

The Role of Laughter

Laughter is being taken more seriously these days in the medical and therapeutic communities. Research is seeping into professional journals validating the various benefits of the laugh:

1) Laughter stimulates the immune system. Research by Dr. Lee Berk shows that laughter lowers levels of the stress hormones cortisol and epinephrine. At the same time, the immune system appears to grow stronger as the body's T cells, natural killer cells, and antibodies all show signs of heightened activity during laughter. Another study led by K. Dillon found subjects showed an increased concentration of salivary immunoglobulin A (a defense against the entry of infectious organisms through the respiratory tract) after viewing a humorous video.

2) Laughter engages various parts of the brain. Derks from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg showed that humor pulls the various parts of the brain together rather than activating a component in only one area. Perhaps this is one reason why people often find that a dose of lengthy laughter can be followed by a burst of creativity and group problem solving.

3) Laughter is a good cardio workout. It increases the activity of the heart and stimulates circulation. In addition, after the laughter subsides, the cardiovascular system goes into a state of relaxation.

4) The threshold of pain is raised during and for a short period of time after laughter. After years of prolonged pain from a rare spinal disease, Norman Cousins, former editor of the US Saturday Review, stopped taking drugs and self-prescribed a new regime of pain killers: When the pain became unbearable, Cousins would watch videos of Laurel and Hardy and Marx Brothers. Five minutes of giggling could provide him with up to two hours of pain relief. This increase of pain threshold during and after laughing episodes has been confirmed in studies.

There are also studies showing the effects of laughter upon the muscular and respiratory systems. Indeed, with the growing validity of psychoneuroimmunology, laughter will most likely be linked to every cell in the human body. There are also various psychological and emotional effects of laughter. For instance, laughter offers a respite from intense moments and energizes us spiritually. Laughter builds rapport, increases communication, and increases our sense of safety with another. As **Harville Hendrix, Ph.D.** has repeatedly said in his workshops, "A belly laugh a day, keeps the divorce lawyers away." In addition, a study done by Walter E. O'Connell, Ph.D. showed that the most self actualized, happy people scored high in appreciation of a sense of humor. In contrast, those with pathological conditions scored high on hostile wit.