

Life Lines

Improving Your Quality of Life — One Step at a Time



Humour Therapy and the Power of Laughter

Stressed out? Feeling anxious or under pressure? Have a good laugh... it will do more for you than you think!

Laughing is infectious. The sound of roaring laughter is far more contagious than any cough, snuffle, or sneeze. We like laughing because it feels good, but it also triggers healthy physical changes in the body. Humour and laughter strengthen the immune system, boost our energy, diminish pain, and can

protect us from the damaging effects of stress. In addition to the positive effects it has on our physical health, when laughter is shared, it binds us together and increases happiness and intimacy. With so much power to heal and renew, the ability to laugh easily and frequently is a tremendous resource. It's no wonder that more and more people are turning to laughter as a form of therapy to help them overcome personal challenges, enhance their relationships, and support their physical and mental health.

A good laugh makes our bodies and minds feel good, but do we actually know why? Laughing increases blood flow, can lead to reductions in stress hormones such as cortisol, adrenaline and when laughing, the brain releases endorphins that can relieve some physical pain. Additionally, laughter also boosts the number of antibody-producing cells and enhances the effectiveness of our T-cells — leading to a stronger immune system. Laughing also facilitates:

- ✔ **A good workout.** Laughing exercises the diaphragm, contracts abdominal muscles and even works out the shoulders, leaving muscles more relaxed afterward. It also provides a good workout for the heart. Laughing 100 times is the equivalent to ten minutes on the rowing machine or 15 minutes on an exercise bike!
- ✔ **A change in your perspective.** Researchers at *the University of California* have found that our response to stressful events can be altered depending on whether we view something as a threat or a challenge. Humour can give us a more light-hearted perspective and help us view stressful events as challenges, thereby making them less threatening and more positive.
- ✔ **A positive impact on others.** Laughter is contagious, so if you bring more laughter into your life, you can most likely help others around you laugh more. By elevating the mood of others, you can diminish their stress levels, and possibly improve the quality of your social interaction with them.
- ✔ **A longer life.** According to recent research published in *the Archives of General Psychiatry*, elderly optimistic people are less likely to die prematurely than pessimists are. In fact, among the 65-85 year-old study participants, those who were most optimistic were 55 percent less likely to die from all causes than those who were most pessimistic.

Humour Therapy

Humour and laughter are part of everyday life, but recently they are receiving increased attention as a form of therapy. Humour therapy involves the use of humour and laughter for the relief of physical or emotional pain and stress. It is used as a complementary method to promote health and cope with illness.

Although, available scientific evidence does not support claims that laughter can cure cancer or any other disease, as mentioned above, it can reduce stress and enhance a person's quality of life. Many hospitals and treatment centres have set up special rooms with humorous materials in order to make people laugh. These materials include movies, audio recordings, books, games, and puzzles. Many hospitals use volunteers who visit patients solely to make them laugh, and some cancer treatment centres offer humour therapy in addition to standard treatments.

That's because we're just not laughing as much as we used to. Recent research shows that pre-school-aged children laugh up to 400 times a day, but by the time we reach adulthood, we laugh a mere 17 times per day on average! Simply put, we need to laugh more. Below are some strategies to help you raise your laughter level:

-  **Smile.** Smiling is the beginning of laughing. Like laughing, it's contagious. Pioneers in 'humour therapy' find it's possible to laugh without even experiencing a funny event. The same holds true for smiling. When you look at someone or see something even slightly pleasing, practice smiling.
-  **Look on the bright side.** Make a list of the positives in your life. This simple act will help you focus less on negative thoughts that are a barrier to humour and laughter.
-  **Move towards the laughter.** Sometimes laughter occurs in a shared joke amongst a small group, but usually not. More often, people are very happy to share something funny with you because it gives them an opportunity to laugh again and feed off the humour you find in it. When you hear laughter, seek it out and ask, "What's funny?"
-  **Hang around the funny ones.** These people laugh easily — both at themselves and at life's absurdities. They routinely find the humour in everyday events. Their playful point of view is contagious. Spending more time with them will help lighten your mood.

If we look at humour and the power of laughter as medicine, it can be an effective self-care and caregiving tool. The body, mind, and spirit all benefit from laughing regularly, and by doing it, we are doing ourselves a favour. It's fun, free, and easy to use. This may make it 'the best medicine' after all.

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