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## LAUGHTER is FUN AND HEALTHY

*Research has shown health benefits of laughter ranging from strengthening the immune system to reducing food cravings to increasing one's threshold for pain. There's even an emerging therapeutic field known as humor therapy to help people heal more quickly, among other things. Humor also has several important stress relieving benefits.*

It is more than six years now since the first 'Laughter Club' was set up. There is a growing demand for such clubs in India and abroad. Almost everyday more and more people are joining Laughter Clubs and are reaping its benefits. One of the benefits is that laughter puts the members in a positive frame of mind and gradually makes them positive thinkers. People suffering from a variety of stress-related diseases have benefited in some way or another. But we don't claim that long-standing ailments have been cured by laughter therapy. Laughter is more of a supplementary and preventive therapy.

**Anti Stress:** Laughter is one of the finest, most economical and easy ways to reduce stress. Laughter is one of the best muscle relaxants. **Laughter** expands blood vessels and sends more blood to the extremities and other muscles all over the body. A good bout of laughter also reduces the levels of stress hormones epinephrine and cortisol. It is used as a form of dynamic meditation or relaxation. For meditation one has to put in a concerted effort to completely detach oneself, on mental and emotional levels, from one's own feelings and thought processes, as well as from the physical world to prevent distractions. While laughing we do not have any conscious thought process and all our senses naturally and effortlessly combine in a moment of harmony to give joy, peace and relaxation. In other types of meditation you need to concentrate a lot to take your mind away from distracting thoughts, which is easier said than done. Therefore, laughter is, if I may say so, the easiest form of meditation and one which brings you instant relaxation.

**Strengthens the Immune System:** The immune system plays an important role in maintaining good health by keeping away infections, allergies and cancers. It has been proven by psychoneuroimmunologists that negative emotions like anxiety, depression or anger weaken the immune system of the body, thereby reducing its fighting capacity against infections. According to Dr. Lee S. Berk from Loma Linda University, California, **laughter** helps to increase the count of natural killer cells (NK cells - a type of white cell) and also raises the antibody levels. Researchers have found that after laughter therapy there is an increase in antibodies (Immunoglobulin A) in the mucous of the nose and respiratory passages, which is believed to have a protective capacity against some viruses, bacteria and other micro organisms. Many members of Laughter Clubs have noticed that their frequency of common colds, sore throats

and chest infections has decreased. The effect of **laughter** on the immune system is considered to be very significant with regard to deadly disease like AIDS and cancer by improving quality of life.

**Aerobic Exercise:** The one benefit almost everybody experiences is a sense of well-being. After 15 minutes of laughter in the morning, they feel fresh throughout the day. There is no medicine like laughter which gives you such an instant result. The reason for the sense of well-being is that you inhale more oxygen while laughing. Laughter can be compared to any aerobic exercises except you don't have to wear fancy shoes or clothes. You don't need to sweat hard on the jogging tracks. According to Dr. William Fry from Stanford University, one minute of **laughter** is equal to 10 minutes on the rowing machine. Laughter stimulates heart and blood circulation like aerobic exercise. **Laughter** exercise is also suited for sedentary people and those who are confined to a bed or wheelchair.

**Depression, anxiety and psychosomatic disorders:** The stress and strain of modern life are taking a heavy toll of the human mind and body. Mind-related diseases like anxiety, depression, nervous breakdowns and sleeplessness are on the rise. Laughter has benefited many people who were on heavy anti-depressant pills and tranquilizers. Now they are getting better sleep and their depression has reduced. People with suicidal tendencies have started living with more hope.

**High Blood Pressure and Heart disease:** There are a number of causes for high blood pressure and heart disease like heredity, obesity, smoking and excessive intake of saturated fats. But stress is one of the major factors. Laughter definitely helps to control blood pressure by reducing the release of stress-related hormones and bringing relaxation.

Our five senses are not enough for ideal living. We need to use our sixth sense: our sense of humor. Humor isn't about merely telling jokes; it's the way we view the world. We can be sincere about life without taking it so seriously. We can laugh about our mistakes and pain. Louis Kronenberger explains: "Humor simultaneously wounds and heals, indicts and pardons, diminishes and enlarges; it constitutes inner growth at the expense of outer gain, and those who possess and honestly practice it make themselves more through a willingness to make themselves less."

The wellspring of laughter is not happiness, but pain, stress, and suffering. Socrates pointed this out when he taught, "The comic and the tragic lie inseparably close, like light and shadow." So, we should be thankful for our suffering, for without it there would be nothing to laugh at. When we laugh at our woes, they dissolve, or at least become bearable, so that we arrive at peace and happiness. **As the pragmatic philosopher and psychologist, William James (1842-1910), said, "We don't laugh because we're happy, we are happy because we laugh."**

#### **Stress Management Benefits of Laughter:**

- **Hormones:** Laughter reduces the level of stress hormones like cortisol, epinephrine, adrenaline, dopamine and growth hormone. It also increases the level of health-enhancing hormones like endorphins, and neurotransmitters. Laughter increases the number of antibody-producing cells and enhances the effectiveness of T cells. All this means a stronger immune system, as well as fewer physical effects of stress.
- **Physical Release:** Have you ever felt like you "have to laugh or I'll cry"? Have you experienced the cleansed feeling after a good laugh? Laughter provides a physical and emotional release.
- **Internal Workout:** A good belly laugh exercises the diaphragm, contracts the abs and even works out the shoulders, leaving muscles more relaxed afterward. It even provides a good workout for the heart.

- **Distraction:** Laughter brings the focus away from anger, guilt, stress and negative emotions.
- **Perspective:** Studies show that our response to stressful events can be altered by whether we view something as a 'threat' or a 'challenge'. Humor can give us a more lighthearted perspective and help us view events as 'challenges', thereby making them less threatening and more positive.
- **Social Benefits of Laughter:** Laughter connects us with others. Also, laughter is contagious, so if you bring more laughter into your life, you can most likely help others around you to laugh more, and realize these benefits as well. By elevating the mood of those around you, you can reduce their stress levels, and perhaps improve the quality of social interaction you experience with them, reducing your stress level even more!

## How To Use Laughter:

William Fry, M.D., professor of psychiatry at Stanford University Medical School and expert on health and laughter, reports the average kindergarten student laughs 300 times a day. Yet, adults average just 17 laughs a day. Why the difference? Are we too uptight, too tense? Do we take life too seriously? Isn't it time we learned how to relax? We don't stop laughing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop laughing. So, if we want to fly like the angels and share in their happiness, we'll have to follow their example and take ourselves lightly. You can raise your laughter level with the following strategies:

- **T.V. and Movies:** There's no shortage of comedies out there, both at the theater and in the aisles of the video stores, as well as right on your T.V. While wasting your time watching something marginally funny may actually frustrate you, watching truly hilarious movies and shows is an easy way to get laughter into your life whenever you need it.
- **Laugh With Friends:** Going to a movie or comedy club with friends is a great way to get more laughter in your life. The contagious effects of laughter may mean you'll laugh more than you otherwise would have during the show, plus you'll have jokes to reference at later times. Having friends over for a party or game night is also a great setup for laughter and other good feelings.
- **Find Humor In Your Life:** Instead of complaining about life's frustrations, try to laugh about them. If something is so frustrating or depressing it's ridiculous, realize that you could 'look back on it and laugh.' Think of how it will sound as a story you could tell to your friends, and then see if you can laugh about it now. With this attitude, you may also find yourself being more lighthearted and silly, giving yourself and those around you more to laugh about. Approach life in a more mirthful way and you'll find you're less stressed about negative events, and you'll achieve the health benefits of laughter.
- **'Fake It Until You Make It':** Just as studies show the positive effects of smiling occur whether the smile is fake or real, faked laughter also provides the benefits mentioned above. So smile more, and fake laughter; you'll still achieve positive effects, and the fake merriment may lead to real smiles and laughter.

## The Many Benefits of Laughter

1. When you make fun of yourself, you disempower those who would make fun of you and disarm possible confrontations.
2. Laughter dissolves tension, stress, anxiety, irritation, anger, grief, and depression. Like crying, laughter lowers inhibitions, allowing the release of pent-up emotions. After a hearty bout of laughter, you will experience a sense of well-being. Simply put, he who laughs, lasts. After all, if you can laugh at it, you can live with it. Remember, a person

without a sense of humor is like a car without shock absorbers.

3. Medical researches have found that laughter boosts the immune system. The study of how behavior and the brain affect the immune system is called psychoneuroimmunology. Though still in its infancy, this science is rapidly gaining much attention as mankind strives to understand the mind-body relationship.

4. Laughter reduces pain by releasing endorphins that are more potent than equivalent amounts of morphine.

5. Humor helps integrate both hemispheres of our brain, for the left hemisphere is used to decipher the verbal content of a joke while the right hemisphere interprets whether it is funny or not.

6. Laughter adds spice to life; it is to life what salt is to a hard-boiled egg.

7. Develop your sense of humor and you will find you are more productive, a better communicator, and a superior team player.

8. Everyone loves someone who can make them laugh. The more you share your sense of humor, the more friends you will have.

9. Humor brings the balance we need to get through the turbulence of life comfortably.

10. Laughter is even equivalent to a small amount of exercise. It massages all the organs of the body, according to Dr. James Walsh.

11. A sense of humor can help you accept the inevitable, rise to any challenge, handle the unexpected with ease, and come out of any difficulty smiling.

The most wasted day is that in which we have not laughed. Don't wait until you are sick before you begin practicing laughter therapy. Start today by renting comedy classics from your video store, borrowing humorous books from the library, attending comedy clubs or watching comics on TV, and exchanging jokes with family members, friends, and coworkers. If you are visiting someone in the hospital, why not bring funny greeting cards and humorous books instead of flowers?