

The Healing Power of Humor
by
Dr. Stuart Robertshaw, President & CEO
National Association for the Humor Impaired
www.drhumor.com

Our history, traditions and experience teach us that humor has great health value. For example, in Proverbs 17: 22, we read “A merry heart does good like a medicine, and a broken spirit dries the bones.” Further, in “The Taming of the Shrew,” Shakespeare advises us, “Frame your mind to mirth and merriment, which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life.” Our subjective experience tells us that we feel better after laughter and socially, we tend to gravitate toward others who exhibit an active sense of humor.

It was not until the publication of Norman Cousins’ book in 1979, “Anatomy of an Illness,” that the scientific community began a more focused investigation of the effects of laughter and humor on physiological and psychological functioning. At that time, volumes of scientific research existed confirming that physical and psychological stress produced chemical and neurological changes. The bulk of that research focused on negative stress or distress and surprisingly very few studies investigated the impact of eustress, or positive emotional states.

In the classic 1989 study by Lee Berk and Stanley Tan at Loma Linda University, the researchers had 20 first-year medical students watch a 45-minute video tape of Gallagher, a popular stand-up comedian. Blood samples were gathered before, during, and immediately after viewing of the video as well as the next day. Their results indicated that: there was a significant increase in the number of activated T-cells (lymphocytes); a significant increase in the activation and number of natural killer cells (NK cells); and a significant increase in production of the antibody immunoglobulin A (IgA). Apparently during mirthful laughter, there is a chemical stimulus that tells our immune system to become active, and to get prepared for combat with a potential virus, bacteria or foreign protein. Some of the chemical changes were evident as long as 12 hours following the viewing of the video tape.

We now also know that our immune system is very sensitive to our moods, being stronger on our “up” days and weaker on our “down” days. This has been documented by a number of studies that indicate negative moods are associated with corresponding reduced levels of: natural killer cell activity; lymphocyte proliferation; serum antibody response to Hepatitis B vaccine; and salivary IgA in response to a novel antigen. Dr. Bernie Siegel has long emphasized the importance of a positive optimistic mood in fighting cancer and sustaining wellness and in preventing “hardening of the attitudes.”

When we’re under stress, our body undergoes a series of hormonal and other body changes which make up the “fight or flight” response. Anything which reduces the level of stress hormones in the blood on a regular basis helps reduce a health threat. Recent research has documented that laughter reduces neuroendocrine hormones associated with stress such as: epinephrine and cortisol. Further, every time we laugh, our blood pressure and heart rate both rise, then fall. This activity tends to increase the intake of oxygen-rich air -- which gives us more energy and helps to expel residual air in our lungs which is high in carbon dioxide.

In summary, following laughter our bodies undergo several physiological and chemical changes that have immediate positive effects on our well-being. Those changes include: improved immunity, reduced stress as well as increased cardiovascular activity. We now know scientifically that it is important for overall health and wellness to make a conscious effort to increase daily the joy, laughter and fun in our lives.

The following strategies are designed to increase the humor and laughter in our lives:

1. Learn to laugh at yourself (and remember that you're unique, just like everybody else).
2. Look for humor in everyday experiences by asking yourself, "What's funny about this situation?"
3. Learn to break free from terminal seriousness and hardening of the attitudes and develop a sense of childlike playfulness.
4. Associate with people who can boost your spirits and bring a smile to your face.
5. Select reading material, television shows, movies etc. for the fun and humor they provide.
6. Learn to look for the humor in stressful or unpleasant situations and ask yourself if the situation will make a difference a year from now? If the answer is yes, how about ten years?
7. Develop a humor file and fill it up with cartoons, jokes, funny ideas, one liners etc. that make you laugh. Use your file for daily humor breaks.
8. Start a humor journal or diary in which you write down off beat and amusing ideas and thoughts that bring a smile to your face.
9. Learn to select activities to do each day just for the fun.
10. Practice laughing out loud and often as a part of your daily exercise regime.

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