

Laughter is the Best Medicine

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The Health Benefits of Humor and Laughter

Humor is infectious. The sound of roaring laughter is far more contagious than any cough, snuffle, or sneeze. When laughter is shared, it binds people together and increases happiness and intimacy. In addition to the domino effect of joy and amusement, laughter also triggers healthy physical changes in the body. Humor and laughter strengthen your immune system, boost your energy, diminish pain, and protect you from the damaging effects of stress. Best of all, this priceless medicine is fun, free, and easy to use.

Laughter is strong medicine for mind and body

“Your sense of humor is one of the most powerful tools you have to make certain that your daily mood and emotional state support good health.”

~ Paul E. McGhee, Ph.D.

Laughter is a powerful antidote to stress, pain, and conflict. Nothing works faster or more dependably to bring your mind and body back into balance than a good laugh. Humor lightens your burdens, inspires hopes, connects you to others, and keeps you grounded, focused, and alert.

With so much power to heal and renew, the ability to laugh easily and frequently is a tremendous resource for surmounting problems, enhancing your relationships, and supporting both physical and emotional health.

Laughter is good for your health

- Laughter relaxes the whole body. A good, hearty laugh relieves physical tension and stress, leaving your muscles relaxed for up to 45 minutes after.
- Laughter boosts the immune system. Laughter decreases stress hormones and increases immune cells and infection-fighting antibodies, thus improving your resistance to disease.
- Laughter triggers the release of endorphins, the body’s natural feel-good chemicals. Endorphins promote an overall sense of well-being and can even temporarily relieve pain.
- Laughter protects the heart. Laughter improves the function of blood vessels and increases blood flow, which can help protect you against a heart attack and other cardiovascular problems.

The Benefits of Laughter

Physical Health Benefits:

- Boosts immunity
- Lowers stress hormones
- Decreases pain
- Relaxes your muscles
- Prevents heart disease

Mental Health Benefits:

- Adds joy and zest to life
- Eases anxiety and fear
- Relieves stress
- Improves mood
- Enhances resilience

Social Benefits:

- Strengthens relationships
- Attracts others to us
- Enhances teamwork
- Helps defuse conflict
- Promotes group bonding

Laughter and humor help you stay emotionally healthy

Laughter makes you feel good. And the good feeling that you get when you laugh remains with you even after the laughter subsides. Humor helps you keep a positive, optimistic outlook through difficult situations, disappointments, and loss.

More than just a respite from sadness and pain, laughter gives you the courage and strength to find new sources of meaning and hope. Even in the most difficult of times, a laugh—or even simply a smile—can go a long way toward making you feel better. And laughter really is contagious—just hearing laughter primes your brain and readies you to smile and join in the fun.

The link between laughter and mental health

- Laughter dissolves distressing emotions. You can't feel anxious, angry, or sad when you're laughing.
- Laughter helps you relax and recharge. It reduces stress and increases energy, enabling you to stay focused and accomplish more.
- Humor shifts perspective, allowing you to see situations in a more realistic, less threatening light. A humorous perspective creates psychological distance, which can help you avoid feeling overwhelmed.

The social benefits of humor and laughter

Humor and playful communication strengthen our relationships by triggering positive feelings and fostering emotional connection. When we laugh with one another, a positive bond is created. This bond acts as a strong buffer against stress, disagreements, and disappointment.

Laughing with others is more powerful than laughing alone

Creating opportunities to laugh

- Watch a funny movie or TV show.
- Go to a comedy club.
- Read the funny pages.
- Seek out funny people.
- Share a good joke or a funny story.
- Check out your bookstore's humor section.
- Host game night with friends.
- Play with a pet.
- Go to a "laughter yoga" class.
- Goof around with children.
- Do something silly.
- Make time for fun activities (e.g. bowling, miniature golfing, karaoke).

Shared laughter is one of the most effective tools for keeping relationships fresh and exciting. All emotional sharing builds strong and lasting relationship bonds, but sharing laughter and play also adds joy, vitality, and resilience. And humor is a powerful and effective way to heal resentments, disagreements, and hurts. Laughter unites people during difficult times.

Incorporating more humor and play into your daily interactions can improve the quality of your love relationships— as well as your connections with co-workers, family members, and friends. Using humor and laughter in relationships allows you to:

- Be more spontaneous. Humor gets you out of your head and away from your troubles.

- Let go of defensiveness. Laughter helps you forget judgments, criticisms, and doubts.
- Release inhibitions. Your fear of holding back and holding on are set aside.
- Express your true feelings. Deeply felt emotions are allowed to rise to the surface.

Bringing more humor and laughter into your life

Want to bring the fun? Get a pet...

Most of us have experienced the joy of playing with a furry friend, and pets are a rewarding way to bring more laughter and joy into your life. But did you know that having a pet is also good for your mental and physical health? Studies show that pets can protect you depression, stress, and even heart disease.

Laughter is your birthright, a natural part of life that is innate and inborn. Infants begin smiling during the first weeks of life and laugh out loud within months of being born. Even if you did not grow up in a household where laughter was a common sound, you can learn to laugh at any stage of life.

Begin by setting aside special times to seek out humor and laughter, as you might with working out, and build from there. Eventually, you'll want to incorporate humor and laughter into the fabric of your life, finding it naturally in everything you do.

Here are some ways to start:

- Smile. Smiling is the beginning of laughter. Like laughter, it's contagious. Pioneers in "laugh therapy," find it's possible to laugh without even experiencing a funny event. The same holds for smiling. When you look at someone or see something even mildly pleasing, practice smiling.
- Count your blessings. Literally make a list. The simple act of considering the good things in your life will distance you from negative thoughts that are a barrier to humor and laughter. When you're in a state of sadness, you have further to travel to get to humor and laughter.
- When you hear laughter, move toward it. Sometimes humor and laughter are private, a shared joke among a small group, but usually not. More often, people are very happy to share something funny because it gives them an opportunity to laugh again and feed off the humor you find in it. When you hear laughter, seek it out and ask, "What's funny?"
- Spend time with fun, playful people. These are people who laugh easily—both at themselves and at life's absurdities—and who routinely find the humor in everyday events. Their playful point of view and laughter are contagious.
- Bring humor into conversations. Ask people, "What's the funniest thing that happened to you today? This week? In your life?"

Developing your sense of humor: Take yourself less seriously

One essential characteristic that helps us laugh is not taking ourselves too seriously. We've all known the classic tight-jawed sourpuss who takes everything with deathly seriousness and never laughs at anything. No fun there!

Some events are clearly sad and not occasions for laughter. But most events in life don't carry an overwhelming sense of either sadness or delight. They fall into the gray zone of ordinary life—giving you the choice to laugh or not.

Ways to help yourself see the lighter side of life:

- Laugh at yourself. Share your embarrassing moments. The best way to take yourself less seriously is to talk about times when you took yourself too seriously.
- Attempt to laugh at situations rather than bemoan them. Look for the humor in a bad situation, and uncover the irony and absurdity of life. This will help improve your mood and the mood of those around you.
- Surround yourself with reminders to lighten up. Keep a toy on your desk or in your car. Put up a funny poster in your office. Choose a computer screensaver that makes you laugh. Frame photos of you and your family or friends having fun.
- Keep things in perspective. Many things in life are beyond your control—particularly the behavior of other people. While you might think taking the weight of the world on your shoulders is admirable, in the long run it's unrealistic, unproductive, unhealthy, and even egotistical.
- Deal with your stress. Stress is a major impediment to humor and laughter.
- Pay attention to children and emulate them. They are the experts on playing, taking life lightly, and laughing.

Checklist for lightening up

When you find yourself taken over by what seems to be a horrible problem, ask these questions:

- Is it really worth getting upset over?
- Is it worth upsetting others?
- Is it that important?
- Is it that bad?
- Is the situation irreparable?
- Is it really your problem?

Using humor and play to overcome challenges and enhance your life

The ability to laugh, play, and have fun with others not only makes life more enjoyable but also helps you solve problems, connect with others, and be more creative. People who incorporate humor and play into their daily lives find that it renews them and all of their relationships.

Life brings challenges that can either get the best of you or become playthings for your imagination. When you “become the problem” and take yourself too seriously, it can be hard to think outside the box and find new solutions. But when you play with the problem, you can often transform it into an opportunity for creative learning.

Playing with problems seems to come naturally to children. When they are confused or afraid, they make their problems into a game, giving them a sense of control and an opportunity to experiment with new solutions. Interacting with others in playful ways helps you retain this creative ability.

Here are two examples of people who took everyday problems and turned them around through laughter and play:

Roy, a semi-retired businessman, was excited to finally have time to devote to golf, his favorite sport. But the more he played, the less he enjoyed himself. Although his game had improved dramatically, he got angry with himself over every mistake. Roy wisely realized that his golfing buddies affected his attitude, so he stopped playing with people who took the game too seriously. When he played with friends who focused more on having fun than on their scores, he was less critical of himself. Now golfing was as enjoyable as Roy hoped it would be. He scored better without working harder. And the

brighter outlook he was getting from his companions and the game spread to other parts of his life, including his work.

Jane worked at home designing greeting cards, a job she used to love but now felt had become routine. Two little girls who loved to draw and paint lived next door. Eventually, Jane invited the girls in to play with all the art supplies she had. At first, she just watched, but in time she joined in. Laughing, coloring, and playing pretend with the little girls transformed Jane's life. Not only did playing with them end her loneliness and mild boredom, it sparked her imagination and helped her artwork flourish. Best of all, it rekindled the playfulness and spark in Jane's relationship with her husband.

As laughter, humor, and play become an integrated part of your life, your creativity will flourish and new discoveries for playing with friends, coworkers, acquaintances, and loved ones will occur to you daily. Humor takes you to a higher place where you can view the world from a more relaxed, positive, creative, joyful, and balanced perspective.