

LAUGHING MATTERS

I don't need to tell you that laughing is good for you. You know that. But did you know that it's easy to add more laughter to your life? (No kidding.) And do you know how widely laughter is used to improve health?

According to Dr. Billy Strean, a Certified Laughter Coach and a Professor of Physical Education at the University of Alberta, "When you laugh your brain chemistry changes and everything starts to work the way it is supposed to".

Go ahead. Check it out. Look in a mirror. Start laughing. Let yourself go. Now how do you feel? I tried it and after I stopped coughing, I felt more relaxed in the chest area and more focused on writing this article.

Laughing has proven to lower blood pressure, reduce stress hormones, increase muscle power, enhance learning and boost immunity. Laughter triggers the release of endorphins, and they make us feel good. With endorphins flowing in our bodies we are simply healthier and happier, and there are no side effects. Laughing every day will improve your health, much like exercising. Of course laughing is not a replacement for healthy exercise, a sound diet, and proper treatment when problems arise. (1)

Studies of hundred of adults established a direct correlation between happiness and humour. The ability to laugh, whether at life itself or at a good joke, is a source of satisfaction. Those who enjoy silly humour are one-third more likely to be happy than those we do not enjoy silly humour. (2)

The American Cancer Society has stated that there is no scientific evidence that humour is effective in treating cancer or any other disease, however, laughter has many clinical benefits that include positive physiological changes and an overall sense of well being. (3)

Patients at Duke University's Comprehensive Cancer Center have been learning about the benefits of laughter since 1976. By giving patients opportunities to create, laugh, and play, Duke's Oncology Recreation Therapy Program matches medical care with music, games, arts and crafts, and laughter. It puts patients in a more positive frame of mind about their situation, treatment and helps them combat fear, fatigue, nausea, and sleeplessness.

The first documented case of laughter improving health occurred in 1964 when Norman Cousins, published "Anatomy of an Illness". *The New England Journal of Medicine* published his findings in 1979, and lent credence to his discovery. Given a one in five hundred chance of recovery from spondylitis, a painful disease causing the disintegration of the spinal connective tissue, Cousins decided to self-medicate—with humour. He learned that 15 minutes of hardy laughter produced two hours of pain free sleep, for him. (4)

NATURAL HUMOUR

Naturopath Avah Sparks explains, “In my work I bring humour to the tragedy of life. I help people laugh at their own humanity, their imperfections. When people embrace their own imperfections they let go of the need to protect their image. Life’s more fun. People are more healthy.

Sparks says that humour tiptoes into her work. “I don’t use humour. Humour uses me.” she explains. “It’s the difference between using the language and learning the grammar. The ability to laugh at a situation can foster a positive and hopeful attitude. Humour gives us a sense of perspective on our problems. Laughter releases uncomfortable emotions that make us sick and prepares us to live naturally healthy lives.

LAUGHTER CLUBS

You can learn more about the benefits of laughter by attending a meeting of a laughter club and by checking out resources on the Web. Susan Barker, Certified Laughter Leader, hypnotherapist and personal coach explains “Once you have experienced a laugh-in with a laughter leader you will want more.” Barker adds, “Once you have the hang of it you can laugh whenever you want. Look at yourself laughing in the mirror. You can also simulate the benefits of laughter without laughing. “A few days ago,” she marvels, “I woke up with a pain down one leg. I imagined myself laughing and the pain went away completely, instantly and permanently.”

LAUGHTER ON THE WEB

The table below lists some laughter resources on the Web.

URL	Provides
www.laughteryoga.org/	Information on Dr Madan Kataria, a physician from Mumbai, India who started laughter yoga to serve his patients. Provides access to some of the 2000 laughter clubs around the world, including Canada. .
www.worldlaughtertour.com/	The site of Steve Wilson, the North American Laughter guru. Plenty of good information and resources for laughter.
http://www.jesthealth.com/	Extensive list of research resources for therapeutic humour associations and publications, information about humour and laughter, therapeutic humour experts, laughter researchers, clown related information and resources, famous and funny performers, best place to go on the WWW for a laugh.

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(1) MODULATION OF NEUROIMMUNE PARAMETERS DURING THE EUSTRESS OF HUMOR-ASSOCIATED MIRTHFUL LAUGHTER, Lee S. Berk, MPH, DrPH, David L. Felten, MD, PhD, Stanley A Tan, MD, PhD, Barry B. Bittman, MD, and James Westengard, BS (http://www.drleeberk.com/art_modulation.pdf)

(2) J. Soloman, "Humour and Aging Well" *American Behaviour Scientist* 39:249, 1996

(3) <http://cancer.duke.edu/patients/ort.asp>

(4) <http://www.potentialsmedia.com/NormanCousins.html>