

THE HEALING POWER OF HUMOR
WHY AND HOW TO TAKE A DAILY DOSE OF
VITAMN L - LAUGHTER
and
VITAMIN H - HUMOR

Nancy P Stewart

Quest Club

April 6, 2018

“At first, the corners of your mouth turn up, slightly, then the muscles around your eyes engage, and a twinkling in the eyes appears. Next you begin to make noises, ranging from controlled snickers and spontaneous giggles, to ridiculous cackles and noisy hoots. Your chest and abdominal muscles become activated. As the noises get louder, you begin to bend your body back and forth, sometimes slapping your knee and stomping your foot. As this strange behavior reaches its peak, tears flow freely. All of this continues until you feel so weak, and exhausted, that you must sit down, or fall down.” This is laughter engaging the entire body, as described by Patty Wooten in her book, Compassionate Laughter.

THE HEALING POWER OF HUMOR
WHY AND HOW TO TAKE A DAILY DOSE OF
VITAMIN L - LAUGHTER
and
VITAMIN H - HUMOR

This paper will describe the difference between smiling, laughter and humor; a “bit” about humor research; the benefits of laughter and humor; and how to improve your own sense of humor.

Laughter, it all begins with a smile! A smile gains attention, invites interaction, and expresses understanding. A smile is a child’s first language, and those smiles engage us immediately. Just watch any adult in the presence of a baby, as they contort their face into comical expressions and generally make a fool of themselves, just to see that baby smile, one more

time. Over the years numerous songs and poetic expressions have reminded us to smile. Carol Crawford's, "My Smile is just a Frown (turned upside down)," and from Annie, "You're Never Fully Dressed Without a Smile." "A smile costs nothing, but gives so much. It enriches those who receive, without making poorer those who give," to mention a few. So take Anthony Euwer's advice:

"No matter how grouchy you're feeling,
You'll find the smile more or less healing.
It grows in a wreath
All around the front teeth,
Thus preserving the face from congealing!"

Smiling and laughter are often associated together, and while they often occur together, there is a distinct difference between the two. Smiling is a feeling while laughter is a reaction. Andrew Tarvin explains the difference between smiling and laughing, "When you show you are happy without revealing your teeth, it is smiling. But when your happiness and teeth are both evident, then it is laughing." A few fun laughter facts:

- On average, a child laughs 300 times a day, while an adult laughs only 15-17 times a day
- The majority of men report that their laughter is a chuckle, and the majority of women report theirs is a giggle
- Adults between the ages of 18 and 34 report laughing the most
- Babies start to laugh at about 4 months old

- Laughter sounds the same across cultures. In fact, the sound of laughter is so common and familiar it can be recognized, if played backwards on tape, and
- The sound of roaring laughter is far more contagious than any cough, snuffle or sneeze

To quote Milton Berle, “Laughter is an instant vacation!” It is always available and doesn’t cost anything. Laughter is one of the first things you do as a newborn, and, if all goes well, it will be one of the last things you do before you die. On his deathbed, American humorist Oscar Wilde looked about his room, and informed his friend, “This wall paper is awful. One of us has to go.”

Laughter is the biological reaction, most often, to moments or occasions of humor.

Humor is the quality that makes something laughable or amusing. There are many different types of humor. Why is it that some people experience humor in a particular situation while others do not? When two people experience the same event and react differently, that difference is based on each individual’s unique perception and personality.

“Doctor, I have a ringing in my ears.” “Don’t Answer”

A sense of humor is the ability to perceive humor or appreciate jokes, to say funny things and see the funny side of things. One’s sense of humor is both a perspective on life and a behavior that expresses that perspective.

After a tree has landed on your car, putting a sign on it that reads, compact car, may not make your car whole again, but it will help you see your misfortune from a different perspective.

That laughter and humor is beneficial to our physical and mental health is not a new idea. The Old Testament references the healing properties of humor: "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine," and American Indians had clown-doctors perform antics to cure the sick. Although our ancestors couldn't explain scientifically, they knew intuitively that laughter was good for the body as well as the soul.

Public interest in the benefits of laughter started to develop in the 1960s. Dr. William Fry, a professor of Psychology at Stanford University, was the first scientist to suggest in 1964 that laughter was a suitable field of study. He applied for public funding. But all research projects were put on the back burner during the Vietnam War. He pursued his interest on an informal, unfunded basis, and published a number of landmark studies on the physiological processes that occur during laughter.

Dr. Norman Cousins raised public awareness and gained attention from the medical community, about the healing power of laughter, following his miraculous 1964 "laughter recovery" from a fatal illness. By surrounding himself with a steady diet of entertainment, such as Candid Camera videos and Marx Brothers films, he realized, that, ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect that would give him at least two hours of pain free sleep, where previously nothing, not even morphine, could help

him. He checked out of the hospital, where he was disrupting the routine, and making too much noise, and moved into a hotel. There, he could “laugh twice as hard at half the price.”

Cousins spent the remaining 12 years of his life as a professor at UCLA Medical School where, he established a “humor task force” to coordinate and support clinical research about laughter. He went on to write 11 books on humor’s affect on health and healing, including the classic, Anatomy of an Illness.

Cousin’s story baffled the scientific community and inspired a number of research projects. Humor scholars started to meet formally to discuss their findings at international conferences beginning in 1976. The American Association for Therapeutic Humor was founded in 1987 and the formation of the International Society for Humor Studies followed in 1988. Both of these organizations unite several hundred professionals interested in integrating humor into a variety of therapeutic modalities, yearly.

They are helping us to understand the wise old saying, laughter is the best medicine, or like a spoonful of sugar, in Mary Poppins, laughter at the right moment helps the “medicine go down.”

Laughter consultants are among the newest to join the booming self help industry. According to Nicci Kobritz, an administrator at Builders Home Health, “Major corporations today are spending money hiring consultants to come in and teach their managements teams the fundamentals and importance of humor. Some employers consider laughter part of their

healthy lifestyles programs, because it helps lower absenteeism, depression and ideally health insurance claims.” Medical schools are beginning to integrate humor courses into their curriculum and the day will come when health forms have a space to check off your sense of humor. Believing that laughter is the best medicine, the Cancer Services of Northeast Indiana held a comedy night on February 24th.

Some of the researched benefits of laughter and humor:

Laughter affects Blood Pressure and protects the Heart– Laughter improves the function of blood vessels and increases blood flow. People who laugh heartily, on a regular basis, have a lower standing blood pressure than does the average person. When people have a good laugh, initially the blood pressure increases, but then it decreases to levels below normal.

Laughter boosts the Immune System – Clinical studies by Lee Berk at Loma Linda University have shown that laughter strengthens the immune system. When we laugh natural killer cells (gamma-interferon, T-Cells and immune proteins) are released which, they claim, destroy tumors and viruses.

Laughter relaxes your Muscles - While you laugh, the muscles that do not participate, in the laugh, relax. After you are finished laughing, those muscles involved in the laughter start to relax, as well

Laughter reduces Pain - Laughter triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural feel good chemical, and allows a person to forget about their aches and pains. It creates the same feeling that long distance joggers experience as a "runner's high."

Laughter improves Brain Function – It stimulates both sides of the brain. The left side is active during the telling of a joke, but as the humor is perceived, (as we "get it") the brain wave activity moves toward the right side. Therefore, laughter brings the whole brain together, the logical left with the creative right side of the brain.

Laughter stimulates your Respiratory System – Belly laughter empties your lungs of more air than it takes in, resulting in a cleansing effect. More oxygen-enriched blood flowing through your body encourages healing.

Laughter burns Calories – It's a Good Workout – Laughter is the equivalent to "internal jogging." Ok, so it's no replacement for going to the gym. But, laughter can provide good cardiac, abdominal, and facial muscle conditioning. According to Dr. Fry:

- One minute of laughter is equal to ten minutes on the rowing machine, and
- Ten minutes of laughter each day can burn the same number of calories as a half-hour workout

To quote Mark Twain in Tom Sawyer, "The old man laughed loud and joyously, shook up the details of his anatomy from head to foot, and ended by

saying that such a laugh was money in a man's pocket, because it cut down the doctor's bills like everything."

Humor and Laughter reduces Stress and Anger. In sharp contrast to what happens to your body when you laugh ----Jane Wagner in, Edith Ann, tells us what happens when we get angry, anxious and/or feel stressed out.

"First, your face gets just like a fist. Then your heart gets like a bunch of bees that fly up and sting your brain. Your eyes are like two dark clouds, looking for trouble. Your blood is like a tornado. And then you have bad weather inside your body."

Accessing humor gives you the power to weather this storm, it is the perfect antidote. Laughter reduces at least three of the neuro-endocrine hormones associated with stress; epinephrine, cortisol, and dopamine. Everyone's attempt to cope is unique and personal depending on the circumstances.

Donna Strickland, a registered nurse, offers a few coping techniques:

- Write a memo congratulating yourself on being so wonderful
- Answer a highly technical question in your best Donald Duck voice
- Take an eight hour lunch hour
- For a quiet evening, play a blank cassette at full volume

Humor and laughter have a positive impact on our mental and emotional health. We cannot expect things to run smoothly twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year. In every job, relationship, or on the journey of life, there is inevitably some turbulence. You can elevate your mood when you strive to

find humor in these turbulent situations. When a grocery store clerk finished filling up the bag – it burst. She responded, “They just don’t make these bags like they used to, this was suppose to happen in your driveway.”

A young business woman spent hours and hours redoing the budget, only to have her boss continually reject it. In total frustration she took her unacceptable budget to the copy machine, made it the size of a postage stamp and presented it to her boss as her “reduced budget.”

Looking at a problem from a different perspective can make it seem less formidable, giving one greater objectivity. To quote Bob Hope, “The older you get the tougher it is to lose weight, because by then your body and your fat are really good friends.” We may not actually solve our problems with humor but we may discover, at least while we are laughing, a way out, a way to turn the situation around.

Comedian Michael Pritchard equates laughter to changing a baby’s diaper, “It doesn’t change things permanently, but it makes everything okay for awhile.”

Before talking about how, you can improve your own sense of humor there are three things you should keep in mind before turning your smile into laughter.

There are many deterrents to laughter: embarrassment, rejection and criticism, to mention a few. Many of these deterrents started when we were

young. Remember being told, “Wipe that smile off your face,” “stop smirking” and/or, “When are you going to grow up?” Laughter often meant that we were immature. In the world of adults these laugh inhibitors continue, but there is one that inhibits laughter quicker than others. We often do not attempt something funny because we fear that we will appear foolish. Doing or saying something foolish, once in a while, can both, hit the nail on the head, and break the tension. But, when you come down to it, we are all in the same boat to one extent or another we are all fools. To quote Stewart Emory, “To be a human being is to be a latent fool. The choice we have is whether or not we are going to be a practicing fool.”

Everyone’s sense of humor is different --- don’t compare yourself to anyone else. Your sense of humor is a reflection of your own personality. A “Psychology Today” humor survey, asked readers to rate 30 jokes, and they found, not surprisingly, that people laugh at different things and that our funny bones are located in different places.

Humor is risky business. Humor is so forceful that it can help communicate and connect, or, just as easily, destroy relationships. Some of you might remember the “Where’s the beef?” commercial? While humorous, in that same thirty seconds, one ethnic joke antagonized an entire group of people. But, if we are going to gain the benefits of humor, we must be willing to take the risk! To take that risk, use the AT&T principles make sure your humor is appropriate, timely and tasteful. Knowing that laughing with others, is an ice breaker while, laughing at others is an ice maker.

There are many ways to expand and improve your sense of humor, to mention a few:

- Start looking for the absurd and silly activities that go on around you each day
- Increase your exposure to comedies and joke books
- Hang out with funny friends
- If you hear a joke you really like, write it down, keep a humor notebook
- Remind yourself to have fun, to lighten up, and
- Spend time with those who help you see the bright side. When ever possible, avoid negative people

YOU CAN EXAGGERATE AND OVERSTATE THE PROBLEM. Making the situation bigger than life, to exaggerate, helps us regain our perspective. For example, frustration over a high medical bill was relieved by writing the following to the doctor; “I recently received your bill for my daughter’s check-up. The unexplained \$75 figure floored me and I called your office for an itemization. I was told that my daughter was older and bigger, so the bill was higher. Does this mean that she has more to examine now? Do you charge by the square inch? If the bill is higher because she is older, than how come my doctor only charges me thirty-five dollars and I am forty-five?”

LOOK FOR THE IRONY – the difference between how things are and how they should be. Irony helps us identify the craziness that exists in our society. Have you ever wondered why, when you bounce a check, they

charge you more, of what they know, you haven't got enough of in the first place?

RECOGNIZE THE INCONGRUITIES AND THE NONSENSE OF A DIFFICULT SITUATION. In her book, How Are You Feeling Today?, Kathryn Hammer suggests some pretty nonsensical ways to prepare for hospitalization:

- Lay on the front lawn dressed in paper napkins with straws stuck up your nose and ask people to poke you as they go by.
- Put your hand down the garbage disposal, while practicing your smile and repeating "mild discomfort."
- Remove all actual food from the house, and
- Learn to urinate in an empty lipstick tube.

USE PROPS AND GIMMICKS. Traffic jams, whether on an actual highway, in your office, at home, or anywhere on the road of life, are all good places to test your sense of humor. Keep a jar of bubbles in your car, when you are in a traffic jam, roll down your window and blow some bubbles. Keep some kids' toys within reach at work. When you are stressed, take out a toy and play with it. That irate customer on the phone will have no idea that you are keeping your cool by playing with a Slinky

LEARN TO PLAY WITH WORDS. Such as the sign -----

- On a diaper truck: Rock a dry baby, or
- On a divorce lawyer's wall: Satisfaction guaranteed, or your honey back, and

- The sign on a restaurant that did not accept checks: We have an agreement with the bank, we don't cash checks, and they don't serve pastrami sandwiches.

TODAY'S UPSETS ARE TOMORROW'S LAUGHS. To quote H.G. Wells, "The crisis of today is the joke of tomorrow." Humorous anecdotes emerge from the most chaotic of scenarios, though they may appear funny, only, in retrospect. Sometimes it takes ten seconds to see some humor in our dilemmas, sometimes ten years. You can shorten this gap, the next time you find yourself in a troublesome situation, stop for a moment, and ask yourself; what will it look like in a month, a year, or when you are eighty-five? If you can say, someday I might laugh at this, you will be closer to doing so. Phyllis Diller expressed it well, "You've got to realize when all goes well, and everything is beautiful, you have no comedy. It's when somebody steps on the bride's train, or belches during the ceremony that you've got comedy."

ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING. Which way you choose to see anything depends on your attitude. Is it partially cloudy, or partially sunny? Is your glass half full or half empty? Oscar Wilde chose to see the glass "half full" after witnessing a dismal production of one of his new plays. When asked by a friend, "How did your play go tonight?" He replied, "Oh, the play was a great success, but the audience was a failure." You choose which pair of attitude glasses to wear. Ma West lived into her eighties believing she was twenty, it never occurred to her that her arithmetic was lousy.

In conclusion ----- Let a “smile be your umbrella,” take a daily dose of Vitamin L, Laughter and Vitamin H, Humor, and spend less time in the doctors office. This prescription will have a profound affect on your body, mind and soul. To quote Serene West,

“Laughter is a melody, a concert from the heart,
a tickling by the angels, creative living art.

Laughter heals and comforts, sometimes gentle, sometimes bold.

Laughter is a freeing dance, performed within the soul.”

Achor, Shawn. *The happiness advantage: the seven principles that fuel success and performance at work*. Virgin, 2011.

Berk, Lee S., et al. "Neuroendocrine and Stress Hormone Changes During Mirthful Laughter." *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, vol. 298, no. 6, 1989, pp. 390–396., doi:10.1097/00000441-198912000-00006.

Cousins, Norman. *Anatomy of an illness as perceived by the patient*. W.W. Norton, 2005.

Fry, William F. *Sweet madness: a study of humor*. Transaction Publishers, 2010.

Hauptman, Don. *Cruel and unusual puns*. Dell Pub., 1991.

"History of Laughter Therapy." *Laughter Online University*, 11 Nov. 2017, www.laughteronlineuniversity.com/western-history-laughter-therapy/.

Humor Therapy-Topic Overview - WebMD.

www.bing.com/cr?IG=00E9F4B565D444829BAADF59DEE20807&CID=093DD0C56DA46EB31A28DB516C0B6F36&rd=1&h=XzJIEGS3mPHQXHbmHm5qXSAoNe9pxiAH3oPk65-lwXY&v=1&r=https%3a%2f%2fwww.webmd.com%2fmental-health%2ftc%2fhumor-therapy-topic-overview&p=DevEx,5065.1

Klein, Allen. *The healing power of humor: techniques for getting through loss, setbacks, upsets, disappointments, difficulties, trials, tribulations, and all that not-so-Funny stuff*. Thorndike Press, 2003.

"Laughter is the Best Medicine." *Laughter is the Best Medicine: The Health Benefits of Humor and Laughter*, www.helpguide.org/articles/mental-health/laughter-is-the-best-medicine.htm.

Mann, David. *Humor therapy: the art of smiling for others*. IUniverse Com, 2015.

Moody, Raymond A. *Laugh after laugh the healing power of humor*. NLS, 1980.

“Stress relief from laughter? It's no joke.” *Mayo Clinic*, Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 21 Apr. 2016, www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-relief/art-20044456.

Sultanoff, Steven M. “☺My belief is that we are going to eventually discover that the most dramatic health benefits of humor are not in laughter, but in the cognitive and emotional management that humorous experiences provide. The experience of humor relieves emotional distress and assists in changing negative thinking patterns.☹Steven M. Sultanoff, Ph.D.” *Definition of humor*, www.humormatters.com/definition.htm.

Tarvin, Andrew. “The Difference Between Smiling and Laughing.” *Humor at Work - Better Results*, www.humorthatworks.com/learning/the-difference-between-smiling-and-laughing/.

The Connection between Laughter, Humor, and Good Health.

www.bing.com/cr?IG=ADCD8BD74F0A4C288843B7A8B085A0F8&CID=135A351226F9613E2C133E8627566074&rd=1&h=ViWBwt7FWxh0wH8Agx3bfJjRa31yC7pggXLYkJ7xYNw&v=1&r=http%3a%2f%2fwww2.ca.uky.edu%2fhes%2ffcs%2ffactshts%2fhsw-caw-807.pdf&p=DevEx,5065.1.

“The Healing Power of Humor.” *Psych Central*, 17 July 2016, psychcentral.com/lib/the-healing-power-of-humor/.

Warner, Joel. “The Importance of Humor Research.” *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 14 Sept. 2011, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-humor-

code/201109/the-importance-humor-research.

Wooten, Patty. *Compassionate laughter: jest for your health*. Jest Press, 2002.