

GROWING Together

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A LAUGH A DAY ...

"A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones." Proverbs 17:22

It's not just an old adage. There really is something to the idea that humour improves our health. What the author of Ecclesiastes taught 3,000 years ago is just now beginning to be recognized by modern research as a legitimate medical tool.

It started in 1978 with a journalist named Norman Cousins. Suffering from a painful and debilitating form of spinal arthritis, Cousins was kept on a regime of mind-numbing painkillers. Fed up with being over-medicated, he checked himself out of the hospital and into a hotel. There, he and a small group of friends watched old Marx Brothers movies and reruns of Candid Camera. They laughed and they laughed and they laughed. As reported in his 1979 book, *Anatomy of an Illness*, the results of this "treatment" were remarkable. "I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep." Within weeks, he was able to return to work.

Since then, researchers have demonstrated what the rest of us already know – or should know. Laughter is good for us. A hearty laugh relieves tension, relaxes muscles for as long as 45 minutes, enhances oxygen intake, stimulates the heart and eases digestion. In addition, it decreases stress hormones while boosting the immune system and increasing infection-fighting antibodies. And as Norman Cousins discovered, laughing triggers the release of endorphins, which reduce pain and can even give us a kind of natural "high."

Laughter may be nothing to joke about, but not everyone is a believer. Critics point out that laughter research has not conclusively eliminated other potential factors. Screaming, they say, may be just as effective. Even if they're right, though, wouldn't you rather laugh than scream? And unlike

screaming, laughter is contagious. Laughter draws a crowd. It induces more laughter. It builds relationship – passengers on a bus who laugh together at the antics of a small child, for example, are no longer just strangers to each other.

Laughter is just the most obvious expression of what Proverbs calls a cheerful heart. Being of good humour means more than sharing a belly laugh to ease the pain of a damaged mind or body. About the time Norman Cousins was healing himself with laughter, a young doctor named Patch Adams was establishing an experimental health facility he called the Gesundheit! Institute. As a troubled and suicidal youth, Adams had been institutionalized in an asylum. There he committed himself to two decisions: to serve others through medicine and to never, ever, have another bad day.



The movie *Patch Adams*, starring Robin Williams, follows Adams' struggle to include humour as a tool for healing. According to the real Patch Adams, "The most revolutionary act you can commit in today's society is to be publicly happy." In 1984, he decided to get serious about clowning. He travelled to Russia where he did volunteer bedside clowning in hospitals, orphanages, nursing homes and other facilities. Wearing his trademark bulbous red nose, he called it "nasal diplomacy." For more than 20 years, volunteer clowns have brought humour and health to 60 countries on six continents.

As Mary Poppins said, "In every job that must be done, there is an element of fun. You find that fun and – *snap* – the job's a game." Finding the fun in life won't make everything a game, but we can be assured that a cheerful heart is indeed good medicine.

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