

Laughter

2 Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."

3 The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.

Psalm 126: 2-3 (New International Version)

We all know how good a big deep belly laugh feels...how much fun it is to play and joke with friends and family. A good comedy show can be a real tonic after a hard day. It's been said that laughter is good for the soul. There's now proof that it is good for the body, mind and emotions too.

Laughter research has shown that humor can help people keep their bodies strong and disease resistant. Humor is equally helpful to our mental health and the way we deal with stress and worry. A good laugh exercises many muscles of the body and causes the brain to secrete *endorphins*. These "feel-good" brain chemicals raise both our mood and our coping abilities. Things don't look so bad when viewed through the eyes of humor. I've even heard of cancer patients being issued *squirt guns* to help ease their stress while undergoing cancer-fighting chemotherapy! Wouldn't that be worth a laugh or two?

Humor therapist, Patty Wooten explains, "Humor can be an empowerment tool. Humor gives us a different perspective on our problems and, with an attitude of detachment, we feel a sense of self-protection and control in our environment."(1) Humor helps us cope with stressful situations in a more relaxed, detached way. We feel more in control. Humor helps us feel in control at work and in social situations. Therapist Cathy Fenwick encourages people to use humor in the workplace. Humor boosts morale, eases communication gaps, and reduces burnout. It helps us be more flexible, adaptable and open to change. A good laugh relieves boredom and boosts creativity. Spontaneity and confidence are more freely expressed. She writes, "Laughing with people is compassionate, but laughing at them is rude, immoral and unethical. Healthy humor is based on caring and empathy, builds confidence, brings people closer together and is mutually supportive."(2) Psychologists such as Carl Rogers (3) and Abraham Maslow (4) wrote that a sense of humor is a key ingredient in self-actualized, full functioning people. Being able to laugh helps us gain a freer perspective of things and face our problems with renewed energy. (5)

Hormones: Laughter reduces the level of stress hormones like cortisol, epinephrine, adrenaline, dopamine and growth hormone. It also increases the level of health-enhancing hormones like endorphins, and neurotransmitters. Laughter increases the number of antibody-producing cells and enhances the effectiveness of T cells. All this means a stronger immune system, as well as fewer physical effects of stress.

Physical Release: Have you ever felt like you had to laugh or you'll cry? Have you experienced the cleansed feeling after a good laugh? Laughter provides a physical and emotional release.

Internal Workout: A deep, rolling belly laugh exercises the diaphragm, the big muscle that separates your chest from your abdomen and allows for deep breathing. Deep breathing brings more oxygen into your lungs and consequently provides more oxygen to all tissues. It also contracts the abdominal muscles and works out the shoulders, leaving muscles more relaxed afterward. It even provides a good workout for the heart.

Distraction: Laughter brings the focus away from your feelings of anger, guilt, stress and negative emotions better than most other mere distractions.

Perspective: Studies show that our response to stressful events can be altered by whether we view something as a 'threat' or a 'challenge'. Humor can give us a more lighthearted perspective and help us view events as 'challenges', thereby making them less threatening and more positive. People who can laugh at themselves or at their situations usually feel stronger when problems arise.

Social Benefits of Laughter: Laughter connects us with others. Also, laughter is contagious, so if you bring more laughter into your life, you can most likely help others around you to laugh more, and realize these benefits as well. By elevating the mood of those around you, you can reduce their stress levels, and perhaps improve the quality of social interaction you experience with them, reducing your stress level even more!

A sense of humor helps us cope with our world in a more philosophical way. Being able to laugh in the face of challenge and strife is a priceless skill to develop. Nurture your ability to share humor, to laugh deeply, to face the world with a smile. It can set the stage for productivity, satisfaction, a sense of belonging and relief from cares and burdens. Make it a daily exercise. You'll be glad you did!

References

1. Wooten, P. (1996). *Humor: An antidote for stress*. *Holistic Nursing Practice*. Vol. 10, No. 2, pages 49-55. On-line version available at: <http://www.jesthealth.com/artantistress.html>
2. Fenwick, C. *Healing with Humor: Making Laughter Work for You*. University of Saskatchewan.
3. Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
4. Maslow, A. (1961). *Toward a psychology of being*. Princeton: Van Nostrand.
5. Kaminski, J. (2004) *Laugh Until It Doesn't Hurt*.

Do you think that Moses led the Israelites through the desert for forty years because:

- a. God was testing him;
- b. God wanted them to really appreciate the promised land when they finally got there;
- c. Moses refused to stop and ask for directions?