



## Laughter is the Best Medicine

The Health Benefits of Humor and Laughter



Sure, it's fun to share a good laugh. But did you know it can actually improve your health? It's true: laughter is strong medicine. It draws people together in ways that trigger healthy physical and emotional changes in the body. Laughter strengthens your immune system, boosts mood, diminishes pain, and protects you from the damaging effects of stress. As children, we used to laugh hundreds of times a day, but as adults life tends to be more serious and laughter more infrequent. By seeking out more opportunities for humor and laughter, though, you can improve your emotional health, strengthen your relationships, find greater happiness—and even add years to your life.

### Why is laughter the sweetest medicine for mind and body?

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Laughter is a powerful antidote to stress, pain, and conflict. Nothing works faster or more dependably to bring your mind and body back into balance than a good laugh. Humor lightens your burdens, inspires hopes, connects you to others, and keeps you grounded, focused, and alert. It also helps you to release anger and be more forgiving.

With so much power to heal and renew, the ability to laugh easily and frequently is a tremendous resource for surmounting problems, enhancing your relationships, and supporting both physical and emotional health. Best of all, this priceless medicine is fun, free, and easy to use.

## Laughter is good for your health

**Laughter relaxes the whole body.** A good, hearty laugh relieves physical tension and stress, leaving your muscles relaxed for up to 45 minutes after.

**Laughter boosts the immune system.** Laughter decreases stress hormones and increases immune cells and infection-fighting antibodies, thus improving your resistance to disease.

**Laughter triggers the release of endorphins,** the body's natural feel-good chemicals. Endorphins promote an overall sense of well-being and can even temporarily relieve pain.

**Laughter protects the heart.** Laughter improves the function of blood vessels and increases blood flow, which can help protect you against a heart attack and other cardiovascular problems.

**Laughter burns calories.** OK, so it's no replacement for going to the gym, but one study found that laughing for 10 to 15 minutes a day can burn about 40 calories—which could be enough to lose three or four pounds over the course of a year.

**Laughter lightens anger's heavy load.** Nothing diffuses anger and conflict faster than a shared laugh. Looking at the funny side can put problems into perspective and enable you to move on from confrontations without holding onto bitterness or resentment.

**Laughter may even help you to live longer.** A study in Norway found that people with a strong sense of humor outlived those who don't laugh as much. The difference was particularly notable for those battling cancer.

## Physical health benefits of laughter

- Boosts immunity
- Lowers stress hormones
- Decreases pain
- Relaxes your muscles
- Prevents heart disease

## Mental health benefits of laughter

- Adds joy and zest to life

- Eases anxiety and tension
- Relieves stress
- Improves mood
- Strengthens resilience

## Social benefits of laughter

- Strengthens relationships
- Attracts others to us
- Enhances teamwork
- Helps defuse conflict
- Promotes group bonding

## Laughter helps you stay mentally healthy

Laughter makes you feel good. And the good feeling that you get when you laugh remains with you even after the laughter subsides. Humor helps you keep a positive, optimistic outlook through difficult situations, disappointments, and loss.

More than just a respite from sadness and pain, laughter gives you the courage and strength to find new sources of meaning and hope. Even in the most difficult of times, a laugh—or even simply a smile—can go a long way toward making you feel better. And laughter really is contagious—just hearing laughter primes your brain and readies you to smile and join in the fun.

### The link between laughter and mental health

**Laughter stops distressing emotions.** You can't feel anxious, angry, or sad when you're laughing.

**Laughter helps you relax and recharge.** It reduces stress and increases energy, enabling you to stay focused and accomplish more.

**Laughter shifts perspective,** allowing you to see situations in a more realistic, less threatening light. A humorous perspective creates psychological distance, which can help you avoid feeling overwhelmed and diffuse conflict.

**Laughter draws you closer to others**, which can have a profound effect on all aspects of your mental and emotional health.

## Laughter brings people together and strengthens relationships

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There's a good reason why TV sitcoms use laugh tracks: laughter is contagious. You're many times more likely to laugh around other people than when you're alone. And the more laughter you bring into your own life, the happier you and those around you will feel.

Sharing humor is half the fun—in fact, most laughter doesn't come from hearing jokes, but rather simply from spending time with friends and family. And it's this social aspect that plays such an important role in the health benefits of laughter. You can't enjoy a laugh with other people unless you take the time to really engage with them. When you care about someone enough to switch off your phone and really connect face to face, you're engaging in a process that rebalances the nervous system and puts the brakes on defensive stress responses like “fight or flight.” And if you share a laugh as well, you'll both feel happier, more positive, and more relaxed—even if you're unable to alter the stressful situation itself.

### How laughing together can strengthen relationships

Shared laughter is one of the most effective tools for keeping relationships fresh and exciting. All emotional sharing builds strong and lasting relationship bonds, but sharing laughter also adds joy, vitality, and resilience. And humor is a powerful and effective way to heal resentments, disagreements, and hurts. Laughter unites people during difficult times.

Humor and playful communication strengthen our relationships by triggering positive feelings and fostering emotional connection. When we laugh with one another, a positive bond is created. This bond acts as a strong buffer against stress, disagreements, and disappointment. Using humor and laughter in relationships allows you to:

**Be more spontaneous.** Humor gets you out of your head and away from your troubles.

**Let go of defensiveness.** Laughter helps you forget resentments, judgments, criticisms, and doubts.

**Release inhibitions.** Your fear of holding back and holding on are set aside.

**Express your true feelings.** Deeply felt emotions are allowed to rise to the surface.

## Use humor to resolve disagreements and tension in your relationships

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(/articles/relationships-communication/managing-conflicts-with-humor.htm)

Laughter is an especially powerful tool for managing conflict and reducing tension when emotions are running high. Whether with romantic partners, friends and family, or co-workers, you can learn to use humor to smooth over disagreements, lower everyone's stress level, and communicate in a way that builds up your relationships rather than breaking them down. See: [Managing Conflicts with Humor](/articles/relationships-communication/managing-conflicts-with-humor.htm) (/articles/relationships-communication/managing-conflicts-with-humor.htm)

## How to bring more laughter into your life

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Laughter is your birthright, a natural part of life that is innate and inborn. Infants begin smiling during the first weeks of life and laugh out loud within months of being born. Even if you did not grow up in a household where laughter was a common sound, you can learn to laugh at any stage of life.

Begin by setting aside special times to seek out humor and laughter, as you might with working out, and build from there. Eventually, you'll want to incorporate humor and laughter into the fabric of your life, finding it naturally in everything you do.

Here are some ways to start:

**Smile.** Smiling is the beginning of laughter and like laughter, it's contagious. When you look at someone or see something even mildly pleasing, practice smiling. Instead of looking down at your phone, look up and smile at people you pass in the street, the person serving you a morning coffee, or the co-workers you share an elevator with. Notice the effect this has on others.

**Count your blessings.** Literally make a list. The simple act of considering the good things in your life will distance you from negative thoughts that are a barrier to humor and laughter. When you're in a state of sadness, you have further to travel to get to humor and laughter.

**When you hear laughter, move toward it.** Sometimes humor and laughter are private, a shared joke among a small group, but usually not. More often, people are very happy to share something funny because it gives them an opportunity to laugh again and feed off the humor you find in it. When you hear laughter, seek it out and ask, “What’s funny?”

**Spend time with fun, playful people.** These are people who laugh easily—both at themselves and at life’s absurdities—and who routinely find the humor in everyday events. Their playful point of view and laughter are contagious. Even if you don’t consider yourself a lighthearted, humorous person, you can still seek out people who like to laugh and make others laugh. Every comedian appreciates an audience.

**Bring humor into conversations.** Ask people, “What’s the funniest thing that happened to you today? This week? In your life?”

### Simulated laughter

So what do you do if you really can’t “find the funny”? Believe it or not, it’s possible to laugh without experiencing a funny event—and simulated laughter can be just as good for you as the real thing. It can even make exercise more fun and more productive. A Georgia State University study found that incorporating bouts of simulated laughter into an exercise program helped improve older adults’ mental health as well as their aerobic endurance. Plus, hearing others laugh, even for no apparent reason, can often trigger genuine laughter.

To add simulated laughter into your own life, search for laugh yoga or laugh therapy groups. Or you can start simply by laughing at other people’s jokes, even if you don’t find them funny. It will make both you and the other person feel good, draw you closer together, and who knows, may even lead to some spontaneous laughter.

### Creating opportunities to laugh

- Watch a funny movie, TV show, or YouTube video
- Invite friends or co-workers to go to a comedy club
- Read the funny pages
- Seek out funny people
- Share a good joke or a funny story
- Check out your bookstore’s humor section
- Host game night with friends
- Play with a pet

- Go to a “laughter yoga” class
- Goof around with children
- Do something silly
- Make time for fun activities (e.g. bowling, miniature golfing, karaoke)

## Tips for developing your sense of humor

An essential ingredient for developing your sense of humor is to learn to not take yourself too seriously and laugh at your own mistakes and foibles. As much as we’d like to believe otherwise, we all do foolish things from time to time. Instead of feeling embarrassed or defensive, embrace your imperfections. While some events in life are clearly sad and not opportunities for laughter, most don’t carry an overwhelming sense of either sadness *or* delight. They fall into the gray zone of ordinary life—giving you the choice to laugh or not. So choose to laugh whenever you can.

### How to Develop Your Sense of Humor

**Laugh at yourself.** Share your embarrassing moments. The best way to take yourself less seriously is to talk about times when you took yourself *too* seriously.

**Attempt to laugh at situations rather than bemoan them.** Look for the humor in a bad situation, and uncover the irony and absurdity of life. When something negative happens, try to find a way to make it a humorous anecdote that will make others laugh.

**Surround yourself with reminders to lighten up.** Keep a toy on your desk or in your car. Put up a funny poster in your office. Choose a computer screensaver that makes you laugh. Frame photos of you and your family or friends having fun.

**Remember funny things that happen.** If something amusing happens or you hear a joke or funny story you really like, write it down or tell it to someone else to help you remember it.

## How to Develop Your Sense of Humor

**Don't dwell on the negative.** Try to avoid negative people and don't dwell on news stories, entertainment, or conversations that make you sad or unhappy. Many things in life are beyond your control—particularly the behavior of other people. While you might think taking the weight of the world on your shoulders is admirable, in the long run it's unrealistic and unhealthy.

**Find your inner child.** Pay attention to children and try to emulate them—after all, they are the experts on playing, taking life lightly, and laughing at ordinary things.

**Deal with your stress.** Stress can be a major impediment to humor and laughter, so it's important to get your stress levels in check. One great technique to relieve [stress in the moment](/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm) is to draw upon a favorite memory that always makes you smile—something your kids did, for example, or something funny a friend told you.

**Don't go a day without laughing.** Think of it like exercise or breakfast and make a conscious effort to find something each day that makes you laugh. Set aside 10 to 15 minutes and do something that amuses you. The more you get used to laughing each day, the less effort you'll have to make.

## Using humor to overcome challenges and enhance your life

The ability to laugh, play, and have fun with others not only makes life more enjoyable but also helps you solve problems, connect with others, and be more creative. People who incorporate humor and play into their daily lives find that it renews them and all of their relationships.

Life brings challenges that can either get the best of you or become playthings for your imagination. When you “become the problem” and take yourself too seriously, it can be hard to think outside the box and find new solutions. But when you play with the problem, you can often transform it into an opportunity for creative learning.

Playing with problems seems to come naturally to children. When they are confused or afraid, they make their problems into a game, giving them a sense of control and an opportunity to experiment with new solutions. Interacting with others in playful ways helps you retain this creative ability.



Here are two examples of people who took everyday problems and turned them around through laughter and play:

**Roy**, a semi-retired businessman, was excited to finally have time to devote to golf, his favorite sport. But the more he played, the less he enjoyed himself. Although his game had improved dramatically, he got angry with himself over every mistake. Roy wisely realized that his golfing buddies affected his attitude, so he stopped playing with people who took the game too seriously. When he played with friends who focused more on having fun than on their scores, he was less critical of himself. Now golfing was as enjoyable as Roy hoped it would be. He scored better without working harder. And the brighter outlook he was getting from his companions and the game spread to other parts of his life.

**Jane** worked at home designing greeting cards, a job she used to love but now felt had become routine. Two little girls who loved to draw and paint lived next door. Eventually, Jane invited the girls in to play with all the art supplies she had. At first, she just watched, but in time she joined in. Laughing, coloring, and playing pretend with the little girls transformed Jane's life. Not only did playing with them end her loneliness and boredom, it sparked her imagination and helped her artwork flourish. Best of all, it rekindled the playfulness and spark in Jane's relationship with her husband.

As laughter, humor, and play become an integrated part of your life, your creativity will flourish and new opportunities for laughing with friends, coworkers, acquaintances, and loved ones will occur to you daily. Laughter takes you to a higher place where you can view the world from a more relaxed, positive, and joyful perspective.

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