WHOLE HEALTH: CHANGE THE CONVERSATION

Advancing Skills in the Delivery of Personalized, Proactive, Patient-Driven Care

The Healing Benefits of Humor and Laughter Clinical Tool

This document has been written for clinicians. The content was developed by the Integrative Medicine Program, Department of Family Medicine, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health in cooperation with Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, under contract to the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, Veterans Health Administration.

Information is organized according to the diagram above, the Components of Proactive Health and Well-Being. While conventional treatments may be covered to some degree, the focus is on other areas of Whole Health that are less likely to be covered elsewhere and may be less familiar to most readers. There is no intention to dismiss what conventional care has to offer. Rather, you are encouraged to learn more about other approaches and how they may be used to complement conventional care. The ultimate decision to use a given approach should be based on many factors, including patient preferences, clinician comfort level, efficacy data, safety, and accessibility. No one approach is right for everyone; personalizing care is of fundamental importance.
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A merry heart doeth good like a medicine.—Bible, Proverbs 17:22

A patient walks into a clinic, terribly anxious.
Patient: Nurse! Please help me! I am shrinking. I am losing an inch of height every few minutes!
Nurse: Sorry, the team is on their way to an emergency. You’re just going to have to be a little patient.

This clinical tool focuses on humor and laughter as important potential pieces of a Personal Health Plan (PHP). Even in an instance where you have no other ideas about what you could do, bringing humor into a situation can be helpful; laughter has healing value. Below, the clinical benefits of laughter and humor are reviewed. Suggestions on how to bring more humor, laughter, and fun into your work and into the rest of your life are provided.

In the 1970s, word spread that Norman Cousins, a journalist, had markedly improved his symptoms of Ankylosing spondylitis through the use of humor.1 He watched Marx Brother’s movies regularly and found that they did much to improve his pain. Ultimately, his book, Anatomy of an Illness, did much to spark interest in the healing benefits of humor and laughter.

Mindful Awareness Moment
Humor and Laughter

Pay attention for a day to how much humor and laughter you experience in your life.
• How many times do you have a good laugh at work?
• How often do you make others laugh? How often for colleagues, and how often for patients? Do you make family members and friends laugh, and do they make you laugh?
• Is there enough laughter and humor in your life, or do you wish there were more?
• Do you ever use “dark humor” to cope with stresses at work?

How Humor and Laughter Affect Us

Patient: Doctor, doctor! My son just swallowed a roll of film!
Doctor: Don’t worry. He’ll be fine. Let’s just wait and see what develops.

Laughter affects our bodies in a number of ways. It leads to changes in body chemistry. For example:2,3

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- It increases **heart and respiratory rates** as well as **oxygen consumption** over a short period. After these changes, a person experiences relaxation. While these effects may not be the equivalent to aerobic exercise, as some claim, that is not to say it is entirely without benefit as a physical activity. 10-15 minutes of laughter per day may burn 10-40 extra calories.
- Laughter affects heart function. It increases stroke volume and cardiac output, and it lowers systemic vascular resistance. It also enhances blood vessel dilation.
- Instances of intense laughter ultimately lead to relaxed **muscle tone**.
- Watching humorous videos increases hormonal levels that are linked to **sympathetic nervous system (SNS) activation**. However, humor seems to reduce how much the SNS increases blood pressure.
- Laughter lowers serum **cortisol** levels, which are linked to stress.
- It increases serum **immunoglobulin A**. More research is needed to determine other ways that it affects the immune system. Some, but not all, studies of its effects on natural killer cells demonstrate that laughter increases their activity.
- Laughter seems to raise **beta-endorphins** (the feel-good chemicals of the body) and **human growth hormone** production.

Laughter and humor also have the following effects on specific illnesses:2,3

- “Humorous stimuli” decreases self-reported **anxiety** in college students.
- “Mirthful laughter” lowers the incidence of **myocardial infarction** in high-risk diabetic patients.
- Watching a comedy show decreased how much **glucose levels** went up after people ate. Mirthful laughter also correlated with increases in good **cholesterol** (HDL) in a study of high-risk diabetic patients.
- There is an inverse association between **coronary heart disease** and propensity to laugh.
- Propensity to laugh also reduces **arrhythmias and recurrent MIs** during cardiac rehabilitation. In these studies, patients chose for themselves which funny materials they wished to see.
- Laughter increases **pain tolerance**.
- Watching a funny movie decreased bronchial responsiveness in people with **asthma**.
- Laughter and clowning reduced hyperinflation of the lungs in people with severe chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).
- Laughter decreased inflammation (as measured by pro-inflammatory cytokine levels) in people with **rheumatoid arthritis**.
- Laughter and humor reduce wheal (skin swelling) reactions to **allergens**.

Laughter also has the potential to significantly affect the quality of our work lives. Humor helps relieve tension, reassures people, and draws them together. It likely strengthens the bonds between patients and members of their care team.4
Ways to Enhance Laughter and Humor in Our Lives

There are many ways to draw laughter and humor into a Personal Health Plan. Here are some suggestions:

- **Simply mentioning that laughter, humor and fun are important** in life can be helpful. If you say it as a clinician, patients are likely to pay attention.
- Remember it is NOT just about recommending it, but intentionally **bringing it into your daily practice** and how you relate to people in general. As appropriate, share your humor with your patients and your colleagues. It will enhance their Whole Health, and it will enhance yours too. Learn a new joke every so often. (We take no responsibility for whether or not the jokes featured in this clinical tool are successful! 😊)
- Some hospitals have created **clown care units** (CCUs). Clowns go on rounds to help bring humor and laughter to inpatients. In the New York City area, Big Apple Circus offers CCU programs in seven hospitals.
- Check out The **Gesundheit Institute** and their activities. Created by Patch Adams, MD, this organization is focused on bringing humor and laughter into health care. For more information about the institute’s efforts, and for ideas for your own practice, see [http://patchadams.org/](http://patchadams.org/).
- Some health care facilities offer **Laugh Mobiles**; carts with items to facilitate humorous encounters are wheeled onto different services by humor volunteers. The Duke Humor Project has done this, for example, for cancer patients at Duke University Medical Center.
- Encourage your patients to try **laughter yoga**. You can easily learn how to take just a minute or two to offer it during a patient visit. A quick Google search using “Laughter Yoga” will provide a number of groups offering courses. Research on laughter yoga is in its early stages, but it has been found to be at least as effective as group exercise for improving depression and life satisfaction in elderly women, and it improved health in a group of nursing students. It improved heart rate variability (which correlates with better overall health) in a small group of people waiting for organ transplants.
Try It Out: Laughter Yoga
Many laughter yoga practitioners contend that you do not have to feel the urge to laugh in order to derive the benefits of laughter. In fact, many laughter yoga activities have participants begin by pretending to laugh in various ways. For instance, you might laugh to a beat. You can try it now:

- Say the words “Mississippi Tennessee.”
- Now laugh with the same cadence you used to say those words: “Ha Ha Ho Ho Hee Hee Hee.”
- Repeat this ten times. What do you notice? Many people find that the exercises strike them as funny enough to actually induce laughter...


- For other ideas on incorporating humor into health care, check out the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor [http://www.aath.org/](http://www.aath.org/)

An elderly man goes in to his clinic for a checkup. After examining him and reviewing his labs, his clinician tells him, “Everything is fine, especially for your age.”

“For my age?” asks the patient. “I am only 70. Do you think I can make it to 80?”

“Well,” said the clinician, “do you drink or smoke?”

“No,” said the man.

“Do you eat fatty meat or sweets?”

“No,” the patient replied. “I am very cautious about my diet.”

“Do you engage in any high-risk behaviors like skiing or sky-diving?”

“Of course not! I always play it safe.”

The clinician thought a moment. “Well, then why in the world would you want to live to be 80?”
Mindful Awareness Moment
Having a Good Laugh Right Now

Take five minutes and search online for something humorous. It might be an excerpt from a television show, a medical humor website, a risqué limerick, or a knock-knock joke you can share with your kids. Just find something that gives you a good belly laugh.

As you laugh, note what happens in your body.
- Did laughing change your emotional state?
- How about your physical state?
- And what about your mental state?

### Additional Resources

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<tr>
<td>Laughter Yoga</td>
<td>This site has a lot of useful introductory information on laughter yoga.</td>
<td><a href="http://laughteryoga.org/english/laughteryoga">http://laughteryoga.org/english/laughteryoga</a>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>International</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wikihow</td>
<td>Note that the instructions featured on the site mention some Buddhist ideas, but laughter yoga is not itself linked to a specific spiritual or religious practice.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.wikihow.com/Do-Laughter-Yoga">http://www.wikihow.com/Do-Laughter-Yoga</a></td>
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<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahhN3Ryw404">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahhN3Ryw404</a></td>
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### Whole Health: Change the Conversation Website

Interested in learning more about Whole Health?
Browse our website for information on personal and professional care.

http://projects.hsl.wisc.edu/SERVICE/index.php
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References