Laughter, Play, and Keeping Well

Can you actually reduce the levels of chronic stress in your body and enhance your lifespan? Boost immune system function? Protect your nervous system and your sanity? Give your endocrine system a much-needed rest? Fortunately there is an easy way to do this: laughter!

Did you know that by the time a child reaches nursery school, he or she will laugh about 300 times a day? Sadly, adults laugh an average of only 17 times a day.

Laughter is a healing activity; it’s free, has no negative side effects, and is always available. Laughter is believed to activate the chemistry associated with the will to live and increase capacity to fight disease. Laughter has been shown to reduce blood pressure, decrease stress hormones, and increase infection-fighting antibodies. Laughter protects the heart. A hearty laugh can burn calories equivalent to several minutes on the exercise bike and rowing machine. It eases muscle tension and psychological stress. Laughter helps replace distressing emotions with pleasurable feelings. One cannot feel angry, depressed, anxious, guilty, or resentful while laughing. Humor and laughter can help us cope with frightening, difficult, unpleasant, and painful experiences.

The Science of Laughter
While many researchers have tracked the brain mechanisms of depression, fear, and anger, they mostly have ignored positive emotions. Exactly how laughter contributes to your health isn’t clearly understood. However, researchers have recently come to believe that we process humor and laughter through a complex pathway of brain activity. Studies suggest that there are three main operational levels in the brain that contribute to humor and laughter. The cognitive areas that help you “get” the joke; the movement area, likely the supplemental motor area that is thought to trigger muscle movement tied to smiling and laughing; and, the emotional component that elicits the happiness you feel after a funny experience.

Laughter, along with an active sense of humor, may help protect you against a heart attack, according to a recent study by cardiologists at the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore. The self-reported study, which is the first to indicate that laughter may help prevent heart disease, found that people with heart disease were 40 percent less likely to laugh in a variety of situations compared to people of the same age without heart disease.

Scientists do not know yet why laughing protects the heart, but they do know that mental stress is associated with impairment of the endothelium, the protective barrier lining our blood vessels. This can cause a series of inflammatory reactions that lead to fat and cholesterol build-up in the coronary arteries and ultimately to a heart attack. In the study, researchers compared the humor responses of 300 people. Half of the participants had either suffered a heart attack or undergone coronary artery bypass surgery. The other 150 did not have heart disease.

Other Ways Laughter Makes You Healthier
In addition to helping your heart, laughter offers other important health benefits. People become healthier from laughter. It improves circulation. When you laugh heartily, every organ is being massaged including your heart, lungs, and digestive system. Headaches can just go away. When you laugh, the endorphins released make you feel this elation. It makes those big decisions seem so much less important. Laughter stimulates both sides of the brain to enhance learning.

The benefits in laughter and play in easing, overcoming, and preventing both physical and emotional health problems are numerous. Laughter activates the immune system by increasing the number and activity of natural killer cells that attack viral infections. It apparently raises levels of infection fighting t-cells, produces disease fighting immunoglobulin A, and triggers the release of endorphins that help reduce pain responses.

At the biophysical level, laughter moves lymph fluid around your body simply by the convulsions you experience during the process of laughing. Laughter increases oxygenation of your body at both the cellular and organ level. By laughing, you take in vast amounts of oxygen. Oxygen is of course one of the primary catalysts for biological energy in the human body and absolutely necessary to sustain human life.
The Importance of Fun and Play

Often, things that make us laugh are also things that are associated with fun and play. Fun can be described as anything that is pleasing and causes happiness. It may serve as an alternative to monotony and drudgery associated with work. Play is a state of mind that is safe, inquisitive, and exists in the moment. It can also be a bodily state of relaxation or an uplifting and engaged emotional state.

Some say play is a spiritual state of profound connection and joy. Play can be something we do by ourselves or with others, but it is also something we can watch others do. Play is something we do for fun, the outward expression of some deep, presumably joyful urge. Play is often described as a time when we feel most alive, yet we often take it for granted and may completely forget about it. Fun can be anything that is restful, refreshing, and diverting.

Currently a broader base of observation, research, and scientific knowledge clearly explains why play is valuable. Play is hardwired into our genetic code. People play because it’s instinctive and fundamental to human existence. It is one of the evolutionary mechanisms that developed the species to its current state. Play is part of how Homo Sapiens adapt and survive.

Yet most of us believe that work is work and play is play. While we may also believe that play really is important to our happiness and well-being, we act as if it isn’t important, particularly in the healthcare environment, because it is not what society expects from us. Healthcare providers often overwork at the expense of our own needs. This conflict saps our energy and enthusiasm and leads to major stress.

Avoiding Burnout

Nurse anesthetists routinely work more than 40 hours per week. For many, work is a major, rewarding part of their lives. Work can even include ecstatic or “peak” experiences and relationships. When work is fulfilling, we are renewed and feel that we are where we ought to be, doing what we were meant to do. Yet our physical, emotional, and mental powers are deeply depleted. Time after work and on weekends is spent catching up with chores, paperwork, and family obligations instead of recharging.

The resulting loss of physical, emotional, and mental well-being happens gradually, eventually becoming burnout. Burnout and resulting health problems are widespread. That’s why it’s especially important for us to play. Without some recreation, our work suffers. Just as we are a sleep-deprived nation, many believe we are also play-deprived. Most of us have been working faster, harder, and smarter, with diminishing free time and feeling chronically overwhelmed.

Current research shows that success at work doesn’t depend on the amount of time you work. It depends upon the quality of work, and the quality of work depends on the level of well-being of the workers. The level of well-being depends significantly on the how often individuals replenish themselves through play. Sometimes that means a quiet read in a favorite armchair, a funny movie or concert, a walk in the woods, golf or tennis, a game of Frisbee, or a trip to the beach.

Preserving and Balancing Your Life

We all define fun in different ways, and in today’s busy environment, face multiple barriers to ways of having fun. But it is important to make time for ourselves. To give ourselves permission to take the time to laugh, play, and just have fun. There are many aspects to play. Much of play is non-rational. It includes nonsense, sick jokes, practical jokes, large bets, bloody contests, cunning strategies, carnival craziness, clever inventions, and high-risk sporting activities. Most of all, however, it is a state of being. Jumping into and out of the world of play on a daily basis can preserve and balance your life.

Look for everyday humor—the absurd, silly, incongruous activities. Remind yourself to laugh and have fun. Hang around happy, positive people who make you feel good. Therapeutic humor and play is any intervention that is refreshment of one’s body and mind.