



Laughter is the best therapy

Reflecting on our theme of change, Trevor Eddolls considers something we should all be doing more of in our lives...

I often hear stories about other therapists complaining about the Solution Focused Hypnotherapist in their clinic because there's too much laughter coming from their consulting room. That doesn't seem like a bad thing to me, but is there any evidence that laughter is good for you?

We all know what laughter is, but for those of you who like a definition for everything, laughter is a 'spontaneous non-verbal vocal expression', like a scream or a sob. In fact, blind and deaf babies will laugh when they are tickled. Back in 2005, Matthew Gervais and David Sloan Wilson published an article in The Quarterly review of Biology suggesting that laughter was a preadaptation that was gradually elaborated and co-opted through both biological and cultural evolution. They suggest that Duchenne (where the eyes get crow's feet and the mouth curls upwards) laughter became fully ritualized in early hominids between 4 and 2 million years ago as a medium for playful emotional contagion. So, humans have been laughing for a very long time.

Evidence suggests that laughter is primarily a form of bonding, and we are 30 times more likely to laugh if we are with others than if we are alone. And, it may surprise you to learn that there are 'gelotologists', who study laughing and the effects it has on our body ('gelos' is from the Greek for 'laughter').

Observational studies indicate that most laughter actually results from statements and comments, rather than jokes. The person who has just spoken laughs the most frequently, suggesting laughter is often not only a reaction to something



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someone else has said. It's also been suggested that our understanding of social laughter develops over our early adult life, and that it is not until we are in our 30s that we become fully adept at using it.

It is also dependent on a desire to find affiliation. Research evidence suggests that teenage boys at risk of psychopathy find laughter much less contagious than their peers. People also use laughter to help cope with stressful situations. People laugh when they are with people they like, but also when they feel physically safe.

Adults, apparently, laugh on average 17.5 times a day! We all like a bit of neuroscience, so what's happening inside our brains when we laugh? Those gelotologists think that multiple regions of our brain are used in the production of laughter, in particular, in the frontal lobe of our cerebral cortex. The left hemisphere of the cortex analyses the structure and the words of the joke, and the right hemisphere of the cortex provides the intellectual analysis to understand the joke.

And if you're into the classification of laughter, it can be classified according to:

- intensity: the chuckle, the titter, the giggle, the chortle, the cackle, the belly laugh, the sputtering burst;
- the overtness: snicker, snigger, guffaw;
- the respiratory pattern involved: snort;
- the emotion it is expressed with: relief, mirth, joy, happiness, embarrassment, apology, confusion, nervous laughter, paradoxical laughter, courtesy laugh, evil laughter; and
- the sequence of notes or pitches it produces. It may be subjectively measured on the Andreoli scale for heartiness, with a higher measure denoting greater robustness.

But, as we all know, laughter isn't always a pleasant experience, e.g. when other people are laughing at you or someone you care about.

On the bright side, there is even a class of therapy called 'Laughter Therapy'. In this, groups of people first have to pretend to laugh, which spreads around the group until everyone is genuinely laughing and enjoying themselves. And this can be used to achieve the benefits associated with laughing. What are those? Here's a list:

1. The physical act of laughing can reduce cortisol levels in the body, making us feel less stressed.
2. Laughter can help our immune system. It causes an increase in the production of B cells (lymphocytes), which secrete protective antibodies.
3. Laughing can reduce the amount of pain that a person feels. Laughter triggers the release of endorphins, which have an analgesic affect.
4. Laughter can help with diabetes. One experiment had diabetics eat a meal and then either listen to a boring lecture or watch a one-hour comedy programme. When the people watched the lecture, there was a rise in their blood sugar levels and they needed insulin. When they watched the comedy, their blood sugar levels stayed in the normal range.

"We've evolved to laugh! It can reduce cortisol levels in the body, making us feel less stressed"

5. Laughter can be therapeutic. Patients in hospital who laugh seem better able to cope with the illness and their treatment. Also, children who laugh during painful medical procedures may be better able to tolerate the pain.
6. Laughing can relax you. Laughter causes increased abdominal pressure and diaphragmatic movement, which massage the vagus nerve, sending a signal through parasympathetic nerves (the rest and digest ones) that tells the body to relax.
7. Laughing is good for the heart. This is because laughing stretches muscles and causes an increase in our pulse rate and blood pressure. Cardiologists at the University of Maryland found that laughter causes a release of nitric oxide that helps dilate our blood vessels and increases blood flow. This sends more blood to our heart and decreases the overall blood pressure.
8. Laughing helps with weight loss - 15 minutes of laughter can burn off 50 calories, which is about the same as running two laps of an athletics track. (Note: a Mars bar contains 229 calories!).
9. Laughter can 'act as if'. If your body is laughing, then your brain thinks you must be doing something funny, so it's less likely to be angry, anxious, or sad.
10. Laughing improves a person's memory. One study had people watch funny videos and then tested their memory. These people were able to learn and recall information in almost half the time of people who didn't watch the videos.

So, laughter is beneficial to us and our clients, and we should encourage them to laugh whenever they can because of all the positive health and emotional benefits. And we shouldn't worry what those other therapists say...it would do them good to laugh as well!

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