

The Magic of Laughter

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Laughter is magic, laughter is healthy, and laughter is contagious. As a matter of fact, the sound of laughter is far more contagious than any cough, sniffle, or sneeze. When laughter is shared, it binds people together and increases happiness and intimacy. Laughter also triggers healthy physical changes in our bodies. Humor and laughter strengthens our immune system, boosts our energy, diminishes our pain, and protects us from the damaging effects of stress. Best of all, laughter is fun, free, and easy to use.

Play Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHnRIAVXTMQ>

As you have just seen, laughter is social and contagious. We actually laugh at the sound of laughter itself.

While very little is known about the specific brain mechanisms responsible for laughter, we do know that laughter is triggered by many sensations and thoughts, and that it activates many parts of the body.

When we first begin to laugh, the muscles around our eyes and cheeks contract.

Our diaphragm and chest muscles tighten, forcing air out of our lungs.

That air rushes through our windpipe, blowing over our larynx.

Our vocal cords vibrate and emit short, vowel sounds like ha-ha or ho-ho.

Then our eyes start to water.

Since the sudden exit of air from our lungs creates an urgent call for oxygen, our heart rate and blood pressure ramps up to help send more oxygen to our organs.

While facial and core muscles tense, the rest of our muscles become weaker or less coordinated.

Have you ever tried to walk straight while laughing hard?

The physical benefits of laughter

A growing body of research supports the theory that laughter may have therapeutic value.

For years, the use of humor has been used in medicine and surgeons used humor to distract patients from pain as early as the 13th century.

The scientific study of the effect of humor on physical wellness began in the 20th century. Many credit this to

Norman Cousins, an American political journalist, author, professor, and world peace advocate. After years of prolonged pain from a serious illness, Cousins claims to have cured himself with a self-invented treatment of laughter and vitamins.

In his 1979 book, *Anatomy of an Illness*, Cousins describes his recovery program.

It incorporated large doses of Vitamin C, a positive attitude, love, faith, hope, and laughter that was induced by watching Marx Brothers films. He reported that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give him at least two hours of pain-free sleep.

When the pain-killing effect of the laughter wore off, he would switch on his motion picture projector again and frequently experience another pain-free interval.

Cousins experiences demonstrate that laughter can help us feel better about ourselves and the world around us. Laughter can be a natural diversion. When we laugh, no other thought comes to mind. Laughing can also induce physical changes in the body:

- Laughter relaxes the whole body.
- 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 us against a heart attack and other cardiovascular problems.

The social benefits of laughter

As noted by comedian Victor Borge: "Laughter is the closest distance between two people."

Dr. Robert Provine, an author and professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Maryland studied the social dynamics of laughter and found that laughter establishes--or restores a positive emotional climate and a sense of connection between people.

And, laughter is part of the universal human vocabulary. All members of the human species understand it. Unlike English or French or Swahili, we don't have to learn to speak it. We're born with the capacity to laugh.

One of the remarkable things about laughter is that it occurs unconsciously. You don't decide to do it. While we can consciously inhibit it, we don't consciously produce

laughter. That's why it's very hard to laugh on command or to fake laughter. (Just ask a friend to laugh on the spot.)

We know that laughter is a message that we send to other people because we rarely laugh when we are alone.

An evolutionary perspective

Does laughter serve as a survival instinct? Many researchers believe that the purpose of laughter is related to making and strengthening human connections.

Laughter occurs when people are comfortable with one another, when they feel open and free. And the more laughter [there is], the more bonding within the group. This is the feedback "loop" of bonding-laughter-more bonding.

So, contrary to folk wisdom, most laughter is not about humor; it is about relationships between people.

The first laughter appears at about 3 to 4 months of age, long before we're able to speak. Laughter, like crying, is a way for a preverbal infant to interact with the mother and other caregivers.

We believe laughter evolved from the panting behavior of our ancient primate ancestors. Today, if we tickle chimps or gorillas, they don't laugh "ha ha ha" but exhibit a panting sound. That's the sound of ape laughter. And it's the root of human laughter.

When we laugh, we're often communicating playful intent. So laughter has a bonding function within individuals in a group. It's often positive, but it is important to remember that it can be negative too. There's a difference between "laughing with" and "laughing at."

Dr. Provine also found that:

- The actual health benefits of laughter may result from the social support it stimulates.
- Laughter plays a big role in mating. People are attracted to others who laugh.
- Both genders laugh a lot, but females laugh more and, interesting enough, the laughter of the female is often seen as the critical measure of a healthy relationship.

Taking yourself less seriously

One essential characteristic that helps us laugh is learning to avoid taking ourselves too seriously.

In life we are all going to do some funny things. We are funny people sometimes, so we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously. And sometimes we just have to be silly. Taking ourselves less seriously means that it's okay to make mistakes and it is perfectly acceptable to be imperfect!

Because the funniest incidents in life tend to come from our own personal experiences, I suspect that many of us here today will be able to identify with the following story.

“Deaf Wife”

A man feared his wife wasn't hearing as well as she used to and he thought she might need a hearing aid.

Not quite sure how to approach her, he called the family doctor to discuss the problem.

The Doctor told him there is a simple informal test the husband could perform to give the doctor a better idea about her hearing loss.

Here's what you do," said the Doctor, "stand about 40 feet away from her, and in a normal conversational speaking tone see if she hears you. If not, go to 30 feet, then 20 feet, and so on until you get a response."

That evening, the wife is in the kitchen cooking dinner, and he was in the den. He says to himself, "I'm about 40 feet away, let's see what happens." Then in a normal tone he asks, "Honey, what's for dinner?"

No response. So, the husband moves closer to the kitchen, about 30 feet from his wife and repeats, "Honey, what's for dinner?" Still no response.

Next he moves into the dining room where he is about 20 feet from his wife and asks, "Honey, what's for dinner?"

Again he gets no response.

So, he walks up to the kitchen door, about 10 feet away.
"Honey, what's for dinner?"

Again, there is no response.

So, he walks right up behind her. "Honey, what's for dinner?"

"Hank, for the fifth time... CHICKEN!"

An incident that reminds me to not take myself so seriously occurred when I was much younger and was attempting to sail a small sailboat on the Rappahannock River near Morattico. Having had very little experience as a sailor, I had flipped my sailboat on its side just as a large menacing storm began to move down the river.

Frantically, I tried to both hold onto the boat and, at the same time, use my other hand to paddle my boat toward the shore which was about a 1/4 mile away. During my struggle, I noticed that my friends, who were standing along the shore, were waving and yelling at me but I could not hear what they were trying to communicate. I continued to make some slight progress in paddling to shore but the storm continued to get closer and I became more frightened.

Finally I got close enough to shore to hear my friends yell, “Stand Up! Stand Up!” which I did and immediately discovered that I was only in about 3 feet of water. With an overwhelming feeling of relief as well as embarrassment, I literally walked my boat to shore!

Creating opportunities to laugh

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. Practice smiling whenever you look at someone.
- 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 to travel further 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?”

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.

Discussion So, what’s the funniest thing that has happened to you today? This week? In your life?

