Giggle your way to good health

By Andrea Lyle, RN

My sister and I are known for many things -- one of which is our ability to share a good belly laugh when no one else around us has any idea what is so funny.

Often we don’t really know either.

One of us finds something a little humorous and begins to chuckle. The other picks up on the humor, without even having to say anything, and off we go into a spontaneous, wholehearted, barely-able-to-breathe fit of hysterics. Those around us simply shake their heads and say, “Here they go again.” And they invariably begin laughing themselves. Even though we don’t always know why we found something so funny, we do know how good we feel afterwards. What my sister and I have noticed from experience, science backs up with facts. Laughter is contagious. When laughter is shared, it binds people together, increases happiness, improves intimacy and feels good.

It’s no secret the significant role stress plays in disease, but many are surprised to learn that one of the best antidotes to stress is laughter. According to The Mayo Clinic, laughter doesn’t just lighten your mental load, it actually induces physical changes in the body. Laughter can:

* **Stimulate many organs.** Laughter enhances your intake of oxygen-rich air, stimulates your heart, lungs and muscles, and increases the endorphins released by the brain.
* **Activate and relieve your stress response.** A good laugh fires up and then cools down your stress response, and it can increase your heart rate and blood pressure. The result? A good, relaxed feeling.
* **Soothe tension.** Laughter can also stimulate circulation and aid muscle relaxation, both of which can help reduce some of the physical symptoms of stress.

But laughter isn't just a quick pick-me-up. It's also good for you over the long term. Laughter may:

* **Improve your immune system.** Negative thoughts manifest into chemical reactions that can affect your body by bringing more stress into your system and decreasing your immunity. In contrast, positive thoughts can actually release neuropeptides that help fight stress and more-serious illnesses.
* **Relieve pain.** Laughter may ease pain by causing the body to produce its own natural painkillers.
* **Increase personal satisfaction.** Laughter can also make it easier to cope with difficult situations. It also helps you connect with other people.
* **Improve your mood.** Many people experience depression, sometimes due to chronic illnesses. Laughter can help lessen feelings of depression and anxiety.

Children are experts at finding things to laugh about, keeping life on the lighter side. As we mature, we seem to lose the ability to be silly and spontaneous in an effort to be more “adult like”. However, trading silliness for seriousness can have detrimental effects on our wellbeing. Letting go, lightening up and laughing is very powerful medicine. In fact, research has shown that laughing for 15 seconds a day can improve overall health so much that it can add upwards of eight years to your lifespan!

Even if you did not grow up in a household where laughter was a common sound, you can learn to laugh at any stage of life. Just as you would with working out, begin by setting aside time to seek out humor and laughter, and build from there. A good start to your day is to simply make yourself laugh for 10 to 15 seconds. It will set the tone for the entire day mentally, emotionally and physically. Eventually, you’ll find you want to incorporate humor and laughter into the fabric of your life. Just remember healthy humor is never at someone else’s expense. Learning to laugh at yourself is great. Laughing at others in a hurtful way is humor gone awry.

If you have trouble making yourself laugh, consider joining or starting a laughing club, hang out with funny friends, take in a comedy show, look at funny photos/videos or TV and read funny books. You can also look online for websites that focus on humorous material. When my sister and I need a good laugh, we like to visit damnyouautocorrect.com, which never fails to deliver up some real life auto-correct failures that get us laughing in no time. No matter where you go for laughs the important thing for your health and wellbeing is to follow the Nike admonition and "just do it!”

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