

The great comedian Groucho Marx once said-"A clown is like aspirin, only he works twice as fast". We have all heard the phrase Laughter is the best medicine. It has been with us for generations and has been studied for generations. Our parents and other wise people will tell us that it is medicine indeed. The first documented publication related to the laughter-healing connection can be found in the writings of Dr. James Walsh-an American physician. Dr. Walsh wrote the book Laughter and Health back in 1927 and found concluded that laughter has many positive effects on the body including reducing pain, improving circulation and general cardiac health as well as the obvious positive changes for mental health.

But it wasn't until Norman Cousins made the theory popular in 1979 with his book Anatomy of an Illness that humor was studied on a more scientific level. Normal Cousins, who was a newspaper editor had suffered from a debilitating form of spinal disease and was looking for any way possible to alleviate the pain associated with his disease. One night he checked out of his hospital room and stayed at a motel with some friends and watch old comedy shows. He found that as he was laughing away, his pain had subsided to the point that he was able to sleep pain free for almost 2 hours. Something unheard of until he tried comedy.

Since that time, many studies about the effects of humor and pain have ben conducted. One study included having subjects watch a comedy show while keeping their hands on a freezing block of ice. Those who were watching the show were able to keep their hands on the ice for three times the length of time than the subjects who were just engaging in conversation. The subjects who rated the show as being the most funny were able to hold out for the longest period of time.

So how does it work?

There are three basic explanations.

#1. Laughter stimulates the endorphins which are the natural pain killers that our bodies produce.

#2. Laughter serves as a muscle relaxant and

#3. Laughter serves a a great distraction from the pain that you are experiencing.

Others have speculated that the benefits of humor and laughter are great enough to extend our life expectancy. However, there is no scientific evidence to support this claim. But although we don't have evidence that states that humor adds **years** to your **life**, we do have evidence that states that humor can add **life** to your **years**.

Many famous people including Gilda Radner from Saturday Night Live fame and Michael Landon from Bonanza have supported this belief and provided support for organizations that incorporate humor into therapeutic modalities. These individuals used humor to help them deal with their own illnesses. One famous comic, after learning that she had cancer stated that the "bad news is I have cancer, the good news is that I'm now biodegradable".

Continuing on with the medical benefits of humor, we understand that stress can weaken the immune system, and it makes sense to say that humor, which is the antidote for stress, will boost your immune system. This is because laughter has been found to lower the level of stress hormones such as epinephrine, cortisol and growth hormones. Laughter is also known to lower the amount of residual air in the lungs by replacing it with oxygen rich air, which in turn has wonderful respiratory benefits. Breathing easier in turn has benefits for the heart. Others theorize that laughter brings together many areas of the brain unlike no other emotion. In general, there are no negative side effects to laughter. Or said in other words, those who laugh, last.

With regards to mental health, we know that humor can help a person change from having a negative attitude to a positive attitude. This reminds me of a story that someone once emailed me about a guy named Dan. Dan was the type of guy that everybody was envious of because of his positive attitude. Dan was a manager of a grocery store...

The Chinese philosopher Lin Yutang stated that "This I believe to be the chemical function of humor-to change the character of our thought.

Humor has positive benefits in relationships. Ask anyone who has been married for more than 40 years what has sustained them in their relationships besides their pacemaker. Most will say a good sense of humor.

Humor also increases an individual to develop a sense of hope. In fact there is a journal called the International Journal of Humor Research (I did not make that up), that conducts studies to investigate the correlation between humor and hope. Again with the use of comedy shows that gave viewers and no-viewers a rating scale to determine their level of hope. Results indicated that those who watched the comedy show rated themselves as being higher in their overall hope scale than did non-viewers.

This concept is not a secular concept. In Mishlei we find the Proverb that says "Lev Sameach Yayteev Gay-hoh, Viruach Nih-chay-oh Tih-yabesh Gorem. A happy heart does good like medicine. But a broken spirit will dry your bones."