

Humor, Laughter and Health

BRINGING MORE HUMOR AND LAUGHTER INTO OUR LIVES



The sound of roaring laughter is far more contagious than any cough, snuffle, or sneeze. Humor and laughter can cause a domino effect of joy and amusement, as well as set off a number of positive physical effects. Humor and laughter strengthen our immune systems and help us recover from illness, as well as bring joy into our lives. The question is, how do we gain access to this priceless medicine?

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Health benefits of humor and laughter

"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 the good sense of humor and the ability to laugh at stressful situations helps mitigate the damaging physical effects of distressing emotions.

A good hearty laugh can help:

- reduce stress
- lower blood pressure
- elevate mood
- boost immune system
- improve brain functioning

Medicine From Henny Youngman:

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

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

From Steven Wright:

- protect the heart
- connect you to others
- foster instant relaxation
- make you feel good.

“If at first you don't succeed, then skydiving definitely isn't for you.”

“Smoking cures weight problems, eventually”.

“If you think nobody cares about you, try missing a couple of payments.”

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.
Humor 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 humor, 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 good 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.
Humor 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

Humor improves mental and emotional health

Humor is a powerful emotional medicine that can lower stress, dissolve anger and unite families in troubled times. Mood is elevated by striving to find humor 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. Humor 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.

Mental health professionals point out that humor can also teach perspective by helping patients to see reality rather than the distortion that supports their distress. Humor 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. Humor 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

Humor helps us stay emotionally healthy

A healthy sense of humor 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 humor 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.)

Mental Health Benefits of Laughter

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

Social benefits of humor and laughter

Our work, marriage and family all need humor, 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?" Humor binds us together, lightens our burdens and helps us keep things in perspective. One of the things that saps our energy is the time and effort we put into coping with life's problems including each other's limitations. Our families, our friends and our neighbors are not perfect and neither are our marriages, our kids or our in-laws. When we laugh together, it can bind us 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.
- Humor 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.

Bringing more humor and laughter into our lives

If laughter is the best medicine, where is the pharmacy where we can fill our prescriptions?

Although healers have intuitively known for centuries that laughter and humor are beneficial for health and well-being, in our modern world we have only very recently begun to scientifically investigate the relationship.

And though we've begun to measure the benefits humor has on our health, we have yet to focus on the question of how to bring humor and laughter into our lives as therapy.

Nevertheless, pioneers in this new discipline are out there in their wagon trains braving the trails. We've collected their early findings and present them as follows.

Developing our sense of humor

Laughter is a birthright, a natural part of life. The part of the brain that connects to and facilitates laughter is among the first parts of the nervous system to come on line after birth. 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.

We may begin by setting aside special times to seek out humor and laughter, as we do with working out. But eventually, we want to incorporate humor and laughter into the fabric of our lives, finding it naturally in everything we do. Here are 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 in a state of sadness, we 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 people who have successfully incorporated humor into their lives.** These are people who naturally take life lightly, who routinely find ordinary events hysterical. Their points of view and their laughter are contagious.

Incorporating humor into everyday life

Here are two examples of people who took everyday problems and turned them around in order to bring more humor into their lives and to help solve the situation at hand, and even others unrelated to it.

Semi-retired, Roy finally had the chance to play golf seriously and often. But before long, he realized he wasn't enjoying it nearly as much as he had hoped. Every poor shot, and all golfers hit them, was cause for remorse. But Roy wisely realized that his golfing companions affected his attitude, and he began playing only with those capable of keeping the game in perspective. Now the game was as much fun 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 in her apartment complex designing greeting cards. Two pre-school girls who loved to make paper dolls lived nearby. Eventually, Jane invited the girls in to play with all the art supplies she had. At first, she watched but in time she joined in. For a year, Jane and the girls played together nearly every day.

Making paper dolls and doll clothes, laughing and playing pretend with the little girls transformed Jane's life. It sparked her imagination, helped her artwork flourish, brightened her outlook, and best of all rekindled her playful side in her relationship with her husband.

Spending time with children is one way to enhance our playfulness, add humor to our lives and help take ourselves less seriously. Not taking ourselves so seriously is an important component in adding humor to our lives.

Taking ourselves less seriously

Angels can fly because they take things lightly - Anonymous

Some events are clearly sad and not occasions for laughter. But most don't carry an overwhelming sense of sadness or

delight. Most fall into the gray zone of ordinary life, and they give us the choice to laugh or not.

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

Here are some ways we can lighten up.

- **View your life in context.** Even world leaders realize they have limited ability to affect others' lives. While we might think taking the weight of the world on our shoulders is admirable, in the long run it's unrealistic, unproductive, unhealthy and even egotistical.
- **Be less serious.** Realize that while your ambitions may be noble, being overly serious about them weighs you down and lessens your chances for achieving them.
- **Deal with your stress.** Stress is a major impediment to humor and laughter.
- **Dress less seriously.**
- **Keep a toy on your desk or in your car.**
- **Laugh at yourself.** Share your embarrassing moments. The best way to take ourselves less seriously is talk about times when we took ourselves too seriously.
- **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 the situation irreparable?
Is it really my problem?

Creating opportunities to laugh

- Watch comedy DVD's and TV shows. Remember classics like the Marx Brothers and the Three Stooges.
- Go to comedy clubs.
- Listen to comedy while driving.
- Read comic authors.
- Seek out funny people.
- Spend less time with overly serious people.
- Bring humor into conversations. Ask people, "What's the funniest thing that happened to you today? This week? In your life?"

Making sure your humor won't offend

Humor can be used as a weapon to belittle others or "score points" in some fashion. Use humor with care by being mindful the following.

- Use humor at the expense of yourself or a group you are part of, rather than at someone's else's expense.
- Don't use humor when someone else is in so much pain that humor will not make them feel better. When someone is physically injured, suffering a serious crisis, or when you are attending a somber event, such as a funeral, humor, no matter how clever or well-intended, will not make people feel better.
- Use humor that everyone present can enjoy. Inside jokes can make people feel excluded. Adult humor in the presence of children is unhealthy for the children, troublesome for their parents or guardians and thoughtless on the part of the would-be comedian.

Related links for humor, laughter and health



[Rotary Jokes: Laughter is the Best Medicine](#) Laughter activates the chemistry of the will to live and increases our capacity to fight disease. And the good feeling that we get when we laugh can remain with us as an internal experience even after the laughter subsides

[Learn More](#)

Other Related links

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

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

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

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

Joke Sites

[Henny Youngman Jokes](#) – The definitive Henny Youngman collection (Funny2.com)

[Steven Wright Jokes](#) - The Master of the Absurd (Funny2.com)

[Good Clean Funnies List Archive](#) – This list contains links to clean jokes. (Good, Clean Funnies List)

[Yahooligans! Jokes](#) – Provides jokes for kids. Clean jokes in 12 categories with a Joke of the Day feature. (Yahoo Kids)

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