



Laughter Is Really Good Medicine

Nancy Recker

Extension Educator, Family and Consumer Sciences
Associate Professor

You have probably heard the saying, “Laughter is the best medicine.” Many medical studies show that laughter has both physical and mental benefits, but in today’s fast-paced stressful world, there is definitely a lack of laughter. People get so caught up in the have-to’s and should-do’s that they forget to lighten up. Laughter and humor are two powerful tools that can help people cope and get through threatening situations. Looking at life’s situations with a sense of humor and laughter provides perspective and helps keep things in balance when life seems unfair.

The Benefits of Laughter

There are limits to what we really know about laughter. There have been many theories to explain the link between laughter and health. Laughter is often part of a bigger picture, the social picture. Health benefits can come from having fun with family and friends, and laughter just naturally goes along with that. While no one really knows the precise connection, we do know that it improves your quality of life.

Why Do People Laugh?

Philosopher John Morreall believes that laughter came about as a gesture of shared relief at the passing of danger. Many researchers believe that the purpose of laughter is related to human connections. Laughter happens when people feel comfortable with each other. With more laughter comes more bonding. Robert Provine, professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, believes that laughter is a social function. People are 30 times more likely to laugh in social settings than when they are alone. Laughter isn’t a learned behavior; it’s instinctual. People who are born

blind and deaf still laugh, and infants laugh before they are two months old. Before humans used speech, laughter was a simpler method of communication.

Finding Things Funny

Each of us has our own unique sense of humor. What people find funny seems to be most significant to age. Young children are constantly discovering new things that may seem ridiculous and surprising to them and so they laugh. They also laugh, much to their parents’ dismay, at toilet jokes and cruelty to others. Pre-teens and adolescents often use humor as a tool to protect themselves or feel superior. As people mature, humor becomes more developed as they learn more. As adults gain more experiences, their sense of humor usually centers around the issues that stress them out. Other factors that affect humor are culture and the community that people come from.

What You Get When You Laugh

Laughter has many psychological benefits. Laughter lets people harmlessly release negative emotions such as anger, sadness, and fear. While we are working at surviving, laughter can help us maintain our perspective. The next time you feel like you are losing control, allow yourself a little “humor time.” If you can find what’s funny in a situation, your upsets may not seem as important as they once did.

Humor gives a sense of power.

There are many things in life that we have no control over and can’t change. As long as we have a sense of humor, we can do something. Humor has the power to turn almost any situation around.

Humor helps us cope.

A lot of the suffering and troubles we experience are not a result of our difficulties, but how we view them. People use humor as a protection against change and uncertainty. Using humor in difficult times can be one of the smartest ways of coping with difficulties, easing our worries, and getting on with life.

Humor helps establish communication and rapport.

Laughter knows no cultural boundaries. You don't have to speak the same language to laugh together. Laughter also helps break the ice when you are in a group. It is one form of communication to which everyone can relate.

Humor relieves tension.

We all know the relief we feel when someone in a group makes a funny comment during a tense situation. Humor dispels anger and aggression in ourselves and others. It helps to use humor when dealing with an angry child. A study of humor in the classroom showed lower scores on aggression for students viewing a humorous videotape.

Humor increases learning and retention.

Laughing stimulates both sides of the brain. People get the message quicker and remember it longer. Children as well as adults learn more when they are having fun and participating in the learning.

Humor is an important, often overlooked tool. 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. Be aware of taking yourself too seriously. It is important to learn to laugh at yourself.

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 suggestions to help add more laughter to your life:

- Recognize the value of humor.
- Don't worry or analyze why people laugh—just participate.
- Think funny—look for the humor in every situation. Learn to laugh at the incongruities in life.
- Keep a notebook and jot down the funny things you hear. Do it daily.
- Adapt material. Use humor from any source. If you think nothing funny happens to you, personalize it and change it to fit you.
- Laugh at yourself. We all do stupid things. If you laugh at your mistakes, it gives others permission to do the same.

Remember, laughter not only can make you feel better, but the use of humor can be a major tool for insight. George Burns probably says it best, "You can't help getting older, but you can help getting old. Chronologically the clock is going to keep on ticking for all of us, but if we take a lick of humor, we can prevent a hardening of the attitudes. If we save humor, humor can be a lifesaver."

Humor is all around you; just open up your eyes and look. We talk about diet and exercise to improve your life, now take a look at your attitude. According to Allen Klein from the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, "Your attitude is like a box of crayons that color the world. Constantly use gray colors, and your picture will always be dark and depressing. Use humor to add bright colors, and your picture begins to lighten up."

Have you had your laughs today? If not, get working on it!

References

Goodman, J. (1995). *Laffirmations, 1001 ways to add humor to your life and work*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications Inc.

Griffin, M. A. (2006). Why we laugh. WebMd feature [Online]. Available: <http://www.webmd.com/content/Article/120/113762>.

Klein, A. (2005, January 20). What a laugh. Humor really can heal. Daily health news [On-line]. Available: www.bottomlinesecrets.com/blpnet

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION

Visit Ohio State University Extension's web site "Ohioline" at: <http://ohioline.osu.edu>

Ohio State University Extension embraces human diversity and is committed to ensuring that all educational programs conducted by OSU Extension are available to clientele on a nondiscriminatory basis without regard to race, color, age, gender identity or expression, disability, religion, sexual orientation, national origin, or veteran status.

Keith L. Smith, Associate Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Director, Ohio State University Extension

TDD No. 800-589-8292 (Ohio only) or 614-292-1868

August 2007—3458