

Therapeutic Humor: Where's the Beef?



Did you know that humor stimulates us in three healthful ways?

Humor stimulates Laughter—the physical response to humor

Humor stimulates Mirth—the emotional response to humor

Humor stimulates Wit—the cognitive response to humor

Humor stimulates Relational Fusion—the social interactive response to humor



Did you know that research has clearly indicated that negative thinking and chronic distressing emotions are directly related to ill health and disease? Humor, by stimulating mirth and wit, counteracts this process.



Did you know that while everyone has a different "sense of humor," there are universal humorous stimuli? For example, the presentation of incongruity, the experience of sudden surprise, and the experience of absurdity are a few examples of universal humor stimuli. A sense of humor is an interaction between a universal stimulus and the individual's *perception* of that stimulus. Want more? Ask me about my presentations, visit my web site, read my articles or chapter in "Play Therapy With Adults."



Did you know that there is very little published research (only one study, to the best of my knowledge) that *directly* supports the notion that endorphins are secreted during the experience of humor? There are, however, studies that *indirectly* suggest that endorphins are secreted during *laughter*. While not directly measuring endorphin secretion, numerous studies have found that tolerance to pain is increased with deep, heartfelt laughter. We know that endorphins are natural pain killers so we can infer that the pain reduction with laughter is associated with the secretion of endorphins. The authors of the studies on laughter and pain tolerance suggest that the pain tolerance mechanism is through the secretion of endorphins.



Did you know that the research that children laugh 400 times a day while adults laugh only 15 times a day appears to be urban legend? I (along with many of my humor colleagues) have not been able to find the research that supports this conclusion. Certainly, by observation, we can see that children laugh more than adults, but this particular research citation and publication continues to elude us.





Did you know that the true value of therapeutic humor is not in a transient or fleeting moment of laughter, mirth, wit, or relational fusion? The true power of humor is in its integration into the fabric of one's being. A lifestyle of humor and humorous perception and experience are truly healthful. A humorous lifestyle is an antidote to daily stresses and a promoter of joy and happiness. As we examine the extensive research on ill health and disease, we discover that negative thinking and distressing emotional experience are both directly related to ill health (see my article on humor and heart disease). Since chronic humor counteracts both negative thoughts and distressing emotions, we can conclude that it also counteracts their negative effect on health.




For psychotherapists, did you know that in addition to building the relationship and promoting cohesion and therapeutic intimacy, humor can be used as a diagnostic tool and as a treatment tool? Want to learn more, consider one of my live continuing education workshops or my online humor programs. (www.mycematters.com)

The Therapeutic Value of Humor: Exploring Beyond Laughter

 **The experience of humor is not the same as the experience of laughter.** You can experience laughter in the absence of humor, and you can experience humor in the absence of laughter. While laughter in the absence of humor may offer health benefits, clearly the experience of humor in the absence of laughter offers health benefits. As you share the benefits of laughter with others, do not forget to also present the benefits of wit—the cognitive experience of humor, which offers perspective, and mirth—the emotional experience of humor, which offers uplifting feelings.

 **There is some limited research that indicates that the “anticipation” of laughter has physiological benefits similar to those of the actual experience of laughter. What is the anticipation of laughter????** It is a cognitive process. When we think (anticipate) “differently,” like anticipating laughter, we create alternative thinking patterns, alternative emotional patterns, and alternative physiological patterns.

Extensive research on how we think and how we feel has indicated that negative thinking patterns and distressing emotional experience are directly related to ill health and reduced life satisfaction. Positive types of thinking such as gratitude, optimism, and sense of efficacy have positive physical and emotional benefits. Humor, in addition to stimulating laughter, changes thinking patterns by providing perspective and changes emotional distress by replacing distressing emotions with more uplifting emotional experience.

 **Have you ever been in a group where others are laughing and questioning you as to why you are not?** People have different funny bones. What triggers your funny bone may be different from that which stimulates others' funny bones. A stimulated funny bone may result in laughter, but may alternatively result in wit, or mirth. While some people experience the benefits of their laughter, others are benefited by **feeling** the humor, and still others are benefited by gaining perspective by **getting** the humor.

People **laugh** differently and some say, “I am laughing on the inside.” Those who are laughing on the inside are actually experiencing “mirth” the emotional experience of humor or “wit” the cognitive experience of humor. It is the uplifting emotional experience of mirth and the readjusting of perspective through wit that counteract the distressing emotions and negative thinking that lead to ill health.

Future research will likely further identify the positive benefits of laughter, but it appears that the therapeutic benefits of mirth, wit, and relational fusion are equally powerful and perhaps even more powerful. Research on attitude (positive and negative thinking) has consistently found that attitude is directly related to many aspects of health and well-being. Research on emotions (distressing and uplifting) has also found that emotional states are directly related to health and well-being.

While the experiences of wit, mirth, laughter, and relational fusion are distinctly different, they are also interactive. When your funny bone is stimulated you are most likely to experience more than one. All four have health benefits and contribute to one's well-being.

Online Videos and Podcasts Featuring Psychologist Steven Sultanoff, PhD

For more information on humor and humor and wellness access some of my online videos.

Humor and Laughter and Health

WebMD (<https://www.webmd.com/oral-health/video/laugh-therapy>);

Humor and Resilience Keynote Presentation (<https://vimeo.com/285203662>);

Episode of "What's Your Ailment" with comedian Maria Bamford (www.topic.com --requires subscription to streaming service "Topic")

Podcast: Humor in Psychotherapy; October, 2020

<https://www.triadbbehavioralhealth.com/behavioral-health-today-podcast>

Continuing Education Programs:

Humor, Clinical Supervision, and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy:

<http://www.myCEmatters.com>

Funny Stuff and Humor Resources:

www.humormatters.com