

Laughter as Therapy

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Therapy can be defined as “an activity or treatment intended to alleviate an undesirable condition.” With that in mind, let’s explore the therapeutic benefit of laughter for the body, mind and spirit.

Throughout history, we have discussed the importance of attending to the body, mind and spirit. Humor is one of the pleasures of life. To dispense laughter will directly enhance the quality of life and perhaps the will to live – this may be the most important result of all. The will to live is a force which is difficult to define but can be a powerful influence in the recovery process. Humor and laughter can create an environment where hope can flourish because it provides a sense of joy, helps us connect with family and friends, and inspires an appreciation and gratitude for life.

Physiological Response

Humor is a perpetual process while laughter is a behavioral response. This behavior creates predictable physiological changes within the body. With vigorous sustained laughter, the heart rate is stimulated, sometimes reaching rates of above 120 bpm; the normal respiratory pattern becomes chaotic; respiratory rate and depth are increased while residual volume is decreased. A variety of muscle groups become active during laughter.

Laughter and Well-Being

How is laughter therapeutic to the body? Laughter is a pleasurable experience; it momentarily banishes feelings of anger and fear. It gives us a feeling of power and control; we feel care-free, lighthearted, and hopeful during the moments of laughter. These feelings may have therapeutic benefits by reversing the immunosuppressive effects of the emotions of anger, fear, or loneliness, which often accompany illness or other stressful events. These emotions are known to produce physiological changes that are harmful to the body; changes which the use of humor and laughter can ease.

Psychological Impact of Laughter

Humor and laughter affect how we perceive and respond to change. Herbert Lefcourt has explored the possibility that a sense of humor and its use can change our emotional response to stress. Humor can also influence the mind by enhancing the ability to learn because it can capture the attention of the learner, enhance retention of the material, or help to release the tension that blocks learning.

Spiritual Effects of Humor

Spirit can be defined as the vital essence or animating force of a living organism, often considered divine in origin. Spirit can also be regarded as vivacity or energy. The word humor itself is a word of many meanings. The root of the word is “umor” meaning liquid, fluid. One dictionary defines humor as “the quality of being laughable or comical” or “a state of mind, mood, spirit”. Humor is something that flows, involving basic characteristics of the individual, which express themselves in the body, in moods and emotional reactions, and in qualities of feeling, of mind and of spirit. The qualities of humor and spirit are similar and, I believe, interdependent.

Therapists facilitate the healing processes within the body and mind. To be most effective, we must direct our efforts to the body, mind and spirit. The root of the word “heal” is “haelen”, meaning to make whole. I have attempted to provide information and inspiration for the possibility that laughter and humor can be a source of therapy.

My intent was to answer the questions: “Why are humor and laughter important? What happens to the body, mind and spirit when we laugh?” You are now probably wondering: “How can I get myself and others to laugh more? When is humor appropriate to use? Who is most likely to laugh?”

Begin to explore your own style and appreciation of humor. Find what works for you. Remember that the shortest distance between two people is a shared laugh.