

Laughing Your Way to a Strong Immune System

Ask veteran nursing educator Anne Belcher, Ph.D., to describe the link between your health and your sense of humor, and she'll quickly tell you how she handled a recent monster traffic jam.

Her strategy was simple. While other drivers leaned on their horns and snarled curses, Dr. Belcher calmly reached into the glove compartment for her jar of pink "Wonder Bubbles."

Moments later, the university nursing professor was blowing a stream of fluttery bubbles past the other drivers, while laughing herself silly at their startled reactions.

"After a couple of minutes," chuckles the professor, who teaches classes in "laughter therapy" each semester, "they didn't know whether to call the cops, or start laughing with me."

For the fun-loving Dr. Belcher, the "Great Bubble Caper" offers a classic example of how laughter can improve your health. Her message, in exactly six words: Laugh more, and you'll feel better.

Develop a better sense of humor, Dr. Belcher contends, and you'll reduce the wear and tear caused by stress, anxiety and frustration -- while at the same time strengthening your immune system's ability to fend off disease. Increasingly, scientific researchers all across America are agreeing with her.

At the Stanford University Medical School in Palo Alto, Calif., for example, famed health researcher William Fry, M.D., recently demonstrated that "mirthful laughter" (the kind you get from watching Bill Cosby, let's say, while enjoying a few old-fashioned "belly laughs") markedly enhances the body's ability to resist illness.

According to Dr. Fry, lab tests showed that the immune systems of the "laughers" tend to release more disease-fighting "T cells" from the spleen into the bloodstream than do the systems of the "non-laughers."

"There's no doubt that mirthful laughter stimulates the quantity of T cells, and also their vitality," says the Stanford psychiatrist.

Here's the bottom line

Because these T cells are a major weapon in the body's defense against illness, the "laughter stimulus" they receive may be a crucial factor in staving off the next flu virus that comes your way.

But the mystery of exactly how laughter strengthens the immune system continues to puzzle researchers.

Is it simply that the physical exercise of laughing helps to "condition" the disease-fighting system, in the same way that exercise "conditions" an athlete? (Dr. Fry's studies have shown that the "inner jogging" of laughter can boost the average pulse rate from 60 to 120 in a few seconds, while flooding the entire cardiovascular system with vital oxygen.) Or is there also a mysterious psychological component at work?

"We can't answer that," says Dr. Fry. "But there's absolutely no doubt that laughing is great exercise. Some people get so involved they end up kicking their feet in the air."

Another health benefit to be gained from the giggles, he says, is that vigorous laughter often activates the body's natural tranquilizers -- the brain-centered "endorphins," which reduce pain and trigger the euphoria known as "runner's high."

Given all of these marvelous health benefits, you'd think that most of us would be laughing our heads off these days, in our continuing quest for wellness.

But we aren't, and for good reason: Life today has become so stressful that many people can't seem to manage even a tiny smile, let alone an old-fashioned belly-whomper.

"A lot of people have just plain forgotten how to laugh," explains Marci Catanzaro, Ph.D., a University of Washington nursing professor, "and that's really a shame."

For those of us now suffering from such "terminal seriousness," Dr. Catanzaro offers a helpful recommendation: We should "reconnect with the child inside, and learn how to laugh again by enjoying the silliness in life." To accomplish that, try a few of these tips:

- Draw up what Dr. Fry calls a five-day "humor profile" of yourself by making a list of things you laughed at during that period (a funny cartoon, a goofy remark, a TV comic, etc.). Start collecting examples of that kind of humor.
- Learn to enjoy the comedy in your own mishaps and boo-boos. Example: Marvin Herring, M.D., a longtime professor of family medicine at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, remembers how he once reached for a microphone before class -- and knocked his own wig off. His reaction? He simply made the mess-up part of the lesson-plan, telling his students: "That just goes to show you that what you see in life is not always what you get -- an important lesson for a doctor!"
- Teach yourself some of Dr. Catanzaro's tricks, such as taking a "humor walk" each day (look for the "human comedy" all around you) or keeping a jar full of your favorite jokes on your desk.
- When it's appropriate, dare to show others the silliness in yourself. Describing a recent tumble she took on an icy sidewalk, Dr. Belcher recalls: "I told the friend I was walking with, 'Just remember that I fell gracefully.' And then I laughed my head off."