

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
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Laughter IS the Best Medicine



Have you ever been in a situation where some friends find something very humorous and begin to laugh with uncontrolled delight? This kind of laughter is infectious, and everyone joins in. Everyone immediately feels better, and sense themselves to be closer with their companions. Laughter makes us happy, but it does more than that: it sets off healthy changes in our body; it increases our energy; it makes pain hurt less; it actually boosts our immune systems, and; it protects us from the harmful effects that stress brings to our entire being.

The old Reader's Digest has a section in every issue called "Laughter Is the Best Medicine". Research has shown that energetic laughter every day could help diabetics, for example, improve their cholesterol level and lower their risk of heart attack. Serious laughter actually reduces some of our "bad" chemicals (like "bad" cholesterol), and increases our good ones. Laughter doesn't cost any money, and the supply is unlimited. It is perfectly legal to be mirthful, to laugh, and to giggle; it is easy to use, and safe for children.

Laughter is inspiring, eases our worries, keeps us alert, makes us feel hopeful, and stops conflict. It is fast working and balances our mind and body when we are off center. Yes, it helps our minds, our bodies, and our spirit.

There is much scientific evidence to back this up. Laughter can relax our muscles for as long as 45 minutes; it lowers the stress-producing hormones; it increases antibodies that fight germs; it increases the internal production of a substance called endorphins that makes us feel good, and can actually decrease pain. The effect is very much like morphine and other pain-killers, or like the endorphin release experienced by athletes; the difference is that there are no negative side-effects as there are with drugs; finally, laughter improves our blood circulation and protects us from heart attacks.

The old song says that "when you're smiling, the whole world smiles with you." Humor lets us weather trying times, even disappointing or sad ones. Laughter makes us feel good all over, and gives us the strength to go on when nothing else seems to help. Even a smile can make us feel better and give us the courage to take the next step. Try one on for size, this very moment!

Laughter is a social act; it helps build friendships, softens disagreements, and brings us together. When we are laughing we are less shy, more spontaneous, less judgmental, and less defensive; laughter allows us to open ourselves up and

share our emotions with others. With humor we can have a better attitude towards life, keeping our “sunny side up”. When we laugh, we feel more deeply and become capable of living fuller lives.

Where can we get some of this remarkable medicine? Start with a smile; make a list of all of the good things in your life, the ones that bring joy to your heart. Spend time with playful and funny people who enjoy laughing; it is quite contagious. If you hear laughter, move in that direction. Do a few silly things; play with kids; enjoy your pets; encourage people to share funny stories and tell some yourself – make sure not to tell any mean-spirited ones.

Read the funny-paper section of your newspaper; get some funny books at the library or bookstore; there are thousands and thousands of joke sites on the internet – you can surely find some to your liking. Watch a funny movie or go to a comedy club or a karaoke club; play with your children or grandchildren or other close young family members; play horseshoes, or go bowling with your friends; have a picnic. The possibilities are endless.

Stop taking yourself so seriously. Lighten up. Relax. Enjoy your precious moments, and don't waste them by worrying about things you can't change, including other people's problems that you can't do anything about. Too often, we make mountains out of mole hills. Most problems can be fixed, and those that can't must be accepted. Put your best face forward. Smile! You're on life's candid camera.

WEBSITE OF THE WEEK: <http://www.funncleanjokes.com/>

TIP OF THE WEEK: In a recent medical journal (Chest, February 2009), scientific studies have indicated that nicotine withdrawal at night can prevent smokers from sleeping properly during the night and can contribute to fatigue and weariness the following day; this could mean that you are often tired every day. One of these days you smokers are going to balance the benefits against the costs, and if you are tough enough, you will quit.