

A laugh is a smile that bursts

By Fiona Hoban

You're not serious

We often take life, and ourselves, very seriously. Wayne Dyer in his book *The Power of Intention* tells a story about a busy executive who arrives at a board meeting, late, flustered and agitated. The Chairman points out to him "remember Rule Number 6". The busy executive suddenly takes a deep breath, smiles and sits down. When asked afterwards what Rule Number 6 is he explained: "don't take yourself so seriously". When asked what the other 5 rules were he replied: "there aren't any." Not taking ourselves so seriously enables us to lighten up, put things in perspective and see the funny side of life (and ourselves). I work as a counsellor and having a sense of humour is a must. I would say that it's a very effective therapeutic tool, because once you see the humour in a situation it's impossible to relate to that situation in the same way.

Why do we laugh?

Laughter is a universal language that we all understand. It is not something we learn to do. It is an instinctive behaviour programmed by our genes. Infants begin smiling within weeks of being born and start to laugh at about 4 months of age, long before they're able to speak. Laughter is a natural part of everyday life yet we often forget how strange it is, and how little we know about it. There is little research on how and why we laugh. We can split the atom and send a man to the moon, yet neuroscientists still have little idea what's happening in our brain when we laugh.



Because laughter is instinctive it may explain why it's difficult to control consciously – whilst we can consciously inhibit it, it's not so easy to consciously produce it. Some would say that efforts to laugh on command are often forced or totally futile. Laughter Yoga therapists, however, would dispute this. They use a blend stimulated laughter exercises and cultivated child-like playfulness to produce laughter in order to improve the immune system, reduce pain and increase endorphins.

Anyone who goes to a psychiatrist should have his head examined.
(Samuel Goldwyn)

Laughter is contagious – we laugh at the sound of laughter (which is why laughter tracks are used on TV comedy shows). But we would be wrong to assume that laughter is a response to humour or comedy. Research shows that most laughter does not follow jokes; only 10% of laughter follows anything joke-like.

"A laugh is a smile that bursts"
(Mary H Waldrip)

Laughter is a social phenomenon. We rarely laugh when we are alone; laughter is 30 times more frequent in social rather than solitary situations. When we're alone we're much more likely to smile to ourselves or to talk to ourselves. However happy we may feel, laughter virtually disappears when we lack an audience.

When we laugh we are often communicating playful intent. Children laugh more than adults because children play more than adults. Laughing with one another creates a positive bond. Laughter increases our sense of belonging and social cohesion. This counteracts feelings of alienation - a major factor in depression and suicide - and acts as a strong buffer against stress, disagreements and disappointment. Of course there's a difference between laughing with and laughing at. Laughing at others may be trying to force them to conform or casting them out of the group.

It would seem that used in a positive sense, laughter is not so much a response to humour, it is primarily a social vocalisation that has a bonding function within individuals in a group. We're social creatures, we need to belong and laughter plays no small part in that.

Research findings on the importance of having a good sense of humour

- Students who used humour as a coping mechanism were more likely to be in a positive mood. A positive frame of mind is a big advantage when facing into exams or pressure situations.
- In a study of depressed and suicidal senior citizens, patients who recovered were the one who demonstrated a sense of humour.
- People under high levels of stress but had a strong sense of humour became less depressed and anxious than those whose sense of humour was less well developed.

Simple ways to improve your sense of humour

1. Watch a funny movie or TV show
2. Go to a comedy club
3. Read the jokes in the papers
4. Seek out funny people
5. Play with a pet
6. Spend some time with children
7. Make time for fun activities (karaoke, treasure hunts)
8. Frame photos of you with friends and family having fun
9. Remind yourself to lighten up (funny screensaver, a toy in your car)
10. Take up laughter yoga

You have to laugh...

There's nothing quite like a good laugh. The most obvious effect of laughter is on our mood. Laughter triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals. But it's not just our mood that benefits. A good, hearty laugh leaves your muscles relaxed for up to 45 minutes and one minute of laughter equals 10 minutes on a rowing machine!

Benefits of Laughter

Physical	Mental	Social
Boosts immune system	Helps prevent heart disease	Strengthens relationships
Lowers stress	Decreases pain	Draws us to others
Decreases pain	Relaxes the muscles	Improves teamwork
Relaxes the muscles	Lowers stress	Helps diffuse conflict
Helps prevent heart disease		Creates a bond with others



Fiona Hoban runs a private counselling practice in Westport, Co Mayo. She also delivers wellbeing talks throughout Ireland. For more details go to www.fionahoban.ie

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