

Reflections

The Benefits of Laughing

By Julie Guirgis

LAUGHTER IS NO JOKING MATTER

A corny knock-knock joke may seem like an eye-rolling waste of time, but if it gets you to giggle even a little bit, it's good for you. In fact, laughing and finding humor in the mundane can improve multiple aspects of your life, including your physical health, mental well-being, relationships, and career.

For centuries, humor has been considered medicinal. As early as the 1200s, surgeons used humor to distract patients from pain. And by the twentieth century, humor came under scientific study for its effects on physical and psychological wellness.

In studies that evaluated people before and after a humorous event, researchers discovered that episodes of laughter helped reduce pain, decrease stress-related hormones, and improve immunity.

"Laughter boosts the immune system so that we are less likely to get ill, and if we do get ill, we can recover quicker," says Lesley Lyle, author of *Laugh Your Way to Happiness*.

As more research about the health benefits of laughter emerges, science seems to agree with philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell:

"Laughter is the most inexpensive and most effective wonder drug. Laughter is a universal medicine." (continued)

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*"Laughter is a
universal medicine."*

—Bertrand Russell



HOW LAUGHTER AFFECTS THE BODY

Finding humor in life literally strengthens your immune system and increases your resistance to disease. A study published in *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine* measured white blood cell activity in subjects before and after they watched humorous videos. They found that the health benefits of laughter linger long after the joke has ended.

“There’s a boost in immune function thirty minutes to an hour after laughing,” says Mary Payne Bennett, director of the Western Kentucky University School of Nursing.

In addition, medical studies have found that laughter not only decreases stress hormones, but it also increases endorphins in the bloodstream, which increases the pain threshold with opiate-like effects. Endorphins are the chemicals that bring a sense of pleasure, improve mood, relieve pain, and help manage discomfort.

“People who suffer from pain can get a lot of relief from indulging in prolonged laughter,” says Lyle. “When we suffer pain, our bodies become tense, and it causes stress, but laughter changes our physical response by making us relaxed, reducing our levels of stress, and producing endorphins. Natural endorphins are more powerful than synthetic painkillers and do not have negative side effects.”

Nearly 40 years ago, Norman Cousins published *Anatomy of an Illness*, a book about mind-body medicine from a patient’s perspective. Diagnosed with a painful degenerative disease, he used laughter as a tool to relieve his severe pain. He discovered that ten minutes of belly laughing could relieve his pain for up to two hours.

Laughter is also good for your heart. Michael Miller, M.D., director of the Center of Preventive Cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center, recommends laughter as part of a healthy heart program for his patients.

According to Miller, laughing for fifteen minutes every day can significantly decrease your chances of suffering a heart attack. Laughter benefits the heart by relaxing the arteries, reducing blood pressure, improving circulation, and increasing blood flow for up to forty-five minutes, which is comparable to aerobic exercise.

HOW LAUGHTER AFFECTS THE MIND

Individuals who laugh easily and often have better self-esteem and a more positive outlook on life. They also experience countless health benefits, including stress relief, increased energy, and improved mental clarity and problem-solving skills. By boosting serotonin, laughter works as a natural antidepressant.

“The more you laugh, the more lively you feel,” says Cris Popp, founder of Laughter Works. “Laughter takes away your worries and tensions and helps you concentrate on your task.”

“Laughter helps release negative emotions and pent-up tension, particularly anger, anxiety, fear, and boredom,” says Popp. “It’s great for anything that involves innovation and creativity. Stress and anxiety restrict the mind, while laughter releases it.”

Michael Cortina, director of outpatient services at the Regional Mental Health Center in Merrillville, Indiana, found that even serious conditions, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can be improved with laughter therapy.

“It is absolutely revolutionary. It eliminates the negative effect and emotional distress of that trauma in one session,” Cortina said.

Laughter also helps relieve a common concern: forgetfulness. According to a study of elderly patients at Loma Linda University, people who watched a funny video that made them laugh before a memory test scored higher than those who didn’t. By reducing the stress hormone cortisol, which is known to damage neurons in the brain, laughter improves memory.

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HOW LAUGHTER AFFECTS YOUR CAREER

Laughter is an important part of effective and positive communication and can make a big difference in how you are perceived in the workplace.

“We have this misguided belief that unless you appear serious and stressed then you can’t be doing your job well,” says Popp. “The opposite is true. People who laugh more are easier to deal with. It enhances communication.”

There’s even a financial incentive for having a sense of humor in the workplace. Research conducted by the Hay Group’s McClelland Center for Research and Innovation discovered that people who frequently laughed earn more than those who only laughed occasionally. The laughers also received larger bonuses and were more effective in the workplace.

Another study indicated that people who laughed fifteen minutes a day for fifteen days in a row ended up being twice as competent at work—and, astonishingly, the residual benefits of their laughter lingered for three months after the study.

HOW LAUGHTER AFFECTS YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

Laughter doesn’t happen only as a result of hearing jokes or watching sitcoms. Simply spending time with friends and family is one of the best ways to laugh more. Research has found that laughter is contagious—so you’re more likely to laugh in the company of others than on your own.

“When we see people laugh . . . , we tend to react by displaying the same behavior. . . . As soon as we see or hear someone laugh, our neurons are stimulated and they ‘fire off’ so that we have an automatic response and laugh too,” says Lyle.

When you engage in a positive way with someone, you rebalance your nervous system and put a halt to defensive stress responses. Laughing

with someone makes you feel happier, more positive, and more relaxed, regardless of your circumstances.

All emotional sharing strengthens relationship bonds, but sharing laughter has an added benefit because it causes the release of oxytocin, also known as the empathy hormone, which helps bond individuals in a greater way. That’s why humor can be helpful in building strong teams, healing resentments, and overcoming disagreements and hurts.

Laughter can also be used as an icebreaker for managing conflict and reducing tension during heated moments. Whether you’re with your spouse, friends, family, or coworkers, humor can be useful in smoothing over disagreements and lowering stress levels. ■

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SHARP Corner

Your Spending Account (YSA) Claims Address Change

Effective June 28, 2021, YSA's mailing address changed to PO Box 64012, The Woodlands, TX 77387-4012. If you use paper claim forms, please note the new address on the form so that when you mail it in, it goes to the right place.

- ▶ **As a reminder, the deadline for 2020 claims was extended to December 20, 2021, per the CARES Act.**
- ▶ **Did you know there are short video clips on our website that can guide you in accessing your HRA or submitting reimbursement claims? Go to <https://www.adventistretirement.org/retiree/sharp/> and scroll down to the blue line bar that indicates +Webinars/Videos. Click on the + and select an option from the menu.**



Thinking about moving?

It's important to consider the tax situation in a jurisdiction before relocating during retirement. This Kiplinger article (<https://www.kiplinger.com/retirement/602202/taxes-in-retirement-how-all-50-states-tax-retirees>) describes how all 50 states and Washington, D.C., tax retirees, taking into account income, sales and property taxes.

When you move, remember to notify the Social Security Office ([ssa.gov](https://www.ssa.gov)): 1-800-772-1213, Aon Retiree Health Exchange: 1-844-360-4714, and Adventist Retirement: 1-443-391-7300.