

Habits for a Healthy Life

Healthy Habit #12:

Laugh Every Day

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(Drs. George and Herr-Paul laughed for at least 45 minutes while writing this article together.)

Did you know that all across the United States, and around the world, there are Laughter Clubs?

Such clubs provide a time and place for people of all ages and beliefs to come together to laugh, purely for the sake of laughter, and all its health and wellness benefits. Laughter is one of the finest (and most fun) ways to relieve and prevent stress.

Everyone experiences stress. It appears regularly to remind us of the edges and boundaries of our lives and our abilities. Stress is not the actual events in our lives; it is the body's reaction to those events.

Stress becomes abnormal when it takes over our attention, filling up our minds with obsessions, worries and fears. If we feel our hearts starting to pound, or find ourselves consumed with thoughts about our jobs, families, and careers, we are likely experiencing unhealthy stress.

Stress out-of-control can raise blood pressure, and cause the release of excess stress hormones (adrenaline, cortisol). At one time or another in our lives, most of us have experienced these "fight-or-flight" physical symptoms related to stress.

The great news is that our bodies are hardwired with some surprisingly powerful natural reactions to extended hearty laughter:

Laughter boosts energy. With laughter, blood and all major organs are fully oxygenated, leaving us bursting with energy. Being recharged with laughter enables us to stay focused, and accomplish our tasks.

Laughter relaxes the whole body.

A good, hearty laugh relieves physical tension and stress, leaving your muscles relaxed 45 minutes or more.

Laughter boosts the immune system. Laughter decreases stress hormones and increases immune cells and infection-fighting antibodies. Our lymphatic system is massaged and our immune systems boosted, thus improving our resistance to disease.

Laughter triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals. Endorphins promote an overall sense of wellbeing and can even reduce aches and pains.

Laughter protects the heart. Laughter improves the elasticity of blood vessels and increases blood flow, which can help protect you against a heart attack. Blood pressure drops, circulation improves and pulse rate drops.

Laughter stimulates circulation to the brain by increasing diaphragmatic pressure, thus improving thought processes and cognitive abilities.

Laughter dissolves distressing emotions. You can't feel anxious, angry, or sad when you're laughing. Depression

is lifted; a daily dose of laughter has been shown to help relieve chronic depression. Laughing boosts our self-confidence, inspiring communication and creativity.

Humor shifts perspective, allowing you to see situations in a less threatening light. A humorous perspective creates psychological relief, which can help you avoid feeling overwhelmed.

Companions to laughter for our overall health and wellbeing include breathing exercises and being outdoors, in contact with nature, either in contemplation or with exercise.

Breathing exercises help us de-stress and refocus. By slowing down the exhale phase, we encourage our bodies to relax, and deepen into the moment, instead of being fraught with despair about the past, or worries about the future.

Have you ever suddenly realized that you are holding your breath? Take a few times every day to touch base with yourself, and see if you might have just been holding your breath; if so, take a deep breath in through your nose, counting to four. Hold your breath for the count of 4, then slowly exhale to the count of 8.

First time you do this, you might not feel that you can in any way accomplish this. No Worries! Try it again, and just do it as well as you can, maybe to the count of 2, or 3, and breathing out to the count of 4. For great ideas on breathing exercises, look at Dr. Andrew Weil's website, at www.drweil.com.

For another stress break, try one quick breath in, and slow breath out any time you are feeling anxious, angry, or frustrated. This calms down your sympathetic nervous system, converting stress hormones to relaxing ones.

Spend time outdoors everyday. Being in touch with the natural world opens us up to fresh air, the delight of growing plants, and shy, yet sometimes inquisitive creatures in our back yards and parks. Being outdoors reminds us of the silliness of some of our fears, and puts us in touch with something bigger than ourselves. Daylight is important to our sleep-wake cycle. Sunlight can help alleviate seasonal affective disorder. Vitamin D is in the health news often these days, and sunlight is an important source of Vitamin D production.

Add laughter as you continue with **Healthy habits # 1 through 11** to support your wellbeing and health. You may even notice that laughter counteracts frown lines and other wrinkles by exercising facial muscles. Be aware though, laughter is contagious!



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This series is created by Mercersburg Area Council for Wellness. Contact us at MAC4Wellness@gmail.com with your questions or comments and if you are interested in being involved with council activities.