



# Laughter Is Good Medicine

Participant Handouts

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## Laughter's Physical Benefits

Experience tells us it feels good to laugh. We roar at a good joke, a clever sitcom, an engaging comic strip, and the antics of family and friends. We laugh and smile and it makes us feel better. What is it about laughter that makes us feel better? Certainly part of feeling good when we share a laugh with family or friends is the camaraderie and sense of fitting in.

In addition, laughter is recognized as an effective relaxation technique. Laughter increases heart rate, respiration rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension. When laughter subsides, these physiological effects are reduced to, or below, previous resting levels. So, laughter effectively reduces stress and the physical symptoms related to stress, as well as serving as a means of communicating amusement, surprise, joy, and belonging.

Preliminary research also suggests that laughter may:

Increase IgA and killer T-cells which would have a positive impact on the immune function

Help with pain management

Decrease serum cortisol levels (a potentially negative stress hormone).

These are exciting preliminary findings, but more research is needed. The potential benefits of laughter are being explored in the relatively new field of study called psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) as well. PNI looks at the effects of stress on disease and treats the mind, central nervous system, and immune system as one interrelated unit (Seaward, 2002).

We have many anecdotal reports of the relationship between positive thoughts and emotions and the maintenance or restoration of health. In *Anatomy of an Illness*, Norman Cousins provides a classic personal testimony of the power of humor in overcoming a devastating personal illness. PNI research is exploring possible scientific explanations for cases such as Cousins. One focus of this interesting work is the role of neuropeptides. Laughter seems to increase release of neuropeptides such as endorphins, interleukins, and interferon. Research is in progress to further our understanding of the interactions and processes involved with neuropeptide release and health outcomes.

While we wait for research to tell us more about the positive effects of laughter, we have good support for the benefits we already know and recognize. So, laugh!



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# Ways to Include More Laughter in Your Life

Humor is an important, often overlooked tool for our everyday life and experiences. The better adjusted you are and the more satisfying your lifestyle, the more readily you will respond to the humor in jokes, cartoons, and everyday situations.

You can learn to share your laughter and help make others laugh. This doesn't mean telling jokes unless that is one of your talents. It means beginning to share your humorous perspective and giving others permission to do the same. A good sense of humor is something everyone can work on. It doesn't just happen. Here are some ideas to help add more laughter to your life:

- **Develop your comedic vision.** Look for the humor in every situation. Learn to laugh at the incongruities of life. We want others to see us as wise and winners, not fools or losers, so when we goof up, we want to disappear. Instead, look for the funny side.
- **Celebrate what works.** Rather than agonizing over what's broken or not working any more, celebrate what *is* working. If you have a bad day or a family difficulty, try a positive approach. Humor can increase your capacity for solving problems and help you acknowledge your victories in life.
- **Surround yourself with humor.** Clip cartoons, collect funny sayings, collect humorous video and audio tapes. Share these with a friend. Display them on the refrigerator or mirror. Listen to a humorous tape as you are doing something distasteful—like cleaning the bathroom.
- **Make humor a daily ritual.** Share something that made you laugh daily with family and friends or tell a funny story or joke. Keep a notebook of funny things and write in it daily. Make a joy list—whenever you experience something that makes you feel good, jot it down in a notebook. Then, when you feel like complaining, read over the list. You'll feel better.
- **Take yourself less seriously.** Learn to laugh at yourself, not scornfully but with acceptance of self. As you take yourself lightly, take your job and your responsibility to yourself and to others seriously. This will make life a little lighter.
- **Spend time with a child to rediscover your sense of delight.** Don't be afraid to be silly. Participate in laughter and enjoyment.
- **Encourage others to laugh.** By creating happiness for others, you will experience a special joy of accomplishment that only a lively, generous sense of humor can bring. Tell a funny story and you may get one back.
- **Realize that a sense of humor is deeper than laughter.** A sense of humor sees the fun in everyday experiences. It is more important to have fun than to be funny.

Make your own **Humor First-Aid Kit**. Stock it with things that always make you laugh. Cartoons, jokes, greeting cards, comedy tapes, stories, photos of yourself, your children, grandchildren doing something that makes you laugh. Take the kit with you and use it with friends, on the road, in the workplace, and wherever a little laughter is needed.