



A Merry Heart: The Healing Power of Good Humor

Your nurse strides in singing, "I only have I.V.'s for you." Your child's eyes start to twinkle when you are being your most stern. You happen upon the neighbor chasing her husband with the water hose. You observe a grandfather talking baby talk with his grandson when he thinks no one is looking. Together you and the woman at the checkout laugh at the tabloid headline, "Man's 40-Mile-an-Hour Burp Blows Wife's Wig Off."

Invitations to respond to the funny side of life abound. The bumper sticker that looks you in the face on Monday morning, "I owe, I owe, so off to work I go." The book title, *All I Want Is a Warm Bed and a Kind Word and Unlimited Power*. The parent who got her words mixed up when writing a note to the teacher: "My son is under doctor's care and should not take fiscal ed. Please execute him."

The "Important Notice" in the *Saturday Review*: If you are one of the hundreds of parachuting enthusiasts who bought our course entitled "Easy Sky Diving in One Fell Swoop," please make the following correction: On page 8, line 7, change "state zip code" to "pull rip cord."

Each of us has our own unique funny bone. Something that causes you to burst into laughter may be only mildly amusing to another. However, this we have in common. We each need a daily dose of Vitamin H — Humor.

History of Humor

Throughout history and across cultures, people have sensed the importance of humor in promoting well-being. The ancient Biblical proverb proclaims what modern science has now confirmed, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine." Medieval professor of surgery, Henri de Mondeville, recommended mirth as an aid to recovery from surgery. In days of old, court jesters relieved melancholy and brought

merriment to royalty. Native American tribes, such as the Pueblo, Hopi and Cree, included groups of ceremonial clowns who regularly provoked laughter and lightheartedness. More recently, a growing body of scientific evidence has underscored the physiological, mental, emotional and social advantages of humor.

Benefits of Good Humor

Laughter has been called "inner jogging" because an old fashioned thigh-slapper does give you an aerobic workout of sorts. It stimulates the cardiovascular system, sends surges of oxygen throughout your bloodstream, exercises the muscles of your face, shoulders, diaphragm and abdomen, and generates bursts of laughter reaching speeds as high as 70 miles an hour. While laughter itself is delightfully stimulating, its afterglow creates a temporary reduction in blood pressure, respiration, heart rate and muscle tension.

Laughter enhances creativity and problem solving, reduces stress, eases strained relationships, and promotes mental health. It may even encourage healing, strengthen the immune system and contribute to longevity. Amid the most trying and oppressive circumstances, humor is a guardian angel that protects our sanity.

When you laugh together as a family, it fosters understanding, open communication and harmony. In families with young children, humor can diffuse emotionally charged issues and encourage balanced disciplinary measures. Humor also promotes good will and cooperation between generations, between those with opposing viewpoints, and between nations.

As a testimony to the healing power of mirth, in recent years humor programs have sprung up in hospitals and outpatient centers across the country. Humor enthusiasts and researchers have established

associations, annual conferences, and a variety of publications. While it would be foolish to think you can “ha ha” yourself out of physical illness or emotional trauma, it is clear that good humor aids health and overall well-being in many ways.

Stay Away from Humor That Hurts

Humor that ridicules, insults, teases and puts down is sick humor. Listen carefully to laughter that comes from an “I’m better than you are” attitude, laughter in response to insensitive ethnic or sexual jokes, laughter that is disrespectful to others or causes them pain. Such laughter lacks joy; its edges are rough; it creates separation and suffering; and it sets a poor example for others, particularly those who are young and impressionable. If you want your humor to be healthy, use what humor expert Allen Klein calls the AT&T principle — make sure it’s appropriate, timely and tasteful.

Be Yourself

Strengthening your sense of humor doesn’t mean that you need to tell jokes all the time. It doesn’t mean you have to be the life of the party. It does mean opening yourself to the comic relief that daily life provides. And it does mean cultivating the ability to not take yourself or life too seriously.

Certain folks have a special gift for telling jokes and creating a level of fun and joy that the rest of us can only admire. We needn’t try to become carbon copies of these great fun-lovers. But we can learn from them and delight in the laughter and lightheartedness they bring.

The Gentle Side of Humor

While laughter is an important element in a well-rounded sense of humor, cheerful smiles, playfulness and moments of quiet amusement also are important characteristics of a merry heart. The highest form of good humor is always an inside-out job. It begins with a heart that is peaceful and filled with a quiet joy. In response to one’s own distinctive personality and outer

circumstances, this inner joy expresses itself in good-natured laughter, playful creativity and gentle smiles.

How’s Your Laugh Life?

If you’d like to add more laughter and lightheartedness to your life, here are a few suggestions. Add others yourself. Then team up with friends and brainstorm additional ways to bring touches of humor into your daily lives.

- ◆ Enjoy spontaneous moments with your family. Suddenly imitating a monster, hitting your mark with a water gun, rolling in a pile of leaves, or delighting in a friendly chase or snowball fight — these enrich today with laughter and tomorrow with fond memories.
- ◆ Collect cartoons and jokes you enjoy from newspapers, magazines and books. Share them in person and by mail with friends and family members.
- ◆ Get together with a couple of friends and take pictures of one another being silly. Share the pictures and laughs with others.
- ◆ Start a “funny bones” bulletin board at home and at work. Fill them with humorous sayings, favorite cartoons and funny pictures.
- ◆ Who says that a little laughter is all right but that uproarious hooting and guffawing is “uncivilized”? When something strikes you as particularly funny, REALLY get into it — enjoy a full blown belly laugh! Allow the laughter to get down into your toes; let the tears flow. After it’s over, you’ll feel refreshed and the world around you will seem like a friendlier place.

For Further Reading

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