





ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

TICKLE YOUR FUNNY BONE
ON A REGULAR BASIS
AND YOU'LL HAVE MORE
ENERGY, LESS STRESS—EVEN
BETTER RELATIONSHIPS.
SO GO AHEAD, LAUGH!

You've had a nightmare week. Work is piling up. Your husband's on the road again. It's looking as if your dad may need to move into a nursing home. And the kids? They've tormented each other to tears, trailed popcorn all over the house, secretly emptied your purse, and are denying all of it! You're just about to lose your cool when your annoyingly perfect neighbor walks in, unaware of what's happening in your life, and admonishes you, "Lighten up!"

We know—you totally want to slug her. And maybe she deserves it, if only because her blouse still looks crisply ironed even at the end of the day. But in fact, you really ought to thank her for the tip and find ways to laugh despite your troubles. A wealth of

recent research shows that a lighthearted approach to life can have more benefits than you can shake a stick at, such as lowering your blood pressure, potentially increasing your productivity at work and helping you form closer and better relationships.

Laugh your way to ... **BETTER HEALTH**

The effect of laughter on the body is beautifully complicated. "Humor and its partner, laughter, activate physiological systems including the muscular, respiratory, cardiovascular and skeletal," says Steven M. Sultanoff, Ph.D., a psychologist and past president of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor. Research shows that a good **CONTINUED**

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belly laugh has measurable benefits on the heart, blood sugar and stress levels, circulation, the immune system and more.

In fact, merely *anticipating* something funny can have a positive effect on your health by increasing the body's levels of beneficial hormones and reducing potentially detrimental ones. In a series of recent experiments Lee Berk, Dr.PH, associate director of the research laboratory at the School of Allied Health Professions at Loma Linda University and one of the foremost researchers of the physiological and psychological effects of humor, found that looking forward to watching a funny video caused blood levels of beta-endorphin, a "happy hormone," to increase by 27 percent and growth hormone to increase by 87 percent. Both of these hormones boost the immune system. Meanwhile, levels of the potentially harmful stress hormones cortisol and epinephrine (adrenaline) were reduced by 39 percent and 70 percent, respectively. In previous studies Dr. Berk also found that some of the biological effects of a single one-hour viewing lasted up to 18 hours.

Dr. Berk and his colleagues have also found that a good-natured or mirthful laugh (as opposed to the kind of laughter that comes from nervousness or fear) can increase the antibody immunoglobulin A, which protects the upper respiratory tract.

Stanley A. Tan, M.D., Ph.D., a former colleague of Dr. Berk's at Loma Linda, led a yearlong study of diabetic heart-attack patients in which they had the experimental group watch something funny on TV for half an hour every day. The results of the study, published in 2007, were so positive that they shocked even the researchers. Forty-two percent of the control group who did not watch the humorous shows had a subsequent heart attack, as opposed to only 7 percent of the group that incorporated humor into their daily lives. The group that laughed on a daily basis also had lower blood pressure, fewer arrhythmias and less need for nitroglycerin. "We followed their meds, their EKGs, everything," remembers Dr. Berk, who was one of the study's authors. "It blew us out of the water. Unbelievable. We have our own pharmacology on board; we just need to use it."

Laugh your way to ... MORE ENERGY

Remember Dr. Berk's studies about the health benefits of anticipating something funny? The first

experiment in that series used a standardized test to assess mood, including vigor. The results were impressive: Two days before watching the funny video, the mere anticipation of a good laugh cut incidence of fatigue by 15 percent in the study volunteers. Right before watching, fatigue had gone down by 63 percent. And after? The volunteers had 87 percent less fatigue.

In addition to counteracting fatigue, levity can help keep us interested and energized. With increased energy we may perform activities that we might otherwise avoid and we get more done in a shorter amount of time. At one company, the promise of getting an hour off to fly paper airplanes in the parking lot was enough to increase productivity that day by more than 150 percent. And studies conducted by David J. Abramis, Ph.D., a psychologist and researcher at California State University, and others found that having fun can help people concentrate on their work more efficiently.

There may even be a fitness component—if you laugh hard enough. William Fry, M.D., a psychiatrist and professor emeritus at Stanford University School of Medicine, found in a "very informal" experiment that it took 10 minutes on a rowing machine to get his pulse rate up as high as it went within the first few seconds of a good laugh. Hard to believe? Maybe, but a 2005 study from the University of Maryland on the effects of laughter found that when people watched a funny movie, on average they experienced an impressive 22 percent increase in blood flow.

Now, you won't achieve a sculpted and chiseled physique merely by lying in bed wheezing with laughter watching *I Love Lucy* reruns, but the laughs can certainly do your body some good.

Laugh your way to ... LESS STRESS

Humor can make you more resilient—in times of trouble, it helps you keep on keeping on. We've already mentioned the dramatic way in which humor affects our blood levels of stress and happiness hormones. Indeed, there are studies that have looked at humor and stress and found that people with a sense of humor can cope better with stress, according to an analysis by University of Western Ontario psychologist Rod A. Martin in his book *The Psychology of Humor*. Some of these studies looked at the subjects using emotional and psychological **CONTINUED**

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criteria, but one tested subjects' immune systems after a series of stressful hassles. People with a sense of humor had better physical immunity in addition to being more emotionally immune to the stress.

It is a fact we all take for granted and need science to make apparent: A sense of humor can help us handle difficult situations by letting us look at things in a different way. Levity—laughing at things, verbalizing the humor of a situation, however dark—helps us gain perspective.

Laugh your way to... STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS

Essential to finding humor in, say, a story someone tells you is the emotional connection between teller and listener. There is an intimacy in humor, an unspoken bond that seems to say, "I know what you're talking about, and I agree with you."

Close interpersonal relationships can be forged and strengthened through humor, according to a series of four influential studies by William Hampes, Ph.D., a humor scholar and professor of psychology and sociology at Black Hawk College. Ever notice how you feel a warm glow toward someone with whom you've just shared a good belly laugh? Humor decreases stress and, as a by-product, increases empathy. Dr. Hampes found that individuals who laugh more tend to have more positive and productive relationships. He also demonstrated a correlation between humor and trust—a relationship dynamic we are all trying to foster. It's important, however, to distinguish between types of humor, Dr. Hampes stresses. When you put yourself or another person down in order to be funny, there may be laughter—but it doesn't help the relationship.

Laughter also helps take the edge off frustrations. During the Middle Ages the court jester's job was to defuse tense situations—even imminent battles—by acting the fool. In theory the combatants on both sides would get caught up in laughter and become distracted. The harder they cackled, the more they released angry emotions harmlessly. Something to think about when you're locking horns with a loved one.

In addition to enhancing existing relationships, levity helps us connect with people we don't neces-

sarily know well. Laughter lets us loosen up, and it's a lot easier to talk with others when you feel at ease. When we experience humor, we talk more, make more eye contact with others, touch people more (in appropriate ways), and so

on. Levity can yank us out of our antisocial shells.

Does this mean you have to crack jokes all the time? Not at all. If you have a good sense of humor, it means you have a lighthearted approach to life—not necessarily that you're a jokester. "A sense of humor is deeper than laughter, more satisfying than comedy, and delivers more rewards than merely being entertaining," say Laurence J. Peter, Ph.D., and Bill Dana, authors of *The Laughter Prescription*. "A sense of humor sees the fun in everyday experiences. It is more important to have fun than to be funny."

Clearly, humor is a good thing to cultivate. But how do you lighten up? In the comedy *What About Bob?* Bill Murray stars as a paranoid, delusional, multi-phobic character who has to take baby steps to overcome his problems. "Baby steps across the room. Baby steps to the elevator," he mutters to himself.

That's not a bad mantra for any of us who want to improve our lives by adding more humor and levity. It's not necessary or wise to attempt to overhaul your approach to life in one fell swoop. Over time, small steps can result in big improvements. Baby steps.

So to better cope with the inevitable grouches all around you, wherever you are right now, laugh out loud. Come on, just do it. See what happens. Tighten your gut and push out a guffaw. Where are you right at this very moment? On a bus? In your cubicle? At home? On an airplane? Would it be terribly wrong for you to laugh right now? Tilt your head back and let a laugh rip. It may sound fake. So what? Within seconds you'll feel a surge of authentic joy, a natural little rush.

And with any luck, you'll infect someone else with your little laugh. It may spread among those around you, as infections do. When you hear a great laugh, it gets you going, doesn't it? Oh, sure, someone may greet your little fit with animosity. To which your eyes will seem to reply—with your own stare and huge grin—"Lighten up!" ■