



Mather LifeWays Orange Papers are provided as a resource on topics related to the growing fields of aging, wellness, and workforce development. Their content reflects the expertise of 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*

*By Reed J. Engel, Director of Wellness Strategies, Mather LifeWays,
and Margaret Mattsson, Wellness Intern, Mather LifeWays*

Did You Hear the One About...?

Laughter and humor help us relax, lower our stress, and finding “the funny” can give us a new perspective.

It can be done all by yourself or with others...it requires about 20 muscles, but it hardly seems like a strain...thirty seconds of it can be equivalent to a good workout!

Yes, we’re talking about laughter—a simple thing we do and take for granted, yet something so powerful, 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, and finding “the funny” can give us a new perspective on a seemingly difficult situation. When shared, laughter can help us connect with family, friends, co-workers, and even strangers.

“Laughter is a behavioral event in response to humor, a smile that engages the entire body.”

- Patty Wooten, RN, former president of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor

THE SCIENCE OF LAUGHTER: EARLY PIONEERS

Though it hardly seems like a science topic, 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 French Enlightenment writer Voltaire who, during the 18th century, lamented “the art of medicine consists of keeping the patient amused while medicine heals the disease.”

Commenting on the importance of laughter, English scientist Charles Darwin accorded it “high evolutionary significance.” Nearly 30 years later, French 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 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 (Berk, 1996). 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.

In *Is Laughter the Best Medicine or Any Medicine at All?*, Dr. Diane Mahony describes the range of health-improvement mechanisms that researchers attribute



Another Orange Paper
from Mather LifeWays

Did You Hear the One About...?

The presence of humor does not guarantee laughter... what's funny to one person might not be funny to someone else.

to laughter and humor (Mahony, 2000). Vigorous laughter is stimulating, increasing heart rate, blood pressure, and circulation. It circulates immune substance effectiveness, pulmonary ventilation, and alertness, and it exercises the skeletal muscles. Mahony cites Dr. W.F. Fry's research which indicates that after laughing there is a brief period when blood pressure drops and heart rate, respiratory rate, and muscle activity decrease, resulting in relaxation. Ha, ha, ha...ahhh.

Laughter and humor are obviously closely tied. Laughter is a physical phenomenon while humor is constructed in the mind (Coalman, 2005). The presence of humor does not guarantee laughter, as most of us have experienced; what's funny to one person might not be funny to someone else. Considerations for what is appropriate in humor include the audience's age, culture, gender, and language, as well as social norms.

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 out of 500 chance for a full recovery (Cousins, 1979). But Cousins spoke about how he took an active role in his own healing, using humor in the form of "Candid Camera" reruns and Marx Brothers films as tools to relieve pain.

Newspaper accounts oversimplified the cause of Cousins' recovery, and he later responded with clarification that laughter was a metaphor for the whole range of positive emotions that had therapeutic value for him (Coalman, 2005). These positive emotions included hope, faith, love, a will to live, cheerfulness, humor, creativity, playfulness, confidence, and great expectations (Coalman, 2005).

Humor helps us keep our balance when life throws us a curve ball.

-Allen Klein (Klein, 1998)

THE ROLE OF LAUGHTER AS WE GROW OLDER

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.

Seeing the lighter side of life does not diminish the need to be emotionally present in one's current situation. Patty Wooten, RN, classified three types of therapeutic humor: hoping, coping, and gallows humor. The chart below explains the role of each and offers examples.

Did You Hear the One About...?

Therapeutic Humor Classification	What it Provides	Example
Hoping	Ability to hope for something better in spite of overwhelming circumstances	Watching a familiar comic do a favorite routine provides a safe haven in a time of trouble
Coping	Changes thinking and helps regain a sense of control	Jane Hill, cancer survivor and comic, compared her operations to airline travel and thought she had enough “frequent gurney miles” for a free operation
Gallows	Recognizes the intolerable aspects of a situation and transforms it into something tolerable	Advantages to having cancer: people don’t ask you to help them move

(Kruse, 2006) and (Klein, 1998)

WAYS TO INTRODUCE LAUGHTER: LAUGHTER YOGA & MORE

There are many ways to add laughter to your life. Separate from typical sources, such as friends, family, and media, there are intentional therapeutic methods you can tap. One of these is 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.” (Sample, 2009)

Laughter Yoga		
Components	Participants	Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses improvisational games that require no acting ability or sense of humor • Deep breathing • Gentle movement • Laughter chants • No yoga poses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anyone of any age • Best in groups • Wear loose clothing • Bring willingness and an open mind • No previous exercise experience needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People decide how much movement to incorporate • Ideal for older adults who want exercise and may have limited mobility • Inclusive; done in circles

(Sample, 2009)

Did You Hear the One About...?

[Laughter]... serves as a signal for us to continue looking at all that is good around us.

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

CONCLUSION

Laughter is a significant factor in how we communicate. When hilarity dissipates pressure or acts 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.

References

- Berk, L.S. (1996). The Laughter-Immune Connection: New Discoveries. *Humor & Health Journal*.
- Coalman, M. (2005). Is laughter really the best medicine? *Journal on Active Aging*, 4 (6), 76-86.
- Cousins, N. (1979). *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Klein, A. (1998). *The Courage to Laugh*. New York: Penguin Putnam.
- Kruse, B.A. (2006). Humor and Older Adults. *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, 188-193.
- Mahony, D. (2000). *Is Laughter the Best Medicine or Any Medicine at All?* Retrieved 12 16, 2009, from Eye on Psi Chi: http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article_81.aspx
- Sample, J. (2009, 123). Certified Laughter Yoga Instructor. (M. Mattsson, Interviewer)



Reed Engel is the Director of Wellness Strategies for Mather LifeWays. Reach him at rengel@matherlifeways.com.

Mather LifeWays is a unique nonprofit organization that enhances the lives of older adults by creating Ways to Age Well.SM For more information about our senior living residences, Community Initiatives, or award-winning research, please visit our website at www.matherlifeways.com or call (847) 492.7500.