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Integrative Way: Go ahead and laugh – it's good for you

By Dr. Kay and Dr. Max -

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The idea of using laughter and humor for healing has been around since biblical times. Cultures from the ancient Greeks to American Indians have long recognized the power of humor to help us to heal. The healing power of laughter was reawakened during the 20th century, and research studies in mind-body medicine have confirmed that laughter produces positive changes in our bodies.

So what happens when we laugh? A good belly laugh seems to benefit multiple body systems. There have been a number of studies in the recent past looking at health outcomes with laughter therapy. They have shown the following:

- Laughter increases the activity of the immune system, especially IgA, which helps us to fight respiratory infections.
- Laughter increases natural killer cells that protect us from cancer and viral infections. One study showed that 30 minutes of watching funny videos produced positive immune changes that lasted for 12 hours!
- Laughter seems to relax and dilate our blood vessels, protecting us from heart disease and lowering our blood pressure; one study at Loma Linda University School of Medicine showed that heart attack survivors who watched a funny video for 30 minutes every day significantly reduced their risk of recurrent heart disease. Another study showed that people with heart disease were 40 percent less likely to laugh in a variety of situations compared with similar folks without heart disease.
- Laughter forces us to breathe more deeply and may help us to clear mucus from the respiratory tree; this can be beneficial for people with respiratory diseases, including asthma.
- Laughter relaxes our muscles and reduces spasm; this may be one of the reasons why hearty laughter seems to reduce musculoskeletal pain.
- Laughter also may boost endorphin production, which is our body's own natural pain-killer.
- Laughter reduces our stress hormones, including cortisol and epinephrine; this in turn also protects our immune system, as chronic stress weakens our cells and makes us more vulnerable to infection.
- Laughter helps us to maintain optimism and hope; this is enormously powerful in healing,

and can also reduce the risk of anxiety and depression when we are facing illness or other challenges in our lives.

What should you do if you want to become more mirthful? You certainly don't have to become a stand-up comic. In fact, people who learn to find and appreciate the humor all around them seem to benefit the most (that's right – humor is a learned behavior – you too can do this).

So go ahead and laugh – you'll feel better. And who knows – you may get healthier, too.

Note: If it's tough for you to find pleasure in normally pleasurable activities, especially if this persists for more than a month, then you may be dealing with depression, and you should talk to your doctor.

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