

The Power of Laughter

Science has proven that there are numerous physiological and psychological benefits achieved from laughter. The phrase “Laughter is the best medicine” is more than just a lovely-sounding cliché, but a proven scientific model. However, this model first points to the purpose of laughter as a social unity mechanism, and through the results of that mechanism other benefits are likely to occur, including physical, chemical and psychological.

Laughter is also linked with optimism and positivity. These characteristics have an even stronger connection with improved health and life achievements.

There are quite a few medical cases where individuals have overcome major illnesses and have won battles over cancer, by including laughter as part of their overall health strategy. Additionally, many coaching clients comment that they would like to have more laughter in their lives and as they achieve this, they also find they are achieving more satisfying and/or successful results in all parts of their lives.

This document is comprised of some thoughts from the experts on the power of laughter. At the end of the document, some exercises have been provided for your further exploration and consideration.

SOME INTERESTING QUOTES

“When we laugh, natural killer cells which destroy tumours and viruses increase, along with Gamma-interferon (a disease-fighting protein), T-cells (important for our immune system) and B-cells (which make disease-fighting antibodies). As well as lowering blood pressure, laughter increases oxygen in the blood, which also encourages healing.” *“Science of Laughter” Discovery Health Website*

"Without humour one's thought processes are likely to become stuck and narrowly focused leading to increased distress." *Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humour*

"Laughter is very powerful medicine. It can lower stress, dissolve anger and unite families in their resolve to overcome troubled times." *University of Nebraska*

"Nothing is good or bad. It is thinking that makes it so." *Shakespeare*

"By the time a child reaches nursery school, he or she will laugh about 300 times a day. Adults laugh an average of 17 times a day." *"Science of Laughter" Discovery Health*

IT ALL STARTS WITH A SMILE

Maureen Nash of Light Hearted Solutions in Sydney, Australia, has produced the following tips on how to bring more laughter and joy into your daily life. Maureen has an extensive background in teaching, adult education, drama, clowning and facilitating laughter workshops.

Although some of the tips below may not seem to directly relate to laughter, they do create environments where laughter is more possible, the mood is more light-hearted and the body is in a good position physically to open up to the laughter experience.

- Smile at everyone you pass on the street!
- Watch a funny video or movie
- Do a loving thing for your partner
- Put more fun into sex
- Laugh out loud just for the fun of it
- Be grateful
- Forgive yourself
- Compliment someone
- Share an embarrassing moment with a friend
- Play with the kids
- Buy some toys to play with
- Change your thinking from negative to positive
- Take a risk and enjoy it
- Use humour in conflict situations
- Nurture yourself with a bath, a lovely walk or time for yourself
- Start seeing humour in every day situations
- Play with the dog, cat, bird or lizard!

HUMOUR AND LAUGHTER – FROM HELPGUIDE.ORG

HELPGUIDE.org is a non-profit resource site focusing on providing free information on mental health, healthy lifestyles, seniors and aging. Their website is www.helpguide.org and they are funded through donations. The information provided on the following pages is reprinted with their permission, and you are invited to support them through your generous donations.

What are the health benefits of humour and laughter?

The sound of roaring laughter is far more contagious than any cough, sniffle, or sneeze. Humour and laughter can cause a domino effect of joy and amusement, as well as set off a number of positive physical effects. A good hearty laugh can help:

Health Benefits of Laughter

- reduce stress
- lower blood pressure
- elevate mood
- boost immune system
- improve brain functioning
- protect the heart
- connect you to others
- foster instant relaxation
- make you feel good.

"Doctor I have a ringing in my ears." "Don't answer!" - Henny Youngman

Laughter activates the chemistry of the will to live and increases our capacity to fight disease. Laughing relaxes the body and reduces problems associated with high blood pressure, strokes, arthritis, and ulcers. Some research suggests that laughter may also reduce the risk of heart disease. Historically, research has shown that distressing emotions (depression, anger, anxiety, and stress) are all related to heart disease. A study done at the University of Maryland Medical Center suggests that a good sense of humour and the ability to laugh at stressful situations helps mitigate the damaging physical effects of distressing emotions (see [References and resources](#) for more details). Some other specifics about laughter's affect on the body are listed below.

Laughter's Effects on the Body

Laughter lowers blood pressure - People who laugh heartily on a regular basis have lower standing blood pressure than the average person. When people have a good laugh, initially the blood pressure increases, but then it decreases to levels below normal. Breathing then becomes deeper which sends oxygen enriched blood and nutrients throughout the body.

Humour changes our biochemical state - Laughter decreases stress hormones and increases infection fighting antibodies. It increases our attentiveness, heart rate, and pulse.

Laughter protects the heart - Laughter, along with an active sense of humour, may help protect you against a heart attack, according to the study at the University of Maryland Medical Center (cited above). The study, which is the first to indicate that laughter may help prevent heart disease, found that people with heart disease were 40 percent less likely to laugh in a variety of situations compared to people of the same age without heart disease.

Laughter gives our bodies a workout - Laughter can be a great workout for your diaphragm, abdominal, respiratory, facial, leg, and back muscles. It massages abdominal organs, tones intestinal functioning, and strengthens the muscles that hold the abdominal organs in place. Not only does laughter give your midsection a workout, it can benefit digestion and absorption functioning as well. It is estimated that hearty laughter can burn calories equivalent to several minutes on the rowing machine or the exercise bike.

Humour improves brain function and relieves stress - Laughter stimulates both sides of the brain to enhance learning. It eases muscle tension and psychological stress, which keeps the brain alert and allows people to retain more information.

How does humour improve mental and emotional health?

Humour is a powerful emotional medicine that can lower stress, dissolve anger and unite families in troubled times. Mood is elevated by striving to find humour in difficult and frustrating situations. Laughing at ourselves and the situation helps reveal that small things are not the earth-shaking events they sometimes seem to be. Looking at a problem from a different perspective can make it seem less formidable and provide opportunities for greater objectivity and insight. Humour also helps us avoid loneliness by connecting with others who are attracted to genuine cheerfulness. And the good feeling that we get when we laugh can remain with us as an internal experience even after the laughter subsides.

The Doctor says "You'll live to be 60!" "I AM 60!" "See, what did I tell you?" - Henny Youngman

Mental health professionals point out that humour can also teach perspective by helping patients to see reality rather than the distortion that supports their distress. Humour shifts the ways in which we think, and distress is greatly associated with the way we think. It is not situations that generate our stress, it is the meaning we place on the situations. Humour adjusts the meaning of an event so that it is not so overwhelming.

Here are some additional things we can do to improve our mood, enjoyment of life and mental health.

- Attempt to laugh at situations rather than bemoan them – this helps improve our disposition and the disposition of those around us.
- Use cathartic laughter to release pent-up feelings of anger and frustration in socially acceptable ways.
- Laugh as a means of reducing tension because laughter is often followed by a state of relaxation.
- Lower anxiety by visualizing a humorous situation to replace the view of an anxiety-producing situation.

Why do we need humour to stay healthy emotionally?

A healthy sense of humour is related to being able to laugh at oneself and one's life. Laughing at oneself can be a way of accepting and respecting oneself. Lack of a sense of humour is directly related to lower self esteem. (Note that laughing at oneself can also be unhealthy if one laughs as a way of self degradation.)

Humour is essential to mental health for a variety of reasons:

Mental Health Benefits of Laughter

- Humour enhances our ability to affiliate or connect with others.
- Humour helps us replace distressing emotions with pleasurable feelings. You cannot feel angry, depressed, anxious, guilty, or resentful and experience humour at the same time.
- Lacking humour will cause one's thought processes to stagnate leading to increased distress.
- Humour changes behaviour – when we experience humour we talk more, make more eye contact with others, touch others, etc.
- Humour increases energy, and with increased energy we may perform activities that we might otherwise avoid.
- Finally, humour is good for mental health because it makes us feel good!

What are the social benefits of humour and laughter?

Our work, marriage and family all need humour, celebrations, play and ritual as much as record-keeping and problem-solving. We should ask the questions "Do we laugh together?" as well as "Can we get through this hardship together?" Humour binds us together, lightens our burdens and helps us keep things in perspective. One of the things that saps our energy is the time, focus and effort we put into coping with life's problems including each other's limitations. Our families, our friends and our neighbours are not perfect and neither are our marriages, our kids or our in-laws. When we laugh together, it can bind us closer together instead of pulling us apart.

Remember that even in the most difficult of times, a laugh, or even simply a smile, can go a long way in helping us feel better

- Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.
- Humour unites us, especially when we laugh together.
- Laughter heals.
- Laughs and smiles are enjoyed best when shared with others.
- To laugh or not to laugh is your choice.

How do we bring more humour and laughter into our lives?

When we consider the inestimable benefits of humour, we want to bring as much laughter into our lives as possible. But for those who grew up in humour-deprived environments, where fun was discouraged or thought of as frivolous, finding opportunities to belly laugh at ourselves and with (not at) others may be rare and experienced as awkward.

Fortunately, as individuals we are programmed to laugh. Think of times when others were laughing around you – and maybe you didn't even know why – but you found yourself laughing uncontrollably with them. There are many kinds of humour and many opportunities for developing humour. We can learn to laugh more frequently by expanding our sense of humour and using it with others. Learning about the nature and variety of humorous experience helps us see that our lives abound with opportunities for finding humour and exercising laughter.

"The older you get, the tougher it is to lose weight, because by then your body and your fat are really good friends." - Bob Hope

What characterises humorous experience?

Humour can be described as a whole brain or whole person experience comprised of:

- Wit, the cognitive experience;
- Mirth, the feel good emotional experience enhanced when shared with others;
- Laughter, the reflexive contagious physiological experience (though we don't need to laugh to experience humour).

According to the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humour, humorous experience varies and includes the following possibilities:

Examples of Humour Experience

Humour is an experience of surprise and incongruity - In one's environment the incongruity may be experienced when someone does something unexpected and out of the ordinary. It's this unexpected twist that makes jokes and the captions of cartoons funny.

Humour is emotional chaos dampened down by an appreciation for the ridiculous - When life pulls the rug out from under us, we can calm and soothe and relax ourselves by focusing on ironical and absurd parts of our experience.

Humour can be experienced in the joy of "getting" it - Humour can be the understanding of something that we at first did not comprehend. For example, this type of humour occurs everyday when we laugh at misunderstandings. The joy of "getting it" is also connected to the joy of sharing it with someone else.

Humour can be an experience of the "forbidden" - Humour can be the experience of the forbidden (laughing in church), or "getting away with" something (often seen with children). Here, again, the element of surprise and the unexpected delight us.

Humour can help us cope - Humour can help us cope with frightening, difficult, unpleasant and painful experiences. It can help buffer us from pain and fear and enable us to remain focused at difficult times.

Humour can also be a safe way to introduce ourselves to others - Shy people often use humour to connect to others and express thoughts, feelings and ideas they otherwise would keep to themselves.

"You know what a red flag is to the IRS? If you have money in your bank accounts after taxes."
- Jay Leno

What is the difference between hurtful and healthful humour?

In general, **healthful humour stimulates wit, mirth, or laughter**. It creates closeness and intimacy between people. **Hurtful humour creates pain and distance**. Often healthful humour pokes fun at oneself and situations while harmful humour pokes fun at other individuals or groups. Sarcasm, put downs, ethnic jokes, and anti jokes (anti men, women, religious groups, nationalities, ethnicity, etc) are all considered hurtful as opposed to therapeutic. "Laughing with others is an ice breaker while laughing at others is an ice maker."

How can you make sure that your humour won't offend?

Because we want others to feel that we are laughing *with* and not *at* them, here are some suggestions for using humour safely with people. Use humour:

- After another person uses humour with you.
- When the situation is socially "appropriate" – humour at a party will be experienced differently than humour at a funeral.
- Aimed at yourself (as opposed to humour aimed at another person.)
- To poke fun at a situation rather at another person or group of persons.

How can you expand your sense of humour?

A sense of humour is developed by putting time, focus and energy into experiences that make us laugh and feel good. The tips below can help you add to your capacity for laughter.

- **Look for the everyday humour.** Start looking for the absurd, silly, incongruous activities that go on around you each day.
- **Observe infants and young children** to learn how to find delight and amusement in the most ordinary things.
- **Increase your exposure to comedies**, comic sitcoms, joke books, comedy clubs, etc.
- **Hang around funny friends**, or better yet, marry a funny partner.
- **Take a 5-10 minute humour break each day.** Read jokes, add to a humour notebook, listen to a funny tape.
- **If you hear a joke you really like, write it down**, or tell it to someone else to help you remember it.
- **Remind yourself to have fun.**
- **Spend time with those who help you see the bright side**, and, whenever possible, avoid people who are negative and dour.

- **Avoid conversation, news, entertainment, etc.,** that frightens, upsets and distresses you or makes you feel sad and unhappy.

References and resources for laughter, humour and health

Health benefits of laughter

University of Maryland Media News has several articles that offer results of a study that shows a good sense of humour may help prevent heart disease and heart attacks. The articles also contain a multiple-choice humour survey to rate your "laugh protection" against heart disease...

- [Laughter is the "Best Medicine" for Your Heart](#)
- [Laughter is Good for Your Heart](#)
- [Humour Survey: How Well Does Your Sense of Humour Protect You From Heart Disease?](#)

[Therapeutic Benefits of Laughter](#) – Details the effects of laughter on the immune system and stress hormones. Includes article on Humour and Health. (Holistic Online.com)

[The Laughter Remedy](#) – Articles on humour and health including, "Humour Your Tumor," "How Humour Helps You Cope," "Emotion: The Key to the Mind's Influence on Health," and "The Physical Health Benefits." (Paul E. McGhee, Ph.D.)

Physiology of Laughter

[How Laughter Works](#) – Explains the physiology of laughter, as well as its physical and emotional benefits. (How Stuff Works)

[Humour, Laughter and the Brain](#) – Explains how laughter affects the workings of the brain. (Society for Neuroscience)

Adding More Humour and Laughter to your Life

[What is Humour?](#) – Discusses the relationship between humour and health and suggests ways to improve your sense of humour. (Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humour)

[Put Laughter and Humour into your Life](#) – Suggests ways to increase the laughter in your life. (University of Nebraska, Lincoln)

Reading and Exercises for Further Development

There are numerous articles and other information available on the Internet to support you in any further research and exploration you would like to do on the topic of laughter. One such site is www.laughterclubs.com where you will find some interesting articles and links to other resources.

If you are interested in reading some scientific articles on the subject of laughter, here are two which provide a substantial amount of information:

- Read ***The Science of Laughter*** by Robert Provine, from the publication Psychology Today. You can access this article directly through this link:
<http://psychologytoday.com/articles/pto-20001101-000036.html>

The article is both insightful and humorous in itself. It provides also some interesting statistical information about the roles of gender in laughter studies. It also explains how and why laughter is contagious.

- A classical psychology article, ***Smiling Wisdom***, written by the late Robert Assagioli, M.D. (1888 – 1974) refers to the power of laughter on numerous social, physical and psychological levels. To read this article click [here](#).

Below is a list of various exercises you may wish to consider for your own further personal development.

- Keep a Laughter Journal – There are various ways of maintaining such a journal to record the instances of humour in your daily life. One is to keep the journal with you throughout your day and write up items as they occur to you, including experiences where you can find the humour in them, even if the experience itself is not based on a joke or gag. Alternatively, you can spend ten minutes at the end of each day writing up your humorous experiences from the day. The challenge of course at the end of the day is remembering all of those events.

One critical part of this exercise is to analyse your strength to find humour in the every day experience, and how you have further developed humour as a strategy to face tough situations.

Some people find that it's not about addressing conflict with humour as much as it is about learning to smile and see the funny side of things and events in order to cope better with the scenario.

- Set some specific goals about how to increase the amount of humour and laughter in your life. One example could be registering for a daily joke or comic strip to be emailed to you, and ensuring you take the time to read the joke and appreciate it no matter how "busy" your day is. Or you may wish to consider making a list of funny movies you'd like to see (or watch again) and keeping the list at the ready for the next time you feel like going to the video/DVD store. There's also the opportunity in most cities to go to a stand-up comedy night or club and go with some friends to enjoy the experience with.
- Encourage your children to tell you jokes on a daily basis. Not only does this have the potential to promote a healthy sense of humour for your children as they develop, but it also provides for others to bring humour into your life. You could consider asking others in your life to contribute in similar ways, including colleagues, friends and/or your partner.
- Consider joining a Laughter Club in your area, or if it's something you've been interested in trying, look for a stand-up comedy workshop to enrol in.

Acknowledgements

The articles presented here are all available on the Internet and full attribution to the authors and their websites where possible have been provided. For further exploration on your own, consider typing in the key words *laughter*, *science of laughter*, *laughter psychology* or *positive psychology* into a browser search. You'll find numerous additional supporting articles and books on the subject.

A comment on websites

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