces as you pass me on the freeway, you may think I’m singing to the radio or arguing with the talk show host, but it’s more likely that I’m working on keeping my “happy face.”
- ☺ If you are wearing a smile, you’ll look and feel better regardless of whatever else you wear. Forget your face--reach out and touch someone.