

By Glenn Plaskin

## Family Answer Book Psychology



# Why Laughter Is Good for You

**A merry heart doeth good like a medicine  
Proverbs 17:22**

**I** recently observed a nine-year-old boy laughing so hard he doubled over, went limp and collapsed to the floor, giggling all the way. His dad, also caught in the moment, was bent over at the waist chuckling, and he later merrily exclaimed, "I really needed that!" Maybe he really did. While aerobic exercise and weight training have been proven to reduce stress and improve cardiovascular health, a laughter burst, say experts, can also disperse tension and lift the spirit.

"Mirthful laughter is an instant mood changer that can erase fear, anger, anxiety and depression," notes William Fry, M.D., professor emeritus at Stanford University Medical School, who has devoted 50 years to laughter research. "From a physical

*Contributing editor Glenn Plaskin lives in New York City.*

standpoint," he explains, "we know that laughter conditions the heart muscle, exercises the lungs and diaphragm, works all the abdominal and thoracic muscles, boosts the immune system and even increases adrenaline and blood flow to the brain."

Other benefits follow, adds Lee Berk, M.D., assistant professor of Family Medicine at the Susan Samueli Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the College of Medicine at the University of California, Irvine. "Laughter," he says, "can also increase alertness, creativity and memory, increase pain tolerance, lower blood pressure, and improve respiration or ease of breathing."

"If I had come up with a medication that accomplished all that," he jokes, "I'd be on my way to Sweden to get a Nobel Prize!" Yet laughter is often suppressed in our schools and corporate settings as subversive, the unde-

sirable opposite of "working hard" and "paying attention." That's gradually changing thanks to medical research and the appearance of more than 200 U.S. "laughter clubs," now found in hospitals, nursing homes, schools and businesses.

"We train individuals in structured laughter exercises that prevent hardening of the attitudes," says counselor and self-proclaimed "joyologist" Steve Wilson. He cofounded the North American Laughter Clubs and World Laughter Tour Inc., which certifies "laughter leaders." He notes that preschool kids laugh about 400 times daily, while some adults produce a mere 15 laughs. Reclaiming childlike giggles rather than squelching them is Wilson's mission.

"Laughter isn't juvenile," he says. "It's a great stress reducer that changes the chemistry of the brain. So every 90 minutes, you should take a humor break. It will prevent burnout, irritability, back pain and the desire to release tension by drinking, smoking or overeating. My philosophy is 'Don't postpone joy.' A wise old saying sums it up: 'Life is uncertain, so eat your dessert first.'"

To elevate your chuckle meter each day, observe people around you with laughter-prone personalities,

Photos, Getty Images.

“It can increase alertness, creativity and memory.”