Ways That Humor Can Heal

Laughter and humor can not only lift your spirits but can benefit your health and well-being.

An argument with a family member, a poor performance evaluation, or an upsetting story on the news can leave you feeling down and maybe even a little hopeless.

The power of laughter can provide humor and healing when life gets hard.

The health benefits of laughter are numerous — from emotional well-being to physical health. Laughter causes physical changes in the mind and body.

Even [anxiety](https://psychcentral.com/anxiety/anxiety-disorders), [stress](https://psychcentral.com/stress/stress-overview), and [depression](https://psychcentral.com/depression/depression) respond to a good joke.

Laughter counteracts stress hormones, increases endorphins, and helps you connect with other people.

Does laughter improve your health?

All emotions affect you mentally and physically, including the joy, excitement, and happiness of humor and laughter.

Think about how your body felt the last time you experienced fear, anxiety, or anticipation: Sweaty palms, labored breathing, and an increased heart rate are all [physical responses](https://psychcentral.com/anxiety/anxiety-in-the-body-physical-symptoms-and-signs) to these emotions.

Laughter and humor cause positive health responses.

Laughter can help [ease](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3196329/) symptoms of depression and [improve](https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01745/full) your social connections.

The combined emotional and physical health benefits of laughter have even [been suggested](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S266594412100016X) as a way to ease stress from the [COVID-19 pandemic](https://psychcentral.com/coronavirus/coronavirus-overview) and other stressful shared community events.

Why does laughter improve your health?

The connection between mind and body is strong, though scientists don’t fully understand it.

There are several theories for why laughter improves health:

* The placebo effect. This effect serves as one example of this principle in action. Sometimes, people feel physically or mentally better even though they’re receiving a placebo instead of treatment.
* Activating your reward system. Humor and laughter [stimulate](https://journals.physiology.org/doi/full/10.1152/advan.00030.2017) your body’s reward system.
* Pain relief. Laughter can act as a natural pain reliever for your tolerance to pain, which can help during recovery after illness or surgery.
* Lowers cortisol. Laughter [has been shown](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6125057/) to reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Stress can lead to inflammation. If you have a way to keep your stress managed, inflammation goes down, too.

The link between laughter and mental health

The connection between laughter, humor, and mental health is well-known.

However, [2021 research](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S266594412100016X) reemphasized this when they found that people who showed both humor and optimism had better well-being when faced with challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a [small 2017 study](https://synapse.koreamed.org/articles/1096448), researchers found that laughter therapy reduced symptoms of depression and helped patients in a long-term care facility sleep better.

A [similar study in 2020Trusted Source](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7444838/) reported that older adults living in a nursing home who regularly told jokes and had fun competitions with one another had reduced depressive symptoms.

Laughter connects our mental and physical well-being, creating benefits that uplift us from the inside-out.

What are the different ways laughter and humor uplifts us?

The power of laughter and humor can ease symptoms of many mental and physical conditions in ways you may not realize.

Improves the immune system

One [small 2009 study](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12652882/) has investigated the theory that people with a higher humor score might also have better immune system functioning.

While the researchers found that it may not strengthen your immune system, they did conclude that humor can act as a buffer from daily life stressors.

Releases endorphins

Laughter [releases endorphins](https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/tjem/239/3/239_243/_html/-char/en), and endorphins make you feel good.

If you’ve ever had a “[runner’s high](https://www.healthline.com/health/runners-high),” you know the power of endorphins. These happy hormones can also help ease symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Reduces stress

Humor’s ability to reduce cortisol levels in the blood can reduce your stress levels.

In some cases, stress and anxiety go hand in hand. If you can lower your stress levels through humor, chances are your anxiety might ease, too.

More laughter with less stress and anxiety can also improve your [sleep quality](https://psychcentral.com/lib/tips-for-a-good-nights-sleep) (and better sleep = even less stress).

Protects the heart

While laughter won’t necessarily prevent heart problems, it may help lower your chances of a heart attack or stroke.

According to a [small 2016 study](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5037252/), your sense of humor and ability to laugh could lower your chances of heart disease. And in [a 2020 study](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7064551/), researchers say that a daily dose of laughter may even lower risks of fatal complications from heart disease.

However, note that both studies were based on self-reports, so results may not be as accurate as other types of research.

Increases pain tolerance

A [2012 study](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3267132/)  suggests that watching a comedy can influence pain tolerance. Basically, you feel less pain after you’ve laughed for a while.

What are some benefits of laughter?

Acts as a coping mechanism

Humor can help you cope with difficult circumstances. A [2018 research review](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29587520/) found that humor positively affected terminally-ill patients and their families.

Before you start cracking jokes when things look bleak, the same review found that it took training to handle humor appropriately in delicate situations.

Helps you learn

In a small [2015 study](http://www.alternative-therapies.com/openaccess/singhbains213.pdf), researchers connected humor to improved short-term memory and learning among older adults.

Relaxes mind and body

Whether you’re laughing alone or with friends, it can help your mind and body relax.

The relaxation has to do with the cumulative effects of laughter — the release of endorphins, lower cortisol levels, and a boost in your mood.

More ways to laugh

If you’re feeling down or not sure where to look for a good chuckle, consider these options:

* watching a clip of your favorite comedian or checking out a comedy podcast or YouTube video
* picking your favorite funny movie to watch
* reading a comic
* reminiscing with family or friends of fun times together
* surrounding yourself with things that make you laugh or smile

It’s not always easy to find something to laugh about. When this happens, you might want to try forcing a laugh.

Your brain may know the difference between a voluntary and forced laugh, but your body doesn’t. So, you’ll get all the physical benefits, even though you’re simulating laughter.

When you’re especially stressed, consider sitting back and forcing out a laugh or two to get your endorphins going.

Recap

Humor and laughter are nature’s ready-made way to invigorate, protect, and connect. It changes how your body works for the better, and it’s free and fairly easy.

Consider giving yourself time and space to laugh every day.

An added benefit? For the most part, laughter has no harmful side effects, unless too much laughing gives you a side ache.

If you need help laughing, try [The Comedy Cures Foundation](https://www.comedycures.org/). They sponsor comedy tours and include clips to help us through life’s toughest challenges.

Also, laughter can fix a lot of things — but not everything. If you or someone you know needs help from a mental health professional, you can find one using our [therapist tool](https://psychcentral.com/health/find-help).

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