



How Does Humor Help Us?

Most people agree that humor is a stress reliever, similar to other positive emotions. Laugh and you feel better. Scientific research agrees. Laughter helps the body to provide its own type of medication. Humor can medically stimulate the immune system. Norman Cousins was the first to bring attention to the benefits of therapeutic humor in his book "Anatomy of an Illness." Cousins dedicated himself to exploring how humor and laughter affect the body and wellness. Studies have shown that laughter stimulates the immune system, off-setting the unwanted effects of stress. Humor can lower your blood pressure and give you energy.

Even without the scientific evidence, consider this: Humor feels better than sadness and you can never overdose on it.

Can't Laugh? Try Smiling!

On the surface, the simple act of turning up the corners of your mouth provides an instant connection between you and a stranger. There are no language barriers when you smile. It has been said that a smile on your face is a light to let someone know that you're home.

On a deeper level, when you are smiling you are also triggering happy memories within your body. According to a study by Clark University, it doesn't matter whether you are smiling for real or faking it. A phony smile is as good for you as a genuine one.

That is why Dr, David Bresler, former director of the pain control unit at the University of California in Los Angeles, prescribes two smiles a day to his patients experiencing pain. Each day they must face themselves in the mirror and smile.

The hardest thing you can do is smile when you are ill, in pain, or depressed. But this no-cost remedy is a necessary first half-step if you are to start on the road to recovery. Smiling cannot only help you get well but also stay well. According to Dr. John Diamond author of "Your Body Doesn't Lie," smiling increases activity in your immune system. Moreover, he noted that just viewing a smiling face gives you more life energy.

Who says humor heals?

The latest research on the benefits of humor and laughing is being conducted by a team of researchers at a university in Southern California. Heading the team is Dr. Lee Berk, a preventative care clinician, medical research scientist, Psychoneuroimmunologist and professor at the School of Medicine and Public Health. He has been seen on such shows as ABC's *Good Morning America*, discussing his important discoveries about the healing power of humor.

The following is a summary of his research, taken from an interview published in the September / October 1996 issue of Humor and Health Journal.

Laughter Activates the Immune System

In Berk's study, the body's response to laughter was the opposite of what is seen in classic stress, supporting the conclusion that laughter is a state that produces healthy and positive emotions. Research indicates that after exposure to humor, there is a general increase of activity in the immune system including:

- An increase in the number and activity of natural killer cells that attack cells infected by viruses and some types of cancer and tumor cells.
- An increase in the antibody immunoglobulin that fights upper respiratory tract infections.
- An increase in gamma interferon, which tells various components of the immune system to "turn on."
- Some increases were present while subjects watched a humorous video and there was also a lingering effect that continued to show increased levels the next day.

Laughter Decreases "Stress" Hormones

The result of the study also supported research indicating a general decrease in stress hormones that constrict blood vessels and suppress immune activity. These were shown to decrease in the study group exposed to humor.

**For more information: Humor & Health Journal
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