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### Laughter: Good Medicine

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**Humor helps  
promote recovery  
from illness.**

## Laughter: Good Medicine

**Humor helps  
combat stress.**

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

**H**umor is the spice of life. It can add joy to our everyday conversation. Laughter can lighten a tense moment and produce a feeling of well-being. Humor helps a speaker connect in a meaningful way with his or her audience, and keep them engaged. Through the years, *Reader's Digest* has given joy to many folks who have read their regular column, "Laughter, the Best Medicine." A good laugh helps a person improve their outlook on life, and may help lift a person out of depression.

The psychological benefits of laughter are well-recognized. Laughter makes a person more optimistic and hopeful. Laughter releases substances in the brain (beta-endorphins) that lower pain levels and reduce anxiety and stress. It helps a person relax in a tense situation, and enjoy happier relationships. Humor helps to minimize one's worries and fears, and enables an individual to confront problems with greater creativity and flexibility.

A hearty laugh may be good for your health, and protect you against heart disease. Laughter provides some benefits to the heart similar to that obtained from an exercise routine. A burst of laughter can improve your blood circulation, increase respiration and reduce the level of stress hormones. Those who enjoy good humor are less likely to get sick, more likely to feel better, and better able to cope in tough situations.

Health professionals realize the value of humor to reduce pain, relieve inflammatory conditions, foster recovery and brighten the outlook of life. Hospital patients who receive humor therapy by watching comedies and reading jokes are more relaxed and responsive, sleep better, and make fewer demands on the hospital staff. Furthermore, patients who regularly watch comedy videos have a marked decrease in cortisol (the stress hormone), lower blood pressure levels, experience fewer

heart attacks over time, and bolster their body's disease-fighting immune forces.

Humor therapy can improve the quality of life for patients with chronic problems. Scientists have observed that those who used humor as a way to cope with difficult life situations had the highest immunoglobulin A levels. One can even experience significant mood improvement from remembering funny events from the past, or by looking forward to watching a comedy or humorous movie. Just the expectation of laughter can raise the endorphin levels in your brain.

When you smile, the world smiles with you. The smile of an infant has been shown to procure love and attachment from a caregiver, thus securing the child's well-being for the future. Experiments have shown that people who take on the facial expressions and postures of happiness experience more joy and acceptance, and are able to see the funnier side of life.

Those who live a very long life are typically happy people with a good sense of humor. Solomon recognized there are appropriate times in life for laughter (see Ecclesiastes 3:4), and commented that a merry heart does good like a medicine and causes good healing (see Proverbs 17:22 KJV).

Winston Craig, Ph.D., RD, is a professor of nutrition at Andrews University.

