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Mather LifeWays researchers, educators, and other professionals who are leaders in creating Ways to Age Well.SM

Did You Hear the One About...?

*A Laugh a Day Just Might
Keep the Doctor Away*

Brought to you by Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging

Dr. Lee Berk, preventive care specialist and researcher at Loma Linda University, has studied the impact of humor on the immune system and found remarkable results: laughter decreases blood pressure, reduces stress hormones, and increases muscle flexion. In addition, laughter was found to boost immune function by increasing infection-fighting T cells as well as IgB (immunoglobulin) that helps antibodies attack dysfunctional cells.

You can do it by yourself or with others...it requires about 20 muscles (but it hardly seems like a strain), and thirty seconds of it can be equivalent to a great workout! Yes, we're talking about laughter—a simple thing we do and take for granted. Laughter is very powerful, as it has been proven to actually alleviate pain. Though most of us aren't aware of it, we could really use a good laugh each day. Laughter and humor help us relax, lower our stress levels, and help us find “the funny,” which can give us a new perspective on seemingly difficult situations. When shared, laughter can help us connect with family, friends, co-workers, and even strangers.

THE SCIENCE OF LAUGHTER: EARLY PIONEERS

The study of laughter and its psychological and physiological effects on the body is called *gelotology*, which comes from the Greek word *gelos*, meaning “to laugh.” Some of the earliest observers of laughter include 18th-century French Enlightenment writer Voltaire who lamented, “The art of medicine consists of keeping the patient amused while medicine heals the disease.” Scientist Charles Darwin lauded its “high evolutionary significance,” and nearly 30 years later, philosopher Henri Bergson penned an essay about why people laugh, basing his thoughts on laughter as a caricature of human habits used by clowns and comics to generate hilarity.

RECENT RESEARCH & OBSERVATIONS

Dr. Lee Berk, preventive care specialist and researcher at Loma Linda University, has studied the impact of humor on the immune system and found remarkable results: laughter decreases blood pressure, reduces stress hormones, and increases muscle flexion. In addition, laughter was found to boost immune function by increasing infection-fighting T cells as well as *IgB* (immunoglobulin) that helps antibodies attack dysfunctional cells. Berk and his colleagues also determined that laughter triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural painkilling chemicals that produce a general sense of well-being.

Dr. Diane Mahony, associate professor of psychology at Brigham Young University-Hawaii, describes how your health can improve through laughter and humor. For a start, vigorous laughter is stimulating; it increases heart rate, blood pressure, and circulation. It also circulates immune substance effectiveness, pulmonary ventilation, and alertness, and it exercises the skeletal muscles.

And after all that laughing, your body still benefits. Dr. William F. Fry Jr., psychiatrist and professor emeritus from the Stanford University School of Medicine, offers that post-laughter, there is a brief period when blood pressure, heart rate, respiratory rate, and muscle activity decrease, resulting in relaxation. In other words: Ha, ha, ha...ahhh.

Patty Wooten, RN, BSN, and former president of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, classified three types of therapeutic humor: hoping, coping, and gallows humor. Hoping is the ability to hope for something better in spite of overwhelming circumstances; coping changes thinking and helps regain a sense of control; and gallows humor recognizes the intolerable aspects of a situation and transforms it into something tolerable.

It's important to note that laughter and humor are obviously closely tied, however, the presence of humor does not necessarily guarantee laughter. As most of us have probably experienced, what's funny to one person might not be funny to someone else. We often have to consider what's "funny" appropriate—and that includes taking the audience's age, culture, gender, and language, as well as social norms into account.

A FAMOUS CASE OF LAUGHTER THERAPY

One of the most famous cases of laughter used as medicine is told by author and journalist Norman Cousins, who shared his experience with the healing powers of laughter in his 1979 book, *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient*. Cousins, an editor of *The Saturday Evening Post* for 35 years, wrote about his 1964 diagnosis with a serious illness involving the disintegration of his spine's connective tissue. One of his doctors gave him a one-in-five-hundred chance for a full recovery, but Cousins spoke about how he took an active role in his own healing by watching *Candid Camera* reruns and Marx Brothers films as tools to relieve pain. Cousins realized laughter elicited positive emotions that had therapeutic value for him, and these positive emotions included hope, faith, love, a will to live, cheerfulness, humor, creativity, playfulness, confidence, and great expectations.

THE ROLE OF LAUGHTER AS WE AGE

The need to embrace positive emotions and have fun does not diminish as we age. In fact, "finding the funny" might become even more important as we face changes brought on by careers, technology, aging, politics, media, illness, loss of loved ones, and the economy, among other variables. Patty Wooten, RN, BSN, and former president of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, classified three types of therapeutic humor: *hoping*, *coping*, and *gallows humor*. *Hoping* is the ability to hope for something better in spite of overwhelming circumstances; an example of this could be watching a familiar comic do a favorite routine to provide a safe haven in a time of trouble. *Coping* changes thinking and helps regain a sense of control; for example, Jane Hill, cancer survivor and comic, once compared her operations to airline travel and thought she had enough "frequent gurney miles" for a free operation. Finally, *gallows humor* recognizes the intolerable aspects of a situation and transforms it into something tolerable; Jane Hill might say: one of the advantages to having cancer is that people don't ask you to help them move!

WAYS TO INTRODUCE LAUGHTER: LAUGHTER YOGA & MORE

There are many ways to add laughter to your life beyond laughing with friends and family or watching a television show or movie. There are actually therapeutic methods

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and organized clubs you can try, such as a laughter club, sometimes called Laughter Yoga.

Since its introduction in 1995 in Mumbai, India, by Dr. Madan Kataria (aka “The Guru of Giggling”), Laughter Yoga has spread across the globe and is now enjoyed in more than 55 countries. Judith Sample, a certified Laughter Yoga instructor in Chicago, describes this therapy as “...using ‘fake’ laughter in spontaneous ways, along with yogic breathing, to stimulate inner joy. The laughter becomes spontaneous very quickly.” Laughter Yoga uses improvisational games that require no acting ability or sense of humor. It employs deep breathing, gentle movement, and laughter chants—and for those intimidated by yoga, good news! There are *no yoga poses*. Anyone of any age can participate and previous exercise experience is not necessary. For older adults with limited mobility, Laughter Yoga can be extremely beneficial.

In addition to Laughter Yoga, there are many other ways to incorporate a good time into your daily life. Ask yourself when, where, and with whom you laugh the most. Do you like droll and dry humor or slapstick and physical comedy? Determining your type of humor can lead you to more sources. You might also consider reading the comics, watching funny movies, playing with pets or children, singing or watching karaoke, visiting a comedy club, surrounding yourself with funny and uplifting people, or holding a clean joke contest!

Laughter affects how we communicate. When “the funny” alleviates pressure or serves as a barometer for how we view life, it serves as a signal for us to continue looking at all that is good around us. Whether we use Laughter Yoga to tickle our funny bones or try to see the humor in the simplest of details, the ability to guffaw can help change our outlook from dark to sunny—if even for a few moments.

*Mather LifeWays is a unique nonprofit organization that enhances the lives of older adults by creating Ways to Age Well.SM Learn more about our award-winning research at Mather LifeWays **Institute on Aging**, our **senior living residences**, and our **community initiatives**.*

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