

Your Personal Coach

By

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

Is having a sense of humor scientifically necessary in life? I've got a bet with my cousin Cindy that it is.

-- Rebecca

I think most people would put their money on your side of that bet.

They would agree that having a sense of humor is necessary if we want to overcome problems with grace, easily connect with other people, enjoy better psychological and physical health, and, in general, live a rich, juicy life. And – as far as “proof” for your bet -- the scientific evidence supports that belief.

Modern science has shown the healing power of laughter and humor in reducing stress, boosting the immune system, and easing suffering.

There are researchers who devote their lives to studying “laughter events” and these are some of the conclusions they’ve drawn: Laughter triggers many positive psychological and physiological changes. Through the “reverse inhalation” capacity of the lungs, the physical contractions of laughter cause extra oxygen to enter the body, moving stagnant air and increasing our body’s blood oxygen levels.

In other words, laughing is aerobic and kind of like “inner jogging.”

One study showed that twenty seconds of a good belly laugh was the cardiovascular equivalent to three minutes of strenuous rowing. That’s cool!

The muscle movements of laughter increase peripheral circulation, which is associated with the innervation of the parasympathetic nervous system and the “relaxation response.” In some ways, the breathing patterns created by laughter are similar to those that naturally occur during meditation.

Other studies have shown that laughter stimulates both hemispheres of the brain at the same time, lowers serum cholesterol, reduces stress-related hormones, and increases virus killer cells, B cells, and activated T lymphocytes, all of which improve immune system functioning and offset the immunosuppressive effects of stress and suffering.

There is even some growing evidence that a good, healthy laugh releases endorphins, the body’s own natural opiates, which diminish both physical and emotional pain.

Dr. Lee Berk, of Loma Linda University in California, one of the major researchers in therapeutic humor, summed up the scientific effects of humor and laughter and said, “If you took what we now know about the capability of laughter to manipulate the immune system and bottled it, it would need FDA approval.”

So does that give you enough scientific evidence to win the bet with your cousin? If not, perhaps Cindy will be impressed to know that having a sense of humor appears to be innate in all species of primates (even rats “laugh” when they’re tickled).

Tiny infants know how to smile and laugh even before they learn to understand jokes (at about 18 months) or Adam Sandler movies (not sure at what developmental stage that happens). Laughter immediately releases tension, and perhaps this is its most basic physiological function.

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Psychologists agree that a healthy sense of humor is a desirable part of every developing personality and it should be encouraged and reinforced.

In addition to all the health benefits, humor is like a magnet. Although what we find to be funny may differ, laughter itself cuts across all cultural and language barriers that threaten to separate us from one another. It has the power to pull us together just as grief does.

Laughter is like the songs of birds, acoustic, natural, and immediately understood by others of our species.

Science has demonstrated that the human laughter “call” is emitted as a series of short vowel-like syllables --- “ha-ha-ha,” or “hee-hee-hee” – each about one sixteenth of a second long and a quarter of a second apart.

Regardless of our own unique versions of laughter, it always follows these measurements and vowel patterns, increases with volume over time, and doesn’t interrupt the structure of a sentence.

These “laughter events” can be altered by culture or age, but children usually laugh from two hundred to four hundred times a day; adults average only twenty times a day.

People can have equally good senses of humor but find very different things to be funny. As for me, I laugh when I think about all those white-lab-coated, clip-board-carrying scientists measuring the ‘laughter events’ of rats being tickled. Now that tickles me.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com, call 473-4004, or direct questions to the Outer Banks Sentinel, P.O. Box 546, Nags Head, NC 27949

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D. is a personal coach, motivational speaker, clinical psychologist and author of “After the Darkest Hour” and other nonfiction books. She lives in Manteo. To learn more about personal coaching, visit her website at www.fullpotentialliving.com. (©2002 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.)