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“When Humor Goes, There Goes Civilization.”

“If You Can’t Make it Better, You Can Laugh At It.”

- Words of wisdom from Erma Bombeck

The year I turned 55, I experienced a life-changing “AH-HA” moment. In fact, I like to call it my “AH-HA-HA” year. It all started with a 3-day training for something called “**Laughter Yoga.**”

A physician in India, **Dr. Madan Kataria** became interested in the healing properties of laughter after reading **Norman Cousins'** book, “**Anatomy of an Illness.**” Impressed at how Cousins relieved his intense pain and broke his need for pain medications by spending time each day laughing at funny movies and shows, Dr. Kataria began exploring the benefits of laughter.

Starting in a park with just a handful of people, Dr. Kataria created a "laughter club," and everyone took turns telling jokes. The first day, the jokes were hilarious, the second day they were kind of funny -- but Dr. Kataria quickly realized that a laughter club based on jokes could not sustain itself.

Studying the blossoming field of laughter and humor research and therapy; Dr. Kataria soon learned that the human body will get physical and psychological benefits from laughter, regardless of whether that laughter is genuine, or feigned. The brain will release “feel good” hormones that eventually lead to stress relief and, believe it or not, REAL feelings of satisfaction and happiness. This led to his development of Laughter Yoga, which combines laughter exercises with yogic breathing (pranayama) and other fun activities that help participants "fake it, 'til they make it."

In my 3-day training to become a certified Laughter Yoga leader, we learned the importance of proper breathing, and how to use breathing exercises to oxygenate your blood, relax your mind, and stimulate laughter as an exercise. No jokes, no comedy, just breathing, laughing and moving. The group soon found out about the contagious reality of laughter, and how easily a few chants of “ho, ho, ha, ha, ha” can lead to really belly laughter. I quickly found out how laughing in this manner is a real aerobic exercise. For me, it was as if a door had opened into a place where I could, through the laughter yoga exercises, feel real stress relief, happiness and joy.

Since that day, I have taken further training, expanding laughter yoga into laughter wellness, the science of happiness, and other well-being practices. As a member of the [Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor](#) (AATH) I have been able learn from the examples of "humorologists," using humor in medicine, in therapy, in recovery, in the classroom and in the workplace. So, don't go gently, go laughing!

Noreen Braman
www.njlaughter.com

2 of the attached laughter activities are from Allen Klein's book L.A.U.G.H. – Using Humor and Play to Help Clients Cope With Stress, Anger, Frustration and More. They are used here with permission.

THREE FUNNY THINGS

Difficulty: **CASUAL** | Frequency: **1X/DAY** | Duration: **10 MINS**



WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Many of us spend our days on serious matters, doing serious work and having serious conversations. Taking some time to reflect on the silly could help you reclaim some playful lightheartedness in your life.

Indeed, research shows that humor is powerful: It can drive bonding between people and learning in the classroom. Laughter has physical effects on our bodies: It releases dopamine, increases blood flow, and strengthens the heart. And seeing the humor in a tough situation can even be a healthy way to cope.

Perhaps that's why Three Funny Things, in particular, has been shown to reduce depression and boost happiness for months after just one week of practice.

TIME REQUIRED

10 minutes/day for at least one week.

HOW TO DO IT

For one week, take 10 minutes every day to complete the following:

- Write down the three funniest things you heard, saw, did, or experienced today. Think about the things you found really funny and describe how they made you feel.
- Also write down the reason why these things were funny. In other words, answer the question: “Why did this funny event happen?” It may be a bit tricky to think about the “why” of the funny things in your life, but it will become easier over the course of the week.

It is important to create a physical record of your items by writing them down; it is not enough simply to do this exercise in your head.

Here are some other tips you may find helpful for your writing:

- Give the event a title (e.g., “joked with my friend about parenting”).
- List any funny things you like: They can be relatively small in importance (e.g., “my partner made a silly face”) or relatively large (e.g., “I went to a comedy show”).
- Remember to write down exactly what happened in as much detail as possible, including what you did or said and, if others were involved, what they did or said.
- Use whatever writing style you please, and do not worry about perfect grammar and spelling.
- To make this exercise part of your daily routine, consider writing before bed.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Wellenzohn, S., Proyer, R. T., & Ruch, W. (2016). [Humor-based online positive psychology interventions: A randomized placebo-controlled long-term trial](#)

. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 11(6), 584-94.

In this study, participants who journaled about Three Funny Things every evening for a week decreased in depression immediately afterward, and increased in happiness up to six months later, compared to a control group who journaled about their early memories.

WHY IT WORKS

Three Funny Things encourages us to focus on the good things in life—in particular, those entertaining, absurd, or knee-slapping moments. Rather than ruminating about problems, we direct our attention to particularly fun and pleasant experiences, often ones that involve other people. By spending time reflecting in this way, we have the opportunity to relive that amusement in the present.

Journaling about Three Funny Things could also shift our long-term perspective. Over time, we may become quicker to laugh and more open to seeing the humor in everyday life.

SOURCES

[Willibald Ruch, Ph.D.](#), University of Zurich

Sara Wellenzohn, University of Zurich

[René Proyer, Ph.D.](#), Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg

FOR MORE

Proyer, R. T., Gander, F., Wellenzohn, S., & Ruch, W. (2015). [Strengths-based positive psychology interventions: A randomized placebo-controlled online trial on long-term effects for a signature strengths- vs. a lesser-strengths intervention](#) *Frontiers in Psychology* 6: 456.

Wellenzohn, S., Proyer, R., & Ruch, W. (2016). [How do positive psychology interventions work? A short-term placebo-controlled humor-based study on the role of the time focus](#). *Personality and Individual Differences* 96: 1-6.

This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).



REFRAME IT

"If you don't like how things are, change it! You're not a tree."

-Jim Rohn

Comedians and cartoonists take everyday situations and get us to laugh by reframing them. For example, in one of Randy Glasbergen's cartoons, there are two dogs conversing in the backyard. One dog says to the other, "Met someone in a chat room and then I found out she's a cat." Glasbergen took a typical scene about meeting someone online and reframes the situation with dogs, which makes the cartoon funny.

Reframing is taking a situation, usually a negative one, and changing it to a more positive one. And you don't have to be a comedian or cartoonist to do this. Salesmen often use this technique when encountering one rejection after another. They frequently remind themselves when someone doesn't buy their product that they haven't really lost a sale, they are merely one step closer to getting one.

Often, with reframing, a small shift in focus can lead to a big shift in perception.

PURPOSE

To see an upsetting person in a new way

SPECIAL MATERIALS NEEDED

Drawing pens, markers, or crayons

ACTIVITY

Think of the person who is upsetting you. (For example, your boss.)

Now draw a cartoon of that person. (Make them as exaggerated as you can.)

And, remember, you don't have to be an artist to do this. You can make the picture as primitive or as elaborate as you want. You can even use stick figures. See if you can show the person doing the thing you hate the most about him/her.

Once you have completed the picture, give it an outrageous, humorous, or silly name. (Your boss, for example, might be "Ms. Molly Monster Manager," or "Mr. I-Want-It-Done-Yesterday.")

Chances are if your cartoon and name are outrageous enough, you probably will lighten up the next time you encounter that person.

DISCUSSION

1. Did drawing a cartoon and naming the person you dislike help you to see him/her in a lighter way?
2. Might you keep your artwork handy as a reminder to reframe your feelings towards the person?



MY DRAWING:
THE TITLE OF THIS PICTURE IS:

WHAT'S SO FUNNY?

"Laugh, and the world laughs with you:
Weep, and you weep alone."

-Ella Wheeler Wilcox

Medically, everyone's funny bone is in the same place—the part of the elbow over which the ulnar nerve passes. Knock it and you may experience a tingling sensation running up your arm.

Non-medically, everyone's funny bone can be in a different place. What people laugh at can cover a wide variety of styles and preferences. Some people, for example, like slapstick such as seen in the Marx brothers comedy routines. Others like put-down humor as exemplified in Don Rickles' stand-up performances. Still others prefer something like Gallagher's prop-based comedy, or Woody Allen's intellectual humor.

The important thing is not to compare what you find funny with what someone else finds funny. Instead, nurture what, and who, makes you laugh.

PURPOSE

To identify the comedy professionals who help you to laugh

ACTIVITY

Complete the following list:

Who makes you laugh?

Stand-up comedians or favorite comedy routines: _____

Movie comics or favorite comedy films: _____

Cartoonists or favorite cartoon characters: _____

Television sitcoms or favorite funny radio shows: _____

Authors or favorite humor books: _____

DISCUSSION

1. Now that you know who helps you get more laughter in your life, when might you tap into those resources?
2. Are there any other professional humor resources that can help you laugh more often?

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How Laughter Brings Us Together



New research suggests that people who laugh together like each other more.

BY JILL SUTTIE | JULY 17, 2017

Victor Borge once wrote, “Laughter is the closest distance between two people.” Many of us would probably agree that laughter brings us closer to others, whether we’re joking with our spouse or laughing with an audience at a comedy club.



Yet laughter isn’t always positive for relationships. Think of your friend laughing at your embarrassing fashion faux pas, or a boyfriend laughing at a comedian you find offensive. This kind of unshared laughter can have the opposite effect.

Now, a new study explores when laughter works as a social glue—and when it doesn’t. While all genuine laughter may help us to feel good, *shared* laughter may communicate to others that we have a similar worldview, which strengthens our relationships.

Researchers at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, devised a way to produce shared laughter in the lab, to measure experimentally how it might impact a relationship with a stranger.

Participants watched a funny, not-so-funny, or not-funny-at-all video while

supposedly video-chatting with another same-sex participant. Unbeknownst to them, the video chat displayed a pre-recorded clip of someone laughing the same amount for each of the two funny videos, but only smiling occasionally during the unfunny video. This produced more shared laughter in the first scenario, minimal shared laughter in the second, and no shared laughter in the third (but still a positive interaction).

Afterwards, the participants then filled out questionnaires about their positive and negative emotions, their sense of similarity to their video partner, and how much they liked or wanted to get to know their video partner.

Results showed that, across the different videos, the amount of shared laughter had consistent effects on the participants' sense of similarity to the video partner—and that this, in turn, increased how much participants liked their partner and wanted to affiliate with him or her.

“For people who are laughing together, shared laughter signals that they see the world in the same way, and it momentarily boosts their sense of connection,” says social psychologist Sara Algoe, co-author of the study with Laura Kurtz. “Perceived similarity ends up being an important part of the story of relationships.”

These results align with two other surveys they conducted, where participants recalled and answered questions about a recent interaction they had—this time, with someone close to them. When they reported more shared laughter (compared to unshared laughter), participants said they experienced more positive emotion and less negative emotion during the interaction, saw the person as more similar to them, and were more satisfied with the relationship. This held true even when controlling for other factors that might explain the good feelings, such as the length of the relationship and number of verbal and physical expressions of love.

This finding also jives with Algoe's prior research, which showed that shared

laughter was uniquely linked to people's overall evaluations of quality, closeness, and social support in their relationships. In other words, it's sharing a laugh—not just laughter, in general—that benefits relationships the most.

“Shared laughter signals that they see the world in the same way... Perceived similarity ends up being an important part of the story of relationships.”

—Sara Algoe

How can we put these findings into practice? Algoe suggests that relationship partners may want to find opportunities to laugh together in order to boost closeness, especially before having difficult or conflict-prone conversations. Likewise, she speculates that shared laughter could be incorporated into staff meetings to make people feel more on the same page and, thereby, become more productive.

Whatever the practical implications, Algoe believes her findings further the research on laughter, showing that social context is important for evaluating its effects.

“Even if laughing on your own might have positive social outcomes, there is a missed opportunity, because laughing at the same time as someone else might be particularly potent—and influential in relationships.”

She also hopes research like hers will encourage others to study the small, everyday behaviors that help people connect better in their relationships. For example, she points to a dissertation study by one of her graduate students in

which half of the everyday texts sent between people in close relationships contained shared jokes.

“We take that as a sign that shared laughter is a really important, but overlooked behavior,” says Algoe. “It may have a lot of potential for helping people grease the wheels of their relationships in everyday life.”

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About the Author



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Jill Suttie, Psy.D., is *Greater Good*'s book review editor and a frequent contributor to the magazine.

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PAST ISSUE: SPRING 2015

ALUMNI NOTES

Overcoming Grief With Laughter

After a devastating family tragedy, actor Bart Sumner found solace through improvisational theater, and, today, he helps others cope with similar emotional pain.





Illustration by Daniel Baxter

As a theater major at Rutgers, Bart Sumner discovered that acting and improvisational theater had the power to inspire others. He particularly enjoyed his time performing with the [Mason Gross School of the Arts](#)' Shoestring Players, an improvisational children's theater troupe, where he developed a love for acting that persists to this day.

When tragedy struck his family nearly 25 years after graduation, Sumner RC'86 discovered that improv also has the power to heal, and he is committed to sharing this personal lesson with others.

In 2009, Sumner and his wife, Leslie, were busy raising two children, David, 10, and Abby, 7. Their lives changed forever when an accident on the football field took David's life. "I can't describe what it is like to lose a child," says Sumner. "One minute they are there, and the next minute they are not."

Returning to his job teaching improv just weeks later, Sumner soon realized that acting and laughter provided emotional relief from his ever-present grief. Improv especially helped him open up, leading him to communicate more deeply with his family through several difficult years.

Sumner recounts his experiences in *Healing Improv: A Journey Through Grief to Laughter*, published in April 2014. The book details how, in 2013, he founded [Healing Improv](#), a nonprofit offering "no-cost comedy improv grief workshops to aid people to break free from stifling grief." Groups such as the Compassionate Friends and Bereaved Parents of the U.S.A. have included his sessions in their conferences. Recently, the Stephen Colbert AmeriCone Dream Fund of Coastal Community Foundation supported Healing Improv by giving a \$10,000 donation.

"I almost drove my car off the road when my wife called and told me," recalls Sumner, laughing. The funding will allow him to continue helping others in painful situations because, as Sumner states on Healing Improv's website, "there are joyous and downright silly things waiting to

be lived.”

Story by Noreen Braman



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