

THE GIFT OF HUMOUR

HUMOUR AND HEALING©

By Lee-Anne Ragan

Co-owner of Rock.Paper.Scissors Inc. who can find humour in even the bleakest of situations. Copyright 2005 ©

Humour is a powerful tool wherever you are on your road to health and healing as a burn survivor. We learn to laugh before we learn to walk or talk. Laughter can shine light and hope into the most dismal of places, whether that place is physical or psychological.

Whether you are the quiet, laugh-behind-the-hand, shy chuckle type or the full on guffaw, laugh until your belly hurts type, or somewhere in between – it's all good. That's what makes humour great – it fits itself to all personalities and preferences. Unlike those horrid pantyhose that claim one size fits all, I encourage you to find your favourite type of laughing and indulge those humour muscles.

Dr. Rod Martin from the University of Western Ontario categorizes humour into four main types: social, self-enhancing/coping, aggressive and self-defeating. His research has shown those who use the latter two tend to have intimacy problems and lower self-esteem.

The ancient Greeks knew a thing or two about healing and humour as they built hospitals besides theatres as they observed patients got better faster if they saw entertainment and laughed.

Gelotology not gelato

"Seven days without laughter makes one weak." ~Mort Walker

Did you know that you can become a gelotologist when you are studying gelotology, the study of laughter and the effects on the human body?

The origin of the word "humour" is from the Latin "humorem" which means moisture. When the flow of the four Hypocratean humours (phlegm, blood, choler and bile) was normal, a person was said to be "in good humour" and with today's emphasis on balance – we can learn a lot from laughing.

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Laughing involves both hemispheres of our brain. It bridges communication gaps, decreases conflict, reduces stress and tension and can help us more effectively navigate the challenges that today's rapid pace of society brings.

The physical effect of laughter on our body is a hot topic now. Time magazine published an entire issue devoted to laughter and happiness. Neurologists from Stanford have found that laughter triggers the brain's "reward centres."

Simply smiling is a workout for our face as it engages a full 15 muscles. We can now measure the effects that laughter has on our bodies. A recent article entitled, *Smile - it could save your life*, states that after we laugh our blood pressure goes down and our heart rate decreases. Laughing may even decrease the incidence of illness such as getting colds and the flu because it increases endorphins. If that isn't enough reason to laugh or smile, know that it also helps prevent heart disease. Blood vessels of subjects in a scientific study increased capacity 22 percent when they watched a humorous movie compared to decreasing by 35 percent when they watched a non-humorous movie.

Dr. Michael Miller of the University of Maryland, who was published in the Journal of the American College of Cardiology, says that "30 minutes of exercise three times a week and 15 minutes of laughter on a daily basis is probably good for the vascular system."

A study reported in Psychosomatic Medicine draws links between your emotions and chemicals in your immune system, meaning that if you cheer up and are happy you won't catch as many colds.

Physiologically speaking, or should I say gelotologically speaking, laughter promotes the production of endorphins – a biochemical substance that leads to good feelings and a sense of wellness, in part because endorphins are the body's natural painkillers.

Professor Lee Berk, who has studied laughter and medicine for 18 years, goes even further with the power of laughter. He says laughter can increase cells that destroy not only viruses but also tumours. Laughter suppresses epinephrine, our stress hormone.

Beyond healthy effects on our bodies, laughter has the power to influence our minds. In fact, we don't necessarily need to believe that something is funny for our mind to respond accordingly. Say what? Research has proven that if we smile or laugh, then our mind believes our faces



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and act accordingly. The saying, 'smile and the world smiles with you' has more power than ever before.

There is a growing body of research on the therapeutic effects of laughter – there's even an association for it, which is called the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humour.

As a burn survivor it is good to set your mind to laugh more. Be more like children, as they tend to laugh 600 percent more than us serious adults (60 times a day versus our 10 times per day). By laughing you integrate and balance the activity in both of your brain's hemispheres and you'll convince your brain and therefore your body, whether you initially believe it or not, that you're happier and healthier.

'How to' tips to invite laughter and levity into your life:

Not sure where to start? Try some of the following websites and other suggestions.

Hooked on surfing? Try these websites:

- Check this out for more information on humour and healing
<http://people.howstuffworks.com/laughter.htm>
- Google humour, laughter and comedy.
- Similar to Google humour, print off a list of your favourites to post where you'll see them on a regular basis, here's one to check out:
<http://www.quotegarden.com/laughter.html>
- There are a multitude of hilarious mini movies on the web, here are two examples: cat herding, the award winning superbowl ad at <http://allowe.cillix.nl/Humor/video/EDS,CatHerding.MPG> and the submarine misunderstanding at http://www.metacafe.com/watch/3094/captain_win/

Tired of taping – take a rest and curl up with a good book. Some of my favourites are:

- Anything written by Whoopi Goldberg
- *Babyhood and Couplehood*. Paul Reiser
- Anything written by Robert Fulghum (*All I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten, True Love, Uh Oh, It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It etc*)
- Time Magazine, January 17th, 2005 issue on Happiness
- Anything written by Stuart McLean that involves the Vinyl Café
- And for the kid in us, *Baby Divine* by Bette Midler and *Don't Make Me Laugh* by James Stevenson

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