

A positive approach to your health

Make laughter your best medicine



By Eve Menezes Cunningham

US researchers from Duke University have found that positive attitudes to health make a real difference. This supports other research (from John Hopkins University) where people who described their health as “poor” (regardless of their actual conditions) doubled their risk of death within five years.

Additional research found that laughter reduces the risk of heart disease while chronically angry people are four to five times more likely to have a heart attack.

As well as being, well, fun, laughter boosts immune system function and decreases stress hormones. As we get too busy to remember how to do what came naturally when we were small children, there are things we can do to help us bring more laughter into our lives.

Kate Hull Rodger, founder of HumourUs (geddit?) helps people build their laughter muscles. But, having been mentally ill in her 20s, Kate has had times when the last thing she’s felt like doing was laughing.

She started her own healing process by “acknowledging and honouring my accomplishments, even when it was as simple as ‘I answered the door’ or ‘I walked the dog’.” Kate also recommends watching funny sitcoms.

For people for whom the very idea of

laughing feels like an affront, Kate recommends taking baby steps. “Start by noticing the little things that happen naturally and bring a smile to your face.”

Kate got into the laughter business because she was asked to talk about her own experiences with mental health and wanted to offer people more than just her story. She realised that laughter had played an enormous part in her recovery so used it as the focus of her stress management with companies.

Laughter helps our blood pressure and creates endorphins. Kate says, “Laughter has huge health benefits. Endorphins are like natural morphine, anti-inflammatories and muscle relaxants. They also block cortisol and stress related adrenaline. So laughter actually inhibits the process of getting stressed.

“The immune system gets a kickstart. There’s anecdotal research to say that treatment times are less for people who have a life to which they want to return. People who laugh a lot digest their food more quickly. Especially with glucose (so this has an impact for people with Type 2 Diabetes).

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you more open to colds.”

“What I’ve chosen to do is focus it in workplaces as it is such a place of stress. People have more control over their home life. Efficiency and effectiveness improve when you’re happy and managers often bring me in almost to give people permission to laugh.”

Kelly Rose Bradford attended a laughter workshop with Southend based therapist Angela Day. She says it involved, “Exploring joy and what makes us joyous, and how we can let joy back into our lives.”

If you’re thinking about attending a laughter workshop, Kelly says, “Expect the unexpected. Don’t go in expecting to be tickled with feathers or told endless jokes (like I did). It is much cleverer than that. And do be honest with your therapist and open minded about his or her ideas and practices.”

She says she left the workshop literally feeling, “A spring in my step and joy in my heart. It changed the way I thought about my perception of happiness and laughter and the things I thought made me happy.

“When I am feeling down I do the exercises Angela taught me - visualising the things that bring me joy and taking time out to spend a few minutes each day with music, things, photos or food that makes me joyous.” ●

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Be positive and take charge of your own health

If something's wrong, don't ignore it and hope it will go away. Make an appointment with your GP. For some people, it can be a huge step but it's definitely worth getting it checked out. Hopefully, your medical professional will be able to reassure you and put your mind at ease but even if you need treatment or further tests, it's far better to know what it is you're dealing with so you can make informed decisions.

Don't be shy about asking a friend or relative to come with you if you're worried about not being able to take in the information or just need some moral support.

Once you've made that appointment, do something nice for yourself.

Browse your local library. Many have great health sections and you'll probably find lots of useful information to educate and empower yourself.

Look online. There maybe support groups, helplines and other ways to connect with people who are going through or have been through similar health issues.

Distract yourself. If you're stuck in bed, watch the most uplifting TV and films available. If you can get out and about, exercise, spend time with fun company, get lots of fresh air and generally look after yourself.

Figure out what lifestyle changes will help you heal faster. By focusing on the things you have influence over rather than passively waiting for results and feeling helpless, you'll be better able to keep up that positive thinking.

Let out any negativity and frustration by punching or screaming into pillows, talking to a trusted friend or maybe even a therapist, keeping a journal or whatever helps you. Suppressed anger and fear has to come out eventually.

Let all your emotions flow and be patient with yourself. If you need to cry about your own health but feel blocked, rent a weepy movie and let it out for the fictional characters. Crying can be very cathartic.

Set and stick to measurable health goals. Don't let a scare prompt vague plans like "I'll definitely quit smoking / lower my cholesterol / get fit". Decide to quit by a certain day using all the help you can get (from hypnotherapy and smoking cessation clinics to self help books, nicotine replacement products and so on). Lower your cholesterol by learning to cook healthy and delicious food yourself (say, a new recipe each week). Start your fitness kick by walking at least 30 minutes a day, build up to the ideal 75 minutes over as many days or weeks as it takes. Keep taking steps in the right direction.



Some of the health benefits of laughter

- Reduced blood pressure
- Stress relief
- Stronger immune system
- Natural painkiller
- Improved digestion
- Improved recovery times



Start (and keep updating) a joke collection

Start collecting jokes. My favourites (below) seem to induce groans from everyone else so find some that genuinely make you chuckle.

Two toothpicks hopped up a hill. Reaching the top, exhausted, they spotted a hedgehog. One turned to the other and said, "I told you we should have waited for the bus!"

A mountain lion roared at a mouse, "Why are you so puny and pathetic and weak while I'm so mighty and magnificent and strong?" The mouse squeaked, "Well, I haven't been feeling too well lately. I think I have a cold."

What do you call two rows of cabbages? A dual-cabbage-way!

Two sheep in a field. One says, "Baaa". The other sighs, "Oh, I was going to say that" (This can be adapted for cows mooing and endless other animals. Hours of fun).

A mother hedgehog said to her baby, "We've lost too many on these roads. Promise me that anytime you have to get to the other side you'll use that crossing". The baby looked and said, "No way! Look what happened to the poor zebra!"

BRING MORE LAUGHTER INTO YOUR LIFE

When was the last time you laughed? If you really can't remember, start paying attention. If you've been keeping an eye out for laughter and it's missing, ask yourself when you last smiled and build up from there.

Start a Laughter Log. Keep a small notebook with you throughout the day or, if you have a very good memory, update it in the evening. List absolutely everything that made you laugh. It may have been something you heard on the radio or on TV, an overheard conversation on a bus, a book you were reading or a thought. Get to know what makes your own laughter muscles strong.

Watch some penguins. If you can't see them in their natural habitat or an aquarium, watch a DVD. Studies show that it's almost impossible for humans to view penguins on land without smiling. Apparently, it has something to do with the way they look like toddlers. Rent *March of the Penguins* and start smiling.

Look out for TV, books and films that make you laugh out loud. (When I need cheering up, I turn to things like *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, *Wild Child*, *Four Christmases*, *Friends* reruns...). My shelves groan with laugh inducing books like *Teri Hatcher's Toast*, Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* and others by Elizabeth Wurtzel, Cynthia Heimel and many more.

Even when times are tough, make an effort. Being cheerful will help your whole family / team. Think about people like the Dalai Lama. Some of the things he's been through are hard to fathom yet he's rarely caught on camera without an enormous, beaming smile.



Resources

www.humourus.co.uk - You can also order Kate's new book: *Pearls of Bizdom* – how to go from grit to great

angela.day.contact@gmail.com

www.applecoaching.com