

LAUGHTER THERAPY AND ITS BENEFITS

Kiran B. Dhamak^{1*}, Kiran B. Kotade² Vinayak M. Gaware¹, Atul N. Khadse¹, Sachin B. Somwanshi³,
Ramdas T. Dolas³, Vikrant K. Nikam³

1. Department of Pharmaceutical Chemistry, College of Pharmacy Chincholi, Sinnar, Nashik, M.S, 422101.
2. Department of Pharmacology, College of Pharmacy Chincholi, Sinnar, Nashik, M.S, 422101.
3. Department of Pharmaceutics, College of Pharmacy Chincholi, Sinnar, Nashik, M.S, 422101.

Corresponding author*:

Kiran B Dhamak

Lecturer, Department of Pharmaceutical Chemistry,

College of Pharmacy, Chincholi, Sinnar, Nashik, M.S (422101)

E-mail: kirandhamak@rediffmail.com

Summary

Laughter and therapy are not generally paired in the minds of clinicians nor in the minds of the general public. Therapy is a serious business and is viewed and approached with a proper amount of ponderous gravity. After all, people enter therapy for serious reasons, often at critical times in their lives. Certainly humor is one trigger for laughter but not the only one. If one entertains the idea that laughter is a physical process which releases emotional pain, then other, more serious triggers like stress, anxiety, and tension will make sense. It is specific to the release of light anger, light fear, and boredom. When people laugh, if uncomplicated by medications which may interfere with the physical catharsis, they are releasing painful feeling which is gone for all time. The exact amount of pain is immeasurable but the body will keep discharging pain cathartically until there is no longer a need. The only thwarting influences are the controls artfully imposed in childhood. Human beings are taught the value of control from an early age. Our cultural preference for processing feelings cognitively instead of feeling them in our bodies tends to maintain and prolong emotional distress. Nevertheless, some part of us instinctively knows that pain is driving us unconsciously. This may be viewed as the innate drive toward health which carries us toward the help we need

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Introduction

Reduction of pain

Laughter also helps in the reduction of pain as it provides a distraction and many doctors believe that it can help the healing process run more smoothly and rapidly. After all, who doesn't want to forget that they are suffering with pain? Laughter allows a person, young or old, to momentarily cast aside thoughts of aches, pains, stiffness in joints, upcoming tests or surgery, etc. and allows relaxation to flood the body¹.

Laughter relaxes all muscles in the body

Muscles throughout the body need a break just like any other part. They often work overtime. When an individual gives in to a wholehearted laugh, muscles are given the opportunity to take a breather from work. Any muscle that does not take part in the laugh is able to relax fully at this time. But the muscles used in the laugh are also able to relax, just a short time later, after the laughter subsides. So in other words you are allowing for a complete relaxation of every muscle in your body when you laugh and mean it.

Laughter is more than just an enjoyable activity. It is very beneficial to the body and mind. It doesn't cost a cent and it is highly contagious. But is laughter really the best medicine?

Everyone enjoys a good laugh, don't they? If they don't, they should! Laughter has many benefits, which in turn have positive effects on the human body. Laughter lowers blood pressure, activates the immune system, triggers the release of endorphins (the body's natural painkillers), reduces stress hormones, helps reduce pain, allows muscles to relax and is helpful for breathing as frequent laughter empties the air of lungs. And that's just the beginning².

Laughter is good for the circulatory system

Laughter is indeed very good for the heart. It increases circulation and improves the delivery of oxygen and nutrients to tissues throughout the body. Humor is known to lower blood pressure (and for reasons that escape even the most trained medical experts, women seem to benefit even more so from frequent laughing than do men).

A laugh is thought of as exercise for the heart and is very often likened to "an internal jogging." Laughter helps strengthen the body's largest muscle, the heart, and is particularly good for those who are not able to get up and walk, jog or do other kinds of cardiac exercises on a regular basis.

Laughter helps the immune system work more effectively

Laughter aids the immune system in doing its job properly. It increases the number and activity level of natural killer cells that attack viral infected cells and a variety of kinds of both tumor and cancer cells. Laughter also encourages an increase in activated T cells (T lymphocytes), which often lie dormant until something awakens them to action. Laughter works well in this role.

Laughter is good for the respiratory system

Respiratory problems such as asthma, bronchitis and frequent head colds are warded off easier by frequent laughter as it increases the concentration of immunoglobulin in saliva. Laughter is good for the lungs overall as it provides an aerobic workout for the diaphragm. Laughter empties the lungs of more air than they take in which results in a cleansing effect in much the same way that an act of deep breathing does. This yields excellent therapeutic benefits for people who suffer from emphysema and sinus problems.

Reduction in stress hormones

There are a number of neuroendocrine hormones in the body that are activated when the body is under a great deal of stress. These hormones cause blood vessels to constrict in response to the stress as well as begin to suppress the activity of the immune system. Laughter plays a role in reducing at least four of these stress hormones. They include cortisol, dopac, epinephrine and growth hormone.

Control of pain

Laughter plays a tremendous role in controlling pain as well as the fact that it raises the level of certain brain chemicals, in particular that of endorphins (as previously mentioned these are the body's natural painkillers). Another important role laughter plays is in the decrease of dopamine levels. Dopamine is a part of the "fight or flight response" of the body and is connected to the elevation of blood pressure when danger is perceived to be imminent³.

Laughter as therapy

It is estimated that a child laughs approximately four hundred times a day while an adult engages in some humorous silliness only fifteen times a day. We are not limited to only fifteen times a day so why don't we do it more often seeing how healthy it is for us?

Longevity is rumored to be connected to laughter and remember that laughter is very contagious. After hearing all of the benefits of laughter, try doubling (or even tripling) the amount you laugh every day and

see how much better you will feel inside and out. It cannot be emphasized enough, laughter is in and of itself a form of therapy and its benefits are many. So go tell a joke, watch a comedy, read an amusing book or go visit one of your more humorous friends. And then laugh because it's good for you. More and more doctors are prescribing laughter therapy for patients feeling the stress of day-to-day life. Humor is a universally recognized language- it is spoken by people in every corner of the world. Laughter is rejuvenating to mind, body and soul, it sparks creative thoughts and it is so useful in maintaining healthy relationships with others. The best thing of all is that laughter is contagious so by all means, pass it on! It costs nothing and no negative side effects have ever been found from laughing (or even laughing too much)⁴.

COULD LAUGHTER REALLY BE THE BEST MEDICINE

Doctors, patients and health care professionals alike are all catching on to the concept that laughter might very well be the best medicine for whatever ails. It is believed that laughter should come naturally to everyone, much as a smile does. And if it is our nature to laugh, we should do so, often.

Three reasons to laugh.

- It strengthens your immune system.
- It makes your cheeks sore.
- It actually increases your intellectual performance and boosts information retention.

Can laughter help us on other levels other than our physical well-being? Certainly it can! Laughter is a universal language after all. It is communicated on every surface of the planet by every person. Laughter is a very socially unifying trait. It brings people together and makes them feel part of something larger than themselves. Even if one doesn't share the same views as others, often a hearty laugh can ease tension, break down barriers and restore balance to an otherwise tension filled situation. Laughter fights loneliness as its aim is to bring people together not makes them feel isolated and alone⁵.

STRESS MANAGEMENT BENEFITS OF LAUGHTER⁶

Hormones: Laughter reduces the level of stress hormones like cortisol, epinephrine (adrenaline), dopamine and growth hormone. It also increases the level of health-enhancing hormones like endorphins, and neurotransmitters. Laughter increases the number of antibody-producing cells and enhances the effectiveness of T cells. All this means a stronger immune system, as well as fewer physical effects of stress.

Physical Release: Have you ever felt like you "have to laugh or I'll cry"? Have you experienced the cleansed feeling after a good laugh? Laughter provides a physical and emotional release.

Internal Workout: A good belly laugh exercises the diaphragm, contracts the abs and even works out the shoulders, leaving muscles more relaxed afterward. It even provides a good workout for the heart.

Distraction: Laughter brings the focus away from anger, guilt, stress and negative emotions in a more beneficial way than other mere distractions.

Perspective: Studies show that our response to stressful events can be altered by whether we view something as a 'threat' or a 'challenge'. Humor can give us a more lighthearted perspective and help us view events as 'challenges', thereby making them less threatening and more positive. (For more on changing your perspective, see this article on cognitive reframing.)

Social Benefits of Laughter: Laughter connects us with others. Just as with smiling and kindness, most people find that laughter is contagious, so if you bring more laughter into your life, you can most likely help others around you to laugh more, and realize these benefits as well. By elevating the mood of those around you, you can reduce their stress levels, and perhaps improve the quality of social interaction you experience with them, reducing your stress level even more!

How To Use Laughter:

Laughter is one of my all-time favorite stress management strategies because it's free, convenient, and beneficial in so many ways. You can get more laughter in your life with the following strategies:

T.V. and Movies: There's no shortage of laughter opportunities from the entertainment, both at the theater and in the aisles of the video stores, as well as at home with T.V. comedies. While wasting your time watching something marginally funny may actually frustrate you, watching truly hilarious movies and shows is an easy way to get laughter into your life whenever you need it.

Laugh With Friends: Going to a movie or comedy club with friends is a great way to get more laughter in your life. The contagious effects of laughter may mean you'll laugh more than you otherwise would have during the show, plus you'll have jokes to reference at later times. Having friends over for a party or game night is also a great setup for laughter and other good feelings. (See this article on laughing more for additional tips on getting more fun and laughter into your life.)

Find Humor In Your Life: Instead of complaining about life's frustrations, try to laugh about them. If something is so frustrating or depressing it's ridiculous, realize that you could 'look back on it and laugh.' Think of how it will sound as a story you could tell to your friends, and then see if you can laugh about it now. With this attitude, you may also find yourself being more lighthearted and silly, giving yourself and those around you more to laugh about. Approach life in a more mirthful way and you'll find you're less stressed about negative events, and you'll achieve the health benefits of laughter. (See this article on maintaining a sense of humor.)

Fake It Until You Make It: Just as studies show the positive effects of smiling occur whether the smile is fake or real, faked laughter also provides the benefits mentioned above. The body can't distinguish between 'fake' laughter that you just start doing on purpose, and 'real' laughter that comes from true humor--the physical benefits are exactly the same, and the former usually leads to the latter anyway. So smile more, and fake laughter; you'll still achieve positive effects, and the fake merriment may lead to real smiles and laughter.

LAUGHTER BENEFITS ⁷

Although reviews are mixed on the findings of laughter therapy research, Robert R. Provine, professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and author of *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*, says that the most convincing health benefit he's seen from laughter is its ability to dull pain. Numerous studies of people in pain or discomfort have found that when they laugh they report that their pain doesn't bother them as much. Over the last few decades studies on laughter have provided other interesting insights into the emotional and physical benefits of laughter therapy.

Immune response: Increases in stress can be associated with decrease in immune capability. Some research has shown that the level of infection fighting antibiotics in the body and the level of immune cells may be boosted through the use of humor.

Blood circulation: Researches at the University of Maryland have conducted studies on laughter and the effects that watching either drama or comedy have on blood vessels. People who watched drama tended to have restricted blood flow, due to tensing of their blood vessels. On the other hand, the blood vessels remained much the same on people who watched comedy.

Blood sugar levels: A study of diabetic patients looked at the effects of laughter on blood sugar levels. On one day the group ate a meal and then attended a lecture. On the next day the group ate a similar meal and then watched a comedy. The group had lower blood sugar levels after watching the comedy than they did after attending the lecture.

Physical workout: Laughter exercises the diaphragm, contracts the abdominal muscles and even provides a workout for the heart. Additionally, a good laugh will provide movement in the neck, shoulders and arms, thus relaxing those muscles.

Stress reduction: Laughter is not only a physical release, but an emotional one, and easily one of the most fun ways to relieve stress. Since laughing is a distraction, it takes focus away from negative feelings, such as anger, pain, fear, guilt, and stress.

Social interaction: Laughter is a universally understood language that connects people. This common connection with others can help reduce stress between individuals and ease stressful encounters within groups.

Weight loss: Individuals who are able to laugh regularly are less likely to suffer from the four major causes of overeating: stress, boredom, depression and loneliness. A happier, lighthearted outlook on life often brings about healthy dietary changes.

Because of the wide range effects of a good laugh, the importance of laughter and healing is quickly becoming readily embraced by the medical community with laughter therapy increasingly used for patients who are ill and those recovering from an injury or surgery.

THE MANY BENEFITS OF LAUGHTER ⁸

1. When you make fun of yourself, you are disempowering those who would make fun of you and disarm possible confrontations.
2. Laughter dissolves tension, stress, anxiety, irritation, anger, grief, and depression. Like crying, laughter lowers inhibitions, allowing the release of pent-up emotions. After a hearty bout of laughter, you will experience a sense of well-being. Simply put, he who laughs, lasts. After all, if you can laugh at it, you can live with it. Remember, a person without a sense of humor is like a car without shock absorbers.
3. Medical researches have found that laughter boosts the immune system. The study of how behavior and the brain affect the immune system is called psychoneuroimmunology. Though still in its infancy, this science is rapidly gaining much attention as mankind strives to understand the mind-body relationship⁹.
4. Laughter reduces pain by releasing endorphins that are more potent than equivalent amounts of morphine.
5. Humor helps integrate both hemispheres of our brain, for the left hemisphere is used to decipher the verbal content of a joke while the right hemisphere interprets whether it is funny or not.
6. Laughter adds spice to life; it is to life what salt is to a hard-boiled egg.
7. Develop your sense of humor and you will find you are more productive, a better communicator, and a superior team player.
8. Everyone loves someone who can make them laugh. The more you share your sense of humor, the more friends you will have.
9. Humor brings the balance we need to get through the turbulence of life comfortably.
10. Laughter is even equivalent to a small amount of exercise. It massages all the organs of the body, according to Dr. James Walsh.
11. A sense of humor can help you accept the inevitable, rise to any challenge, handle the unexpected with ease, and come out of any difficulty smiling.

The most wasted day is that in which we have not laughed. Don't wait until you are sick before you begin practicing laughter therapy. Start today by renting comedy classics from your video store, borrowing humorous books from the library, attending comedy clubs or watching comics on TV, and exchanging jokes with family members, friends, and coworkers. If you are visiting someone in the hospital, why not bring funny greeting cards and humorous books instead of flowers¹⁰.

Conclusion

Physiological research in the field of humor and laughter has uncovered amazing results, suggesting that, indeed, laughter has many clinical benefits. In the short term, laughter promotes many physiological changes; most notably, it stabilizes blood pressure, massages inner organs, stimulates circulation, facilitates digestion, increases oxygen supply to muscles, decreases muscle tension, and promotes an overall sense of well-being. In fact, laughter produces similar, if not identical, responses to those associated with progressive muscular relaxation, a widely recognized relaxation technique used to reduce muscle tension. In addition, tears produced by laughter differ from those produced by sadness and depression in that they contain toxins the body tries to release through the laughter response. The most remarkable effect laughter may produce is the release of neuropeptides, including the beta endorphine, which act as pain reducers. Cousins, in his now famous testimony, said that ten minutes of laughter gave him two hours of pain-free sleep during his recovery. Perhaps most interesting are the long-term effects of laughter and the positive emotions that accompany it. Although researchers have yet to identify an intensity-frequency-duration formula for the exposure to laughter as with physical exercise, conventional wisdom suggests that daily encounters with humor are beneficial to total well-being.

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