



By Maridel Reyes
Illustration by Ahoy There



hey say laughter is the best medicine, and there could be more truth to that than we think. *Psychology Today* calls our laughter “the universal human vocabulary, produced and recognized by people of all cultures.”

But laughter may do far more than just bind us together culturally — it could have significant physical benefits as well. Here’s a look at the serious science behind our uniquely human ability to ham it up.

For 17 years, Terri Corcoran of Falls Church, Virginia, took care of her husband, who suffered from a devastating brain illness.

At mealtimes and before bed, Corcoran, now age 66, would pull out a humor book and perform a spirited reading for her husband, who was no longer able to speak. “Reading out loud helped distract me,” she says. “It kept me from losing patience. It’s cathartic.” She joined a support group for caregivers called the Well Spouse Association. Their meetings always were full of laughter — and even some bathroom humor. “We were able to find humor in the ups and downs we had to face as caregivers of helpless spouses,” she says. “I am so grateful for my sense of humor.”

Since her husband passed away last year, Corcoran says she only wants to watch comedies on TV. “I’m always looking for humor online,” she says. “I’m drawn to what’s funny. I’ve had enough grief.”

In the burgeoning field of laughter

research, there is evidence suggesting there may be benefits of a good chuckle.

Dr. Michael Miller, a Professor of Cardiovascular Medicine, Epidemiology & Public Health at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and the author of *Heal Your Heart: The Positive Emotions Prescription* has published research relating to that very subject.

“Humor is so important that I place it as a daily requirement for a healthy heart, just like diet, exercise and sleep,” he says. “In fact, a good laugh will make you more likely to experience a good night’s sleep, give you more motivation to exercise and may even keep you away from unhealthy comfort foods that are often sought out during stress.”

When you laugh, it sets off a chain of positive physical and mental reactions, says psychologist Steve Wilson, founder of the World Laughter Tour and an educator of mental health. First, there’s a dilation of



your blood vessels. Your lungs take in more oxygen. Your muscles relax, which makes your digestion better. Your heart rate is elevated. And your brain produces neurotransmitters like endorphins.

Researchers liken a good laugh-fest to a mild workout. “The antithesis of laughter is distress,” says Dr. Lee Berk, Professor of Allied Health Studies at Loma Linda University in Southern California. “And chronic distress is potentially more deadly than a poor diet or lack of exercise.” That’s because when you’re chronically stressed out, your body produces elevated levels of certain hormones that make you more prone to infection, disease and cancer. “You have to break the cycle of a stressed life,” he continues. “And laughter does that, which is critical.”

Of course, a hearty chuckle is not the only way to cope with negative emotions and experiences, say experts. Regular exercise, a balanced diet and adequate sleep all are positive ways to deal with stress. But laughing may be the most fun way to stay healthy.

Need more reasons to laugh? Here are seven proven benefits for your body, mind and social life:



Sign in to your plan website and click on the My Health and Wellness tab for technology such as apps and websites that can get you laughing. myAARPMedicare.com



1. You'll feel less pain.

This is where the evidence is the strongest, says Berk. A 2011 Oxford University study found that pain tolerances became higher after laughter. Laughter releases endorphins in the body, which are considered one of the body's natural painkillers, according to the Mayo Clinic.

2. You'll stress less.

Similar to exercise, laughter suppresses the release of stress hormones and boosts levels of the feel-good brain chemical endorphin. Berk says similar to your home's thermostat, you can reset your stress levels by making time for more humor. (See “How to Laugh More” on the next page.)

3. You'll sharpen your brain.

One theory suggests that humor can improve cognitive functioning by activating all parts of the brain at once. Researchers at the College of William and Mary found that a wave of



electricity sweeps through the entire cerebral cortex before we laugh. And Berk's research shows that laughter induces “gamma” frequencies — the type of brain waves that help with recall and memory.

4. You'll feel closer to friends and family.

A well-timed joke can smooth over most awkward social situations and makes everyone feel more comfortable and supported. If you're

around someone who uses humor in a positive way (or if you're that person), you'll increase your social connection. Bonus: Being funny also helps you make new friends.

5. You'll lower your blood pressure.

Researchers at the University of Maryland Medical Center found a link between laughter and healthy blood vessels. A genuine laugh dilates your blood vessels, causing increased blood flow and reduced blood pressure.

6. You'll live longer.

According to a 15-year Norwegian study published in 2016 in *Psychosomatic*

Medicine, women with a "high sense of humor" had a significantly lower chance of dying from cardiovascular disease and infections; men had a significantly lower rate of death from infections. And that's after adjusting for the social benefits of humor.

7. You'll strengthen your immune system.

National Institutes of Health research has also suggested that laughing boosts natural killer cell activity, a type of white blood cell that guards against tumors and launches attacks against infections. It also raises levels of infection-fighting antibodies. •



How to Laugh More

When you call psychologist Steve Wilson, his ringtone is the sound of uproarious laughter. He's been known to put on a clown nose in his car to make himself — and other drivers — feel goofy during traffic. Here's how to sneak more laughs into your life:

- ▶ Make a "Humor First Aid Kit" with things you think are funny, whether it's a book of comics, a hilarious family photo or a chuckle-inducing greeting card. Take a laugh break whenever you need to cut the tension.
- ▶ Instead of watching the news before bed, switch to a sitcom.
- ▶ Listen to humor podcasts in the car.
- ▶ Keep a container of blowing bubbles nearby. You'll delight the people in your life (and yourself) by watching them float in the air — and it will remind you to take deep breaths.
- ▶ Try going to a comedy show.
- ▶ Subscribe to funny sites on social media.

CHEER UP ONLINE

Fire up your computer for a healthy dose of humor and inspiration. Have a favorite movie or television series you remember from years ago? (*The Carol Burnett Show*, perhaps?) Many of them are available on streaming services that are typically available for a monthly fee.

5

Length, in seconds, of "Dramatic Chipmunk," one of the shortest — and funniest — cute animal videos ever to hit the web. Check it out on YouTube.

10

Number of seats in the restaurant featured in the inspiring and critically acclaimed documentary "Jiro Dreams of Sushi," about an 85-year-old master sushi chef.

2,300+

Number of TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) Talks available online. Informative, topical and moving videos from expert speakers such as Tony Robbins and Brené Brown. TED Talks have been viewed more than 1 billion times.

844,149,215

Views of "Charlie Bit My Finger," one of the most viral and hilarious videos to hit the web. It stars a young British boy who's complaining that his little brother bit his finger.

Renew
For You

What If It's Hard to Laugh? Humor can be wonderful for our health — but it can also seem out of reach. If you're feeling anxiety, experiencing lethargy or a lack of joy, or simply haven't felt happy lately, be sure to talk to your doctor.