

The *Best* Medicine



“The best blush to use is **laughter**:
It puts roses in your cheeks
and in your soul.” Linda Knight

“Laughter is a *tranquilizer* with no side effect.”
Arnold Glasow

“A *merry* heart doeth good,
just like a medicine.” Proverbs

“Keep laughing.
As long as you’re laughing you still have hope.”
Moe Howard

WRITTEN BY STEVEN E. PARNELL • PHOTO BY JEFF SILKER

I am sure many of you have heard similar quotes about the benefit of laughter. But I wonder if you really believe them. As a dad, nothing is more fun than to hear the laughter of my kids. Those deep belly giggles from babies who giggle spontaneously at any little noise, goofy face or little tickle are contagious to all who hear them and so is listening to a room full of teenage girls eating dinner around a table filled with laughter.

I still laugh when I remember my son Tim giggling uncontrollably at funny spots in movies that he had seen time and time again. And the time during an evening church service when my girls got the giggles so hard that their entire bodies were shaking as they tried to keep the giggles quiet. Everyone in front and in back of us could barely contain their snickering either. Of course, I needed to be the good parent and give them the “You better stop it now” look, only to find myself giggling, too.

There have been times when playing games with friends that we as adults end up on the floor laughing so hard we can barely catch our breath. Laughter isn't just fun, it is healthy! But why do we do it less and less as we leave childhood?

The average preschooler laughs 300 times per day as compared to the average adult who laughs only 17 times per day. Take the giggle test and count how many times in one day you actually giggle, not just smile or give a second or two of sound, but really giggle. I think many of you may have a hard time making it to the average number of 17. Why would I want you to do this? Because I want you to see that being healthy includes laughter. Laughter is a free gift we have inside of us that has the power to increase our health and the health of those around us.

Our family recently went out to dinner at a local restaurant (where you actually had to wait for the food to be prepared and served). Not many tables away from us were ten women, two of whom arrived late for their get-together. The late arrivals came in laughing. These women laughed from the time they arrived, through the eating of their food including dessert. We could not hear what they were giggling about but we sure had fun watching others who sat near the women. They giggled right along with them, just as we did. They proved the adage that laughter is easiest when you are in a comfortable environment with friends.

The notion that laughter is "the best medicine" is not new. What is relatively recent is the science supporting laughter as a powerful force not only on our minds, but also on our bodies. Studies done at Loma Linda University in California have shown the effects of laughter on the body's immune system.

They have measured increasing T-cell activity in the blood after episodes of laughter. T-cells are cells that give the body a boost in its ability to fight infection. It also correlates with a decrease in stress. Laughter moves lymph fluid around your body simply by the convulsions you experience during the process. As the T-cells move around in the lymph fluid, your immune system function is boosted and the waste products from organs and tissues are cleared out. Not only was there an increase in T-cell activity noted, but a corresponding decrease in disease-related symptoms like irregular heart rhythms were found.

When you laugh, blood pressure drops, heart rate increases, endorphins are released which decrease chronic pain and depression improves. Laughing causes you to take deep breaths of oxygen and oxygen is needed to produce energy for our bodies. Increased circulation caused from laughing distributes this added oxygen



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about the body. In many ways, laughing exercises our bodies to the point that we even may get sore muscles from the experience.

Laughing can make you feel better. Laughter actually massages your internal organs and relaxes muscles. Studies have shown that humor actually helps people live longer happier lives, increases creativity and productivity, energizes, reduces stress, fear and embarrassment. These psychological effects from laughter can last from 12-24 hours.▶

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I find that humor in the office breaks tension, puts the staff at ease and brings a comfort level that increases production and teamwork. During exams, I often intersperse humor and get my patients to laugh with me. They in turn are more relaxed and feel more open to sharing what is really going on in their lives. When my patients enjoy the benefits of laughter, their stress levels go down along with their blood pressure that increased just because they came to see the doctor.

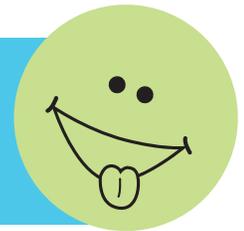
I'm not alone in wanting my patients to benefit from laughter.

Throughout the world, laughing therapy is being used.

It is used at cancer centers, nursing homes, schools and the list grows. It is used as an exercise for health where people come together for 30 minutes and laugh continuously.

A cancer treatment center uses certified laughter leaders who teach the value of laughter by pretending to laugh. This pretend laughter has the same benefits as true laughter caused by something funny. As patients "pretend" to laugh, they soon are truly laughing. Companies have introduced planned laughter into their work places to relieve

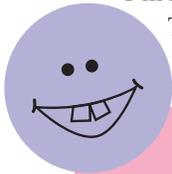
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stress since laughter fosters instant relaxation and connectivity. Laughter is a great medicine and it comes without a price tag. It is available for all, young and old.

The next time you feel stressed, think of that hilarious situation in your past and start to laugh. Let it come from deep inside and keep it up for a few minutes. Then, start to laugh again. Remember how you used to try lots of ways or sounds of giggling? Remember them now and try them out. There are many funny giggles that have been recorded on the web. If you can't make yourself giggle, try to find a recorded giggle. Laugh with the noise you hear. We have been given the gift of laughter and the benefits that come from using it are great.

Martin Luther was quoted as saying, "If there isn't any laughter in heaven, I don't want to go there." He must have understood just how important a good laugh really was. Many things that are good for us take lots of time, are spendy and are no fun. But laughter can happen anywhere, many times a day and it's free. Perhaps, it isn't an apple a day that keeps the doctor away, but it's really laughter. Try it, you'll like it! *W*



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