

Laugh, for the Health of It

Research shows it really *is* the best medicine.

Laughter really is good for your mental and physical health, say researchers who have studied its benefits. Here's some of what these researchers have learned.

Laughter strengthens the body's ability to fight disease. Laughter increases the body's ability to produce and release a bacteria- and virus-fighter known as salivary immunoglobulin A (S-IgA). Researchers studied two groups of students. One group tended to use humor to cope with stress and another didn't. After both groups viewed a comedy routine, the group that relied on laughter to fight stress had higher S-IgA levels than the other group.

Laughter fights stress. Stressed individuals have higher levels of a hormone called cortisol. Studies show that laughter lowers cortisol levels in the body, which makes laughter a natural stress buster.

Laughter fights stress in another way. Much of the stress we experience is related to how we think. Laughing after an embarrassing mistake you made, for example, is far less stressful than losing sleep or remaining stressed over it.

At least one type of laughter can lower blood pressure. An ability to laugh at your own mistakes also is a good way to lower blood pressure. In one study, researchers first measured what made people laugh. Then, each person was subjected to experiences that normally raise blood pres-

sure levels. People who tended to laugh at their own mistakes had the smallest increases in blood pressure. However, people who tended to use humor that attacks other people or things had the highest increases.

Laughter increases energy levels. Feeling tired or run down? Have a good laugh. Laughter is a natural pick-me-up, which may provide the energy and time needed to do things that might otherwise be avoided.

Laughter helps us bond with others. Ever heard the expression "Laugh and the world laughs with you"? Research shows that when we laugh, we tend to talk more, make more eye contact and do more of the things that help us connect with others. Laughter also lessens tension. It's hard to feel angry, tense or anxious when you're laughing.

Laughter is good exercise. Laughing 100 times has the same effect on the body as being on a rowing machine for 10 minutes or a stationary bike for 15 minutes.

Little Known Facts About Laughter

- Children laugh about 400 times a day. Adults laugh an average of 15 times a day.
- Laughter is infectious, which is why most TV sitcoms have a laugh track. Laughter is so contagious, it can even reach epidemic proportions. In 1962 in the African country now known as Tanzania, a few schoolgirls began laugh-

ing uncontrollably. Their laughter soon spread to people in neighboring communities. Schools were closed to keep others from catching the laugh bug. The epidemic subsided after six months.

- Laughter isn't just about jokes and funny stories. One researcher eavesdropped on conversations in malls, noting why and how often people laughed. Less than 20% of the laughter followed a joke or humorous story. Most laughter took place as people were greeting one other or saying goodbye.
- Laughter sounds the same across cultures, leading some researchers to believe that laughter helped bond our ancestors together. In fact, the sound of laughter is so common and familiar, it can be recognized if played backwards on tape.

To Add Laughter to Your Life

- Watch funny movies or TV shows.
- Read funny books or listen to cassettes of your favorite comedian in the car.
- Read your favorite comic strip each day. Clip the ones that make you laugh most and post them where you can see them.
- Watch children and animals. They naturally do things that make us laugh.
- Spend time with people who like to laugh.
- Remember a funny story about yourself or someone you know.

Movies to Understand Life By

Most movies are a poor reflection of reality. But some seem to tell it like it is. David Schroeder, PhD, an EAP professional from Modesto, Calif., often recommends movies to clients as a way to help them understand and sort through uncomfortable life events. Among his recommendations are: "Ordinary People" and "Soul Food" for people experiencing grief or the loss of a loved one; "Bridges of Madison County" for couples struggling in their relationship; "Searching for Bobby Fisher," "The Great

Santini," and "Father of the Bride" for people interested in exploring father/child relationships; and "Life is Beautiful" to demonstrate that beauty and laughter are possible under the most desperate circumstances. Schroeder cautions, however, that movies are no substitute for professional advice. Those who face a challenging life situation and feel uncertain about how to handle it may benefit from professional assistance.

Self-Control

How to get it, keep it and have it always.

Most people have good self-control. Even when angered or jostled, most people can keep it together.

But some people lose control and go into fits of rage, creating tense moments for those around them.

For someone who wants to regain control, it's important to identify how rage begins and what alternative behaviors are available. Therapists recommend these four steps for accomplishing these tasks.

- Tune in to what is going on in your body that lets you know you are about to lose control.
- Figure out what happened to make you feel this way.
- Think about ways in which you might control yourself.
- Choose the best way to control yourself, and do it.

It's unrealistic to expect someone who has lost control to calmly and deliberately go through each of these steps. So here's a technique that will help: Think back to a time when you lost control. What triggered the event? What signals did your body give off that you were about to lose it? With the answers to these two questions, you can engage in a mental exercise that can help prevent losing control in the future. Picture the same circumstance. Imagine your body giving you the same signals that you're about to lose control. Then, imagine yourself doing something else, anything else, constructive. Imagine this over and over again until you have the alternative behavior firmly imbedded in your mind. You'll find that the next time you begin to feel rage, your mind will already be sending you the message that you have a choice — you don't have to lose control.

So Write About It!

Keeping a journal as a way to heal from painful life experiences may also benefit someone physically. Researchers divided 112 asthma and arthritis sufferers into two groups. Half of the subjects were asked to write about a traumatic event in their lives, the other half wrote about topics that had no emotional value. Four months later, among those in the group that wrote about a traumatic event, the asthma patients showed a nearly 20% improvement in their lung functioning and the arthritis sufferers had a 28% decline in the severity of their condition. There was no change in the condition of those who wrote about emotionally neutral topics. Even more remarkable was that patients were asked to write about a trauma only once and that the health benefits were experienced four months later. But researchers aren't sure how long the health benefits of the writing exercise might last or whether the exercise would work with other illnesses. (Journal of the American Medical Association)



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Compulsive Spending

It's a disorder as powerful as compulsive gambling or compulsive eating.

Overspending around the holidays is a problem for many people. But it's one that can be easily remedied with thrift and good spending habits in the months that follow.

But for some people, overspending is a year-around compulsion with drastic complications. Compulsive spenders may risk their jobs, their families and their careers to acquire things.

University of Florida researchers estimate that between 2% and 8% of the population spends compulsively. Symptoms of the problem include:

- being preoccupied with shopping or the idea of shopping
- frequently buying unneeded items
- routinely spending more than one can afford
- shopping for longer periods than initially intended

U of F researchers say compulsive spending is just like any other impulse-control disorder: shopping and the act of acquiring things lessens feelings of emptiness or anxiety. The disorder eventually takes its toll. The average compulsive spender is \$23,000 in debt, usually in the form of credit cards or mortgages against his/her home. The person's marriage or family life may suffer due to high debt, his/her job may be in jeopardy due to absenteeism following a shopping spree, and his/her social life may be in shambles due to borrowing money from friends. Some compulsive spenders may be in trouble with the law, stealing from their employers or others to pay off debts or to buy more.

To end the cycle, the person must acknowledge the problem and get help. If you or someone you know may be a compulsive spender, seek professional help.

Help available all day,
all week, all year.

1 800 222 0364

TTY: 1 888 262 7848