The Giggle Cure

Science has long believed laughter is good medicine. Now, there's proof.

BY Doug Donaldson

DUUUUDE! WHAT'S UP?” says Dr. Deb Lonzer in a bright voice as she steps into the examination room.

On the table, 5-year-old Caden Coleman breaks into a grin. Like other kids, he's a little shy around doctors. And like other parents, his mother, Tracy Coleman, is a little apprehensive during doctors' visits. Today, Caden's recurring ear problems brought him to the office.

"I understand you have a porcupine in your ear," Dr. Lonzer says, in mock seriousness. Caden busts out laughing.

This, as most can attest, is a welcome change from the sterile, sometimes intimidating atmosphere of the traditional medical office. "We have a great rapport with Dr. Lonzer because of her sense of humor," says Tracy. "When she talks to us, we feel more relaxed and confident. We're completely at ease in her office."

Dr. Lonzer, a pediatrician with the Cleveland Clinic, has gradually incorporated humor into her practice, and she views smiles and giggles as a way to get to know families and develop bonds that lead to improved care.

It wasn't always that way. The use of humor—and bedside manner of any kind—is not a standard part of medical school training. Dr. Lonzer had to discover her comedic skills on her own. "When I first started practicing, I didn't feel comfortable joking with patients," the physician recalls. "But with my personality, little bits of humor kept creeping in and I saw that patients responded favorably."

Institutional medicine may be coming around to Dr. Lonzer's viewpoint. As a practical matter, it works, according to Dr. Edward Dunkelblau, a clinical psychologist and former president of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor. "Using humor enhances the way patients listen and boosts trust in their doctors. Patients are also more likely to follow the doctors'
in addition to improving doctor-patient rapport and trust, humor and laughter have potentially profound, beneficial physiological effects that are just now beginning to be understood. New studies are shifting the concept of giggle medicine from anecdotal remedy to scientific fact.

It was in the 1970s that author Norman Cousins first popularized the notion that laughter is good medicine with his successful self-treatment of a chronic illness by yukking it up while watching Marx Brothers films—an unconventional idea that the Post explored in its June 1977 issue. In the decades that followed, similar anecdotal evidence of the effects trickled out.

Today researchers have a much firmer understanding of the mechanism of laughter’s impact. “Researchers all over the world are looking at how humor benefits health,” says Mary Bennett, Ph.D., director of Western Kentucky University School of Nursing, who’s been studying effects of laughter on health for more than 16 years. She notes that while the story isn’t yet fully understood, the pieces of the puzzle are rapidly falling into place. A new wave of research has found that laughter can:

Reduce stress
When you laugh, the day’s tension instantly subsides. This is an effect everyone has experienced, but it’s also something that is measurable. With a few chuckles, oxygen consumption is increased, and afterward there’s a decrease in blood pressure, heart rate, and respiratory rate. Studies suggest laughter may decrease stress hormones, such as cortisol, epinephrine, and norepinephrine, according to Bennett. In a previous study, college students were told they would receive a shock after a brief waiting period. Some listened to a humorous tape while waiting; others heard a nonfunny recording. The humor group reported less anxiety.

It was precisely this kind of stress-reducing benefit that Bob Adelberg, a commercial insurance agent in Louisville, Kentucky, believes helped him successfully battle prostate cancer while in the hospital and beyond. Adelberg laughed his way through his treatment, even though the early prognosis wasn’t good. His doctor believed Adelberg had been carrying the cancer for 11 years at the time it was discovered. And Adelberg’s prostate-specific antigen (PSA) test—a marker for prostate cancer—showed a level of 33.9, which is off the charts. (Anything over 4 is considered elevated.)

After successful treatment, during which he made a point of watching comedies and making jokes daily, the 73-year-old Adelberg has no detectible level of PSA. “I believe the best cure is between your ears, Adelberg says. “Humor heals and fortifies.”

Keep blood vessels healthy
In a study at the University of Maryland Medical Center, volunteers were shown 15-minute segments of two movies—one funny, the other serious or sad. The researchers then took ultrasound images to measure changes in blood vessel reactivity. As the subjects watched the humorous movies, the inner lining of their blood vessels, called the endothelium, appeared to expand, allowing more blood to flow. “The endothelium is the first line in defense against the development of atherosclerosis or hardening of the arteries,” says principal investigator Michael Miller, M.D., director of preventive cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center. “Laughing may be important to maintain a healthy endothelium, and reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease.”

Laughter Is Contagious!
Laughter is part of what defines us as humans, not animals. Laughter is often a child’s first social sound. It’s ingrained in our being and vital to our survival. How much so? Children born deaf and blind can laugh, even though they’ve never heard it or learned how. And it turns out that laughter is literally contagious, according to Dr. Carl D. Marci, director of Social Neuroscience, Psychotherapy Research Program at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. Dr. Marci has found that the brain’s mirror neurons, which cause us to be empathetic, fire when we see others performing the same actions—like laughing in a comedy show audience or during laughter yoga (see page 29). That’s why television shows add laugh tracks.

In effect, laughter is a form of communication. It helps us engage and connect, and sends a signal directly to the brains of others that we’re relaxed, supportive, and sympathetic.

“When we laugh and share humor, we engage other people. Laughter is a socially engaging experience,” says Dr. Dunkelblau. “When we laugh together, we have a shared, common focus.”
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## Manage diabetes

If you're one of the nearly 26 million Americans with diabetes, simply put, you should laugh more. During a two-day study, researchers in Japan tested the effects of laughter on reducing blood glucose levels in diabetics and found a positive correlation. After eating identical meals, the subjects were required to listen to a long, dull speech one day and a comedy show the next. Blood glucose levels climbed during both events. But in comparison, glucose levels were notably lower after the humorous show. Researchers believe that the muscles used in laughing contribute to this beneficial effect and recommend that diabetic patients laugh frequently during the day.

## Ward off heart attacks

Another University of Maryland study examined 300 people—half of whom had suffered a heart attack or had bypass surgery, and half who didn't have any form of heart disease. The study's questionnaires measured how much or little participants laughed in certain situations and also gauged their hostility and anger. Those with heart disease responded less humorously to everyday challenges. Again, the relative health of the endothelium may be responsible for this difference: "When the endothelium is impaired, it can cause a series of inflammatory reactions that lead to fat and cholesterol buildup in the coronary arteries and ultimately to a heart attack," says Dr. Miller. "The old saying that 'laughter is the best medicine,' definitely appears to be true when it comes to protecting your heart."

## Aid fertility

Israeli researchers found that women using in vitro fertilization experienced significantly increased fertility rates when they laughed. The test subjects were entertained by a clown in a single 15-minute session immediately after embryo transfer. In the study, published in *Fertility and Sterility* this past January, 36.4 percent of women exposed to clowning became pregnant, as compared to only 20.2 percent of those who didn't attend laugh sessions.

The use of humor in healing doesn't have to mean putting on a clown wig, pulling out magic tricks, or finding porcupines in ears. Dr. Dunkelblau says "passive" humor such as playful art on walls, funny magazines, or humorous videos can also create the open, receptive mood that is essential both to good medical care and a faster recovery. Another good thing about laughter: It has no harmful side effects. "Humor has all gain and no loss," Dr. Dunkelblau says. "Having a laugh with patients won't hurt
anybody and potentially has huge gains."

Put simply, when you're laughing, the world around you feels like a better place. And it seems that very sense of well-being may itself be a force for healing.

Now, that's something to smile about.

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**The Laughing Guru**

There's something funny about Dr. Madan Kataria. And he's just fine with that. As the founder of Laughter Yoga, he's been dubbed the Guru of Giggling and Yogi of Yuks.

The bald-headed, bug-eyed doctor is rarely seen without a grin or smile on his face. While practicing medicine in India, Dr. Kataria, inspired by Norman Cousins' research, started an informal laughter yoga club with a group of friends who met in a park to share jokes and laughs.

"We ran out of jokes," Dr. Kataria remembers, with (of course) a laugh. So, to promote giggles without punch lines, he developed laughter exercises and a class-like structure. Dr. Kataria's model quickly spread across the globe, and his Laughter Yoga Clubs are now found in more than 65 countries, with more than 6,000 worldwide and 500 in the United States.

"Anyone can do it, and you can feel the results from the very first session," Dr. Kataria explains. "Your mood is elevated not only right after the session, but throughout the day."

Laughter yoga is sort of like meditation with guffaws. Through Dr. Kataria's program, trained laugh instructors, like Stephen Findley, a chaplain at the MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, act as pied pipers of merriment. Findley's laughter yoga sessions start with a rhythmic clapping where participants repeat "ho, ho, ho, ha, ha, ha."

That's when the magic starts. In minutes or even seconds, the fake laughs transform into real ones. And at the end of the session, Findley asks everyone to put their hands in a circle and share an affirmation—something that's positive in their lives.

The classes aren't touted as a cure for anything but garden-variety stress, but some individuals claim greater benefits. Charles Creech, a stage IV colon cancer patient at MD Anderson, and his wife, Sara, have been going to sessions since September 2010. "It's been priceless, really," Charles says. "Laughing shifts my mind from the details of treatment and gives me a reason to be happy."

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