

Laughing Does the Body Good

"A merry heart doeth good like a medicine." –Proverbs

By Patt Harper

I know a woman who sets her alarm ½ hour early every morning to watch reruns of old sit-coms. When asked why, she answers simply, "I'd rather laugh than sweat." We all know that aerobic exercise helps reduce stress and improve cardiovascular health. This woman knows experts have found the same benefits in hearty laughter. She knows the importance of the "laugh factor."

Researchers have discovered several benefits from a good laugh. Laughter has been shown to lower rates of allergies and infections and to help with digestion and improve sleep. Laughter also has a positive effect on our respiratory, circulatory and muscular systems. Dr. William Fry, emeritus professor at Stanford Medical School says, "Laughter aids memory and increases alertness and concentration." Whether or not you believe these findings, most of us agree we just feel better after a good belly laugh. As Will Rogers said, *"We're all here for a spell – so get all the good laughs you can."*

After my mother's first heart attack at age 49 her doctor warned her that stress was her worst enemy. Many of us have suffered from headaches, muscle pain or stomachaches due to stress and tension. Laughter is one of the most powerful defenses against life's low blows. Laughter gives your body a dose of pain-killing hormones called endorphins which actually diminish physical and psychological pain. In his book, "Anatomy of an Illness" Norman Cousins explains how he used laughter as a painkiller when fighting a debilitating and painful disease. Subsequent studies have found these endorphins also stimulate the body's immune system to increase its disease-fighting ability. Finding humor in any potential stressful situation can give us a new perspective. By learning to laugh at our daily stressors and making humor a habit we can reduce the amount of strain we put on our bodies. *"I have discovered that somewhere, hidden in any circumstance life hands to us, is a little bit of fun. Why not go looking for it? – Cheryl B. Gartley, author.*

Having worked with older adults for over ten years I have observed laughter can enhance the quality of life no matter the physical health or chronological age of an individual. Those people who were able to laugh at whatever life threw at them were the ones who looked forward to each day and were able to enjoy every moment they experienced unlike those persons who sat and stewed about their problems. Humor can become a natural way of coping. If we learn to develop a healthy sense of humor and use laughter as an instinctive response we can begin to deal with what life hands us. Laughter may not help us live longer but it can certainly help us to be happier. So the bottom line is, if we don't laugh, we'll feel old much faster.

A healthy sense of humor is also beneficial psychologically. It helps us cope with fear, disappointments and despair by drawing our attention away from our upsets and providing a more realistic perspective. Much of our suffering is not so much the actual event that causes pain, but our reaction to it. Being able to laugh at a situation, we put things into perspective and are able to deal with reality, instead of creating a monster to fight with later. As Bill Cosby says, *"If you can laugh at it, you can survive it."*

What this all means is, it's extremely important to have a positive attitude, which laughing can provide. This can help to prevent stress and tension from manifesting into physical disorders. It is necessary to change our childish behaviors to more child-like ones. Childish is being negative and self-centered. Child-like is positive, spontaneous and loving. We need to learn to think like the 4-year-old boy who declared while cleaning a litter-box, "Today's my lucky day! I'm finding all kinds of poop!" There is always a choice about how we view circumstances even if there is not a choice about the circumstance itself.

The bottom line appears to be if we want all-over wellness, getting our daily giggles in is not an option. We need to be as serious about adding a laugh to our life as we are about improving our eating and exercise habits.

Patt Harper is a motivational humorist, trainer and author. She has spoken before and worked with organizations across the United States and Canada. Her hands on presentations are designed to teach participants to use humor more effectively and be well in mind, body, and spirit. Patt is a Certified Laughter Leader through the World Laughter Tour organization. Learn more at www.LAFF4Life.com. You can contact her at patthaha@aol.com.