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# Funny BONE

ELENA IACOVOU explains  
why laughter really is the  
best medicine





**W**e exercise, we eat right, but how many times a day do we laugh? Laughter wellness experts suggest that a 10 to 15 minute belly laugh on a daily basis is good for our overall health, and science appears to agree.

Whether you're simulating laughter through humorous exercises or laughter yoga sessions, watching a funny video, or genuinely in stitches over a funny joke, the body responds in exactly the same way.

"Your body doesn't think, it just feels, so when you're laughing, even if it's through simulated laughter exercises, you will still get all the wonderful health benefits," explains Ros Ben-Moshe, adjunct lecturer in the School of Public Health at La Trobe University and director of LaughLife Wellbeing Programs.

What are some of these feelgood factors we can rely on after a good belly laugh? Science has the facts.

## **Benefits of a good belly laugh**

### **PREVENTIVE CARE**

Regular hearty laughs aid longevity and can help reduce the risk of disease.

Laughter, along with an active sense of humour, may help protect against a heart attack, cardiologists at the University of Maryland Medical Center discovered.

"As we age, we often lose our innate connection for smiling and laughing. We start to put a thought process on laughter and over time this shuts down our ability to laugh from the heart, as children do," Ben-Moshe says.

"We need to open and reconnect with our core emotional centre, as our inability to feel joy can directly affect our heart's vitality," she says.

Ben-Moshe explains how laughter from the heart can boost our system's defence mechanism, increase life expectancy and replenish emotions. And since laughter is also like an aerobics exercise, it further benefits cardiovascular health.

"When you add in the feelgood hormones that are released – endorphins and other opioids – and the bond that people feel when they laugh together, all these factors give the body a hike, which makes a person feel emotionally connected."

### **REDUCES STRESS LEVELS**

Laughter can optimise one's own strategies for coping with stress.

A repetitious mirthful laugh reduced the levels of three stress hormones – cortisol, adrenaline and dopamine – by 39, 70 and 38 per cent respectively, researchers at California's Loma Linda University found.

"In all conditions we suffer from, there is an element of stress, and laughter is a natural antidote," says Mahes Karupiah-Quillen, naturopath and director of Destination Detox.

"When we are stressed, we are more in the sympathetic nervous system, which stimulates the body's fight or flight response, and constantly probes us into action," Karupiah-Quillen says. "Laughter induces the activity of the parasympathetic nervous system, which is the balancing force, where we can rest, relax and let go."

### **HEALING AND WELLBEING**

The positive and beneficial neurochemical effects of laughter modulate components of the immune system and make it function better as well as improve quality of life and patient care.

Laughter yoga creates good spirits in cancer patients; decreases stress levels before chemotherapy; and improves the treatment process without any harmful side effects, researchers at the Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences found.

"In moments of pain and grief it won't be easy to laugh, but the more you allow yourself to be open to that process, the more you can receive tremendous benefits," Ben-Moshe says.



"When we laugh and we feel good, there is increased production of antibodies and activation of the body's protective cells, including T-cells and especially natural killer cells, killing activity of tumour cells," Karuppiiah-Quillen explains.

"When the immune cells are strong, the body's capacity to heal increases," she adds.

"A good belly laugh also activates the endorphins, which nourish the whole body and act as a natural relaxant – for both mind and body – allowing us to cope better. Laughter is the quickest and most natural way to get us back into living and living well."

### HOPEFULNESS AND POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Laughter elevates our mood, enhances our levels of hopefulness, and gives us a boost of energy and vigour.

After watching a 15-minute video comedy, participants increased in their scores for hopefulness and were more positive, a study led by a Texas-based psychologist found.

"Laughter will make you more positive, and when it's part of your daily wellbeing practice, it can make you a more positive person," says Dr Paula Robinson, director of the Positive Psychology Institute.

"The more the facial muscles – connected to the brain, together with the frontal lobe of the brain – remain active, the more you can keep yourself positive. Laughter will reduce the negative chemistry and will increase the more positive chemistry in the mind," Dr Robinson says.

"Laughter as a strategy to increase wellbeing and joy in life is good for our psychological wellbeing. It makes us more cheerful, which is good for all of us, as a positive mood can be picked up by those around us and can be quite contagious."

### PHYSIOLOGICAL BENEFITS

A big belly laugh gives the muscles a good workout and helps optimise many of the body's functions.

According to researchers in Spain, laughter exercises and relaxes muscles, improves respiration, stimulates circulation and elevates pain thresholds.

"In laughter yoga sessions, the act of laughter and the breathing practice of pranayama go hand in hand," Ben-Moshe says.

"After a few rounds of laughter, where the muscles contract and relax, deep breathing follows. This improves the exchange of oxygen to all organs in the body, which benefits us holistically, and helps to elicit the relaxation response in the body."

When it comes to pain management, research explains that when endorphins are released, they can also act like morphine in the brain, which assists in pain reduction.

### BOOSTS SHORT-TERM MEMORY

Increased circulation in the brain opens new pathways, which allows us to use the brain more optimally.

After watching 20 minutes of funny videos, participants in a Loma Linda University study performed better in their memory recall abilities and reduced their cortisol levels, which negatively affect memory.

"The effects of laughter are similar to those of meditation, whereby both hemispheres of the brain are stimulated. This helps reduce stress, the cumulative effects of which wreak havoc on short-term memory," Ben-Moshe says.

"Aligning to a more positive mindset through laughter creates new neural pathways, which change the way the brain thinks and functions. This not only enhances overall memory, but assists in healthy brain function and performance, like creative thinking and problem solving."

### ENHANCES SOCIAL BONDS

Laughter may increase one's social competencies, which can result in better interpersonal skills, friendliness, solidarity and cohesiveness.

After watching a 10 minute funny video, people in a University College London study were encouraged to make more intimate disclosures to strangers, helping them build social relationships.

"Laughter is the closest distance between two people," Karuppiiah-Quillen says.

"It's a common energy which attracts us to each other, making it one of the best practices used to reduce conflict, enhance team work and rapport, strengthen relationships, bridge the gap between strangers and increase interpersonal relationships," she says.

"Having facilitated laughter yoga in diverse settings, from workplaces to schools and hospitals, I have seen how laughter unifies people, dissolves hierarchies and pulls down barriers. It really does promote equality," Ben-Moshe says.

### Start laughing:

**Karuppiiah-Quillen suggests:** Before jumping out of bed, go through a body scan and get every part of your body laughing. Start from your toes, move to your calves, to the knees, thighs, belly and heart. Take the laughter all over the body and tell yourself that every cell of your body is laughing. Lastly, take it to the crown of your head, where you will feel your whole body vibrating. Do this out loud or silently. The person next to you will get used to it...eventually.

**Ben-Moshe suggests:** Attend a laughter class, laugh with friends or family, watch a funny video.

### Where else can laughter help?

**Fertility** – Infertility researchers in Israel found that a 15-minute encounter with a clown, immediately after fertility treatment, increased the chances of a successful pregnancy by 36.4 per cent.

**Burns calories** – Researchers at Vanderbilt University in Nashville reported that strong laughter for 10 to 15 minutes daily can increase energy consumption by 10 to 40 calories per day, which can induce weight loss. **N11**

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