Therapeutic Effects of Humor and Laughter

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Believe it or not, humor is emotionally and biochemically healing - and society’s apparent shortage of it is bad news given its beneficial effects on physical health and psychological well-being.

The New Encyclopedia Britannica defines humor as a “form of communication in which a complex mental stimulus illuminates or amuses, or elicits the reflex of laughter.” One might think of laughter as an end result of a significant level of humor, resulting in involuntary contraction of many facial muscles usually accompanied by a pattern of uncontrollable noises. Laughter is the outcome of already existing ideas and facts falling into place at a particular moment in time. One other point: many consider a smile to be a subtle form of laughter.

If you watched the film Patch Adams, you’ll recall that academy award winner Robin Williams plays the role of a physician who treats his patients with humor. His unconventional methods manage to diffuse patient stress and expedite healing. Therapeutic humor not only exists in movies, but also in clinical settings where physicians strive to incorporate humor in patient treatment regimens. According to the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, therapeutic humor is “any intervention which promotes health and wellness by stimulating expression of the incongruity or absurdity of life’s situations.”

Laughter Helps Vital Functions

Humor and laughter have possible health benefits. Many think that people who laugh a few minutes a day are more likely to live longer and have a better quality of life. The experience of laughter is believed to be associated with reduced occurrence of illness. Laughter is known to improve vital functions including heart rate, respiratory rate, and blood pressure.

Laughter changes blood chemistry to improve immune function. It increases certain immunity cells and immunoglobulins (antibodies), all of which protect us against infectious diseases. In one experiment, after subjects viewed a humorous video, researchers measured an increase in salivary immunoglobulin, a special type of antibody cells. These immune cells are the body’s front line defense against foreign substances when they first enter the respiratory tract. Another point of interest. A tear drop in response to laughter has a greater concentration of proteins that rid the body of poisons than a tear produced from cutting onions.

Laughter brings joy and pleasure. It has several positive effects on psychological well-being. A study recent published in the Mind/Body Health newsletter reports that heart attack survivors who experience half an hour of humor daily are less likely to be victims of additional heart attacks and require less medication. Laughter also lowers levels of steroid chemicals in the blood, such as cortisol, which is associated with stress.

People laugh because they need to release nervous tensions. These tensions build up from repressed thoughts, hostile urges, and sexual desires. Endorphins, chemicals with pain relieving properties, are also released during laughter. Ten minutes of heartfelt laughter may give patients with chronic pain hours of pain-free sleep. Additionally, it has been found that a few minutes of laughter are correlated with reduced incidence of depression and anxiety.

Laughter is the most civilized and natural music in the world. It appears to have health benefits and improves our ability to communicate and bond with others. It all begins with a smile. And the best part, it’s free.
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