




*Laugh,*

it's good  
for you!

By Steve Harrington



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**I**n the hallway outside a room in San Francisco, one can hear laughter that goes on for hours. It often starts out forced as a small group of people conjure giggles that develop into belly laughs. In a few seconds, the laughter is real—and contagious. Even those passing by can be seen giggling as the subdued laughs grow into an uproar.

This small group is on a mission: To bring laughter into their own lives and the lives of others. It is one of a growing number of laughter clubs springing up across North America. The purpose is to have a good time, but the benefits extend far beyond entertainment.

“There have been studies over the years that show laughter increases endorphins [although] other studies say it isn’t so. But the bottom line is that we all know we feel better when we laugh,” says Beverly Bender, who says she is a trained laugh leader. “Laughter is a great stress reliever,” she says. “It can help reduce the risks of cardiovascular disease, strokes, and a host of other ailments. Laughter therapy can be especially effective for people with depression.”

Laughter, among other remedies, can help us sleep better and bring a more positive, joyful attitude

to our lives. It can help us think better, get out of emotional ruts, connect with other people, and release emotional pain, according to Bender.

Laughter can also have physical health benefits. “One minute of laughter is equivalent to five minutes on a rowing machine or eight minutes on an exercise bike. It can strengthen our immune systems, improve lung capacity, reduce pain, and relax muscles,” Bender says. “You can’t feel pain or depression when you are laughing.”

Laughter is described as the best medicine in the biblical book of Proverbs. Although it has been studied seriously since soon after the Dark Ages, Steve Wilson, MA, a psychologist from Columbus, Ohio, says there is a lack of empirical research about it. But researchers are currently engaged in a variety of studies that may eventually shed new light on humor and laughter, he says.

Understanding the difference between humor and laughter is important, according to Wilson. “Humor is a psychological characteristic. It is an emotional perspective that tells us whether or not something is funny. Laughter is a physical response to things we find humorous,” he says, although it’s possible to find something funny and not laugh.

Studies show laughter is universal and is enjoyed by people of all ages in all cultures, whereas humor, which leads to laughter, is very individualized. Humor is often a result of the values and perspectives we develop throughout life, Wilson says. What may appear funny to one person may not be so to another. "Unfortunately, it seems we lose humor as we age. We tend to take things more seriously as we get older. That is why it is fun to be around children," Bender says.

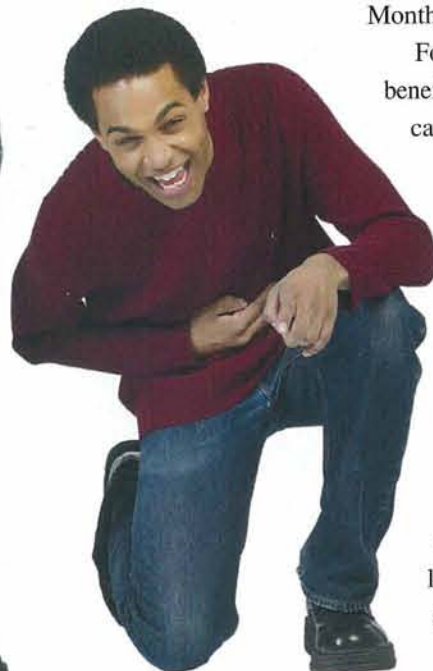
"Although laughter is a natural, healthy response, there is a stigma associated with it. Too often, our society implies it is wrong to laugh so we suppress laughter. That is just wrong. Laughter therapists help people understand the value of laughter and how to become comfortable laughing," Wilson says. "People with a loud, long, or unusual laugh are often made to feel uncomfortable in groups. That can damage self-esteem," he says.

One reason people have an impaired sense of humor is that we are surrounded by negativity, according to Bender, who provides training and lectures on the value of humor. "All you have to do is listen to the news. It can be enough to depress anyone. It would be nice if, instead of focusing only on all the problems of the world, newscasters ended all their broadcasts with funny stories," she says.

"Never go to bed right after you've watched the news. It will leave you full of tension and anxiety."

A good sense of humor may reduce depression, stress, and anxiety, says **Dana Lightman, PhD.**

She says bad situations, such as the adversities involved in



dealing with psychiatric disorders, are often less important than what is learned from going through those challenges. "Too often, we begin a downward spiral with negative thoughts. The trick is to use humor to turn that around into an upward spiral," she says. "Sometimes we have to take things slowly and climb a ladder back to joy. Humor can help us climb that ladder more quickly."

Wilson has trained more than 5,000 self-styled laughter therapists who work in a variety of settings, including psychiatric hospitals and mental health agencies. Through years of study, he says researchers are finding humor development and laughter can be especially helpful for depression and obsessive-compulsive disorders. Because laughter can improve lung function and capacity, laughter therapy is becoming especially important for patients with lung transplants and a host of pulmonary diseases.

## ***"Laughter therapists help people understand the value of laughter and how to become comfortable laughing."***

Although he is now retired, Wilson remains busy training "laugh leaders." "Laughter is something we need to encourage throughout the world. It gives us a break from our problems and the seriousness of life. That is the big benefit of laughing. It helps us relax and take care of ourselves. Too often, we forget to do that," says Wilson who is director of the Laughter Foundation and head of World Laughing Month, which is April.

For persons with psychiatric disorders, Wilson says key benefits include boosts in hope and self-worth as laughter can replace negative thoughts with positive ones.

Another potential benefit is improved counseling sessions, he says. "Laughter is thought to be one of the earliest ways that humans signaled support and 'it is safe to relax here.' Good-natured, shared laughter between counselor and client can foster trust, rapport and reduced defensiveness."

"Laughter—even fake laughter—can have all the benefits of real laughter. The body doesn't know the difference. And laughing can improve our sense of humor," Bender says. To develop a healthy sense of humor, Bender suggests starting with fake laughter. "You can just stand in front of a mirror and start with a 'Ho, ho, ho' or a 'Ha, ha, ha.' It's a great way to start the morning and before you know it, you

are looking for reasons to laugh throughout the day.”

Despite the long list of benefits a good sense of humor and laughter can bring to our lives, Bender says therapists must also be aware that some people may not be ready to laugh, especially if they are experiencing grief or trauma issues. “There are times in our lives when it is natural and appropriate to be depressed or anxious,” Lightman says. “When you lose a job or a loved one dies, those are difficult times. But, in time, a person with a good sense of humor can find a way to begin an upward spiral. It’s often a matter of timing, but when the timing is right, it can be powerful.”

Lightman, a psychologist who uses humor as therapy, likes to share the story about a day when she was feeling low and filled with negative feelings about herself. She went for a walk with a friend and discussed her problems. After she had explained her despair, the friend turned to her and said, “Well, you aren’t the ugliest person in the world!” “That simple comment was just the right medicine for me at that time,” Lightman says. “My friend said it in such a way that made it funny. We both had a good laugh and we both felt better.”

Self-deprecating humor—the humor we find in our own faults and shortcomings—can be especially powerful for persons with psychiatric disorders, according to Bender. “People who are able to make fun of themselves display high self-esteem. They are secure in themselves and are

able to see humor in themselves and don’t take themselves so seriously,” she says. “It also builds resilience. Being able to laugh at ourselves can help us when we face difficult situations in our lives.”

Humor can be detrimental if it is directed at a particular group—including those with psychiatric disorders, says Jon E. Roenneklein, author of *The Psychology of Humor: A Reference Guide and Annotated Bibliography* (Greenwood Press, 2002). He writes that jokes that degrade or stigmatize a particular group can have a powerful

negative effect on the group members, whereas the same joke told by one group member to others within the group can have a totally different, and often positive, effect.

Laugh-provoking comedy can be found on television, at the movies, in books, at parks

watching children play, in toy stores, and on cars that sport funny bumper stickers. “Some people keep a personal humor journal so they can remind themselves of funny jokes or situations. Others have ‘humor buddies,’ who are people they can count on to make them laugh,” Bender says.

Laughter is good medicine with no negative side effects. It’s fun, free, and non-fattening. But it is important to keep humor in perspective. It is like changing a baby’s diaper. It doesn’t solve the problem, but it can make things more bearable. ★

## **“Being able to laugh at ourselves can help us when we face difficult situations in our lives.”**

Developing a good sense of humor and the ability to laugh can be difficult for those facing adversity such as the challenges a psychiatric disorder can bring. It may take some work and time but can lead to a lifestyle change. Here are some suggestions from Beverly Bender, MA, and Dana Lightman, PhD, that may help:

- ☺ Remember there are times when circumstances make it difficult—even inappropriate—to be joyful. But give yourself time; you’ll know when you’re ready.
- ☺ Start out with a “fake” laugh. Just ten seconds of laughing in the mirror can be a great way to start the day.
- ☺ Surround yourself with positive people who find humor in their lives.
- ☺ Use a personal “laughter journal” to keep track of humorous events and circumstances each day.
- ☺ Join a laughter club. Start your search at [www.worldlaughtertour.com](http://www.worldlaughtertour.com).
- ☺ Watch funny movies and television programs, read funny books, or the comic section of a newspaper to turn stress into joy.
- ☺ Spend time with children.
- ☺ Look for funny situations in life by observing those around you.