



Laughter Ebook

About laughter and the effects of laughter



Introduction

Most people like to laugh. Yet we don't often think about what positive effects laughter has on our mind and body.

Laughter has a long range of positive physiological effects on our body. It releases endorphins, lowers stress levels and is an excellent form of exercise.

Besides helping the spirit of the individual, it creates a better atmosphere in a group. When we laugh there is a self-reinforcing effect, which makes us happier. When we laugh together in a group, we send out social signals of acceptance and openness. Which again has a positive effect on cooperation and creativity.

In order to make people laugh more, the Indian doctor Madam Katari developed "laughter yoga". It consists of a series of exercises where you laugh deliberately or on cue. In the beginning this can seem a bit unnatural and forced, yet the body can't feel the difference between real and simulated laughter. Because of the reinforcing effects of laughter, most people will experience that the simulated laughter develops into real laughter.

In this ebook you can read more about laughter and the positive effects. The first section is about the positive effect of laughter.

The second section is about laughter yoga as a method for laughing more.

In the last, you will find a more thorough scientific description of the positive effects of laughter.



How does laughter effect people

Most people know that it is wonderful to laugh. This makes it a bit strange to describe laughter as a good thing. Most people would have experienced situations where they would have been rolling on the floor laughing, and the wonderful feeling that would have followed.

It is rare that people think about how laughter concretely effects us. I think this is a shame, because laughter has many positive aspects and should get a bigger focus. Laughter makes people happier and gives them personal well being. Laughter works for all people, across all ages, ideologies and social classes.





An example of the effect of laughter

In 1964, the editor Norman Cousins became sick. He was diagnosed with a spinal infection and the doctors gave him a 0.2 chance of survival. Yet Norman didn't surrender; he signed himself out of the hospital and moved into a hotel. Here he actively used laughter to get through the disease. He watched humanistic movies with the Marx brothers and had humanistic stories read to him. Because of his infection, he was in a lot of pain, which made it hard to sleep. He learned that watching a movie with the Marx brothers made him laugh a lot. This made the pain disappear enough for him to be able to sleep for a few hours. When the pain would again wake him up, he would turn on the movie and laugh again to minimize the pain.

During his illness, his blood was continually tested. After a long laugh, a lot of the values that were characteristic of the disease would drop. Eventually he recovered, and personally he is convinced that it was the conscious use of laughter that made him well.



Laughter as a social adhesive

A laugh can help bring people together; this is something that most people would agree on. Yet it is rare that we actually think about the many different ways laughter can effect a group and how we can use this actively.

When laughter is mentioned, most people think of it as a physical reaction to something funny. But laughter is not just a physical reaction; it is a very social behavior. Physiologists have found that we are 30 times more likely to laugh when we are in company with others. It does not need to be a reaction to something funny; on the other hand it is a social signal of acceptance and openness.

Imagine a situation where you wanted to signal openness and acceptance. Most likely you would have laughed more than you would under normal circumstances. A good example might be the first encounter with your in-laws.



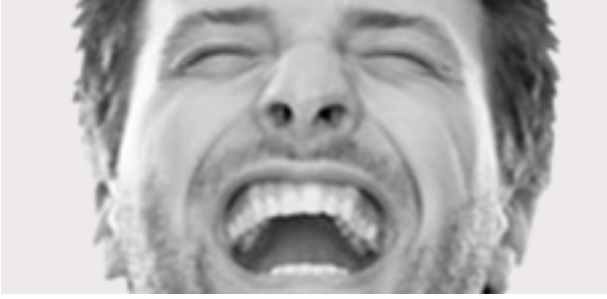
Laughter as a social adhesive

Laughter is highly contagious. Unfortunately this insight has also found its way to the people that set up fake laughter in sitcoms. If there is a background of people laughing, we will simply laugh more.

Once in a while I catch myself laughing at a funny remark, even though I have not heard it, simply because the people around me are laughing. In those situations I laugh almost automatically, because laughter is so contagious, and because I unconsciously want to signal openness and acceptance.

When communicating, 7% of what we communicate is the actual words, 38% is the tone of voice and 55 % is body language. Because laughter is communication via tone of voice and body language, it is an excellent way of communicating good intentions. Laughter is also a universal form of communication that works in all cultures.





We laugh less

An average child laughs about 300 times a day, whereas an adult laughs just 15 times a day. In the 1950's an average adult laughed almost 20 minutes on an average. Today the average is down to about 6 minutes.

As we saw in the first section, there are a lot of positive effects of laughter, so the decrease in laughs is definitely a negative development. A course in laughter yoga can help turn this development and increase the amount of laughter in our lives.



Laughter yoga

How do we then open up for resources that are available in laughter ?

One way of doing this is through laughter without course, or “laughter yoga”.

In 1995 the Indian doctor Madam Katari was writing an article about the beneficial effects of laughter. He thought it was striking that although there were many documented positive things associated with laughter, no one seemed to do something in order to use it actively.

Building on these thoughts, he made some attempts to have more laughter in his own life. The story started in the local park with 5 friends. They told jokes and funny stories in order to get the laughter rolling. After a while they ran out of jokes and needed something to laugh about. This was the basis of laughter yoga. This has now developed into a global movement with over 6000 laughter clubs in over 60 countries.

The word “yoga” comes from the old Indian and can loosely be translated into “joining” – what you are trying to join in yoga is mind and body typically through breathing and physical exercises. The goal of yoga exercises is thus to unite the mind and body.

Laughter yoga is very much inspired by this perspective. In laughter, as in breathing exercises, the mind and the body touch each other. While you are laughing it is hard to be elsewhere in your mind – you can’t easily think of shopping, picking up kids or similar things. When you are consumed with laughter, it is very hard to think of other things.



Laughter yoga

Laughter brings you into the present, which is very sought after, but hard to obtain, for the modern human being. Laughter yoga can be seen as a method to stimulate the physical laughter and thereby help the connection between the mind and body.

Laughter yoga can best be described as a series of exercises, where you instigate laughter. In a way it is a game to stimulate laughter in adults who have forgotten how to laugh naturally. The thought behind it is “fake it till you make it”. The purpose is therefore to create situations where you laugh. Over the years there has been a wide range of exercises developed. It could be presenting yourself using your laughter instead of your name, where you take turns shaking hands and or to laugh as a lawnmower.

The laughter exercises now include over 100 different exercises; all constructed to a situation where the objective is to instigate laughter, that then can turn into real laughter.

A couple of years ago I encountered laughter yoga. In the beginning it seemed a bit strange to me. Yet I was too curious not to try it.

My experience is that the forced laughter quickly gets exchanged for real sincere laughter. As it turned out I was hooked by the idea of using laughter yoga to tap into the positive effects of laughter.





Fake it til you make it

You have to initiate laughter until you laugh naturally. The body can not tell the difference between real and stimulated laughter. In both situations it releases endorphins and self reinforcing social signals. You can say that the communication between the mind and the body goes both ways. If you experience great positive feelings, like falling in love, your facial muscles will translate this into a smile. Yet it can also work the other way around. If you take a pen and place it between your lips such that it forces the edges of your mouth up, it effects your mood positively. However small the effect of this specific action might be, there are studies that show how movement of facial muscles has physiological effects. The results showed that there are similar physiological effects to actually experiencing an emotion and just moving your facial muscles as if you experienced it.

It is these same dynamics that are behind the effects of laughter yoga, yet with results of a different magnitude. Laughter releases a chain reaction of positive effects on your mind and body. There have been interviews organized with people after a session with laughter yoga. Most of the people interviewed say that the session has helped their mood. The effects within each person are only enforced by the positive social feedback achieved by laughing in a group.



The social aspect of laughter

As previously mentioned, laughter is a highly social behavior. When we laugh it is lent to other people and to a group as a whole. When laughter yoga is practiced in a group, people send out the positive signals associated with laughter.

The immediate effect is that it creates a room where social barriers are broken down. This again results in a group where the members will be more open towards each other, which results in better collaboration and enhanced creativity.

One of the things that inhibit creativity the most is a tendency not to share new ideas for fear of judgement. When a group signals openness and acceptance, this fear is diminished and creativity increased.





What can a laughter session do ?

Laughter has many positive effects and yet we don't laugh enough. What can we do about it?

A course in laughter yoga is led by a laughter instructor. It consists of a range of laughter exercises that stimulate laughter in the participants. In the beginning the laughter will be forced, but eventually it will become more and more sincere. In between these exercises, there are a series of yoga inspired, breathing and stretching exercises. The reason for the breathing and stretching is that it can actually be hard work to laugh. After a series of laughter exercises you typically finish the session with a period of free laughter, where you simply laugh and keep laughing.

Many companies and organizations have benefited from being introduced to laughter by a laughter instructor. Often the laughter sessions include a talk about laughter and how it can be used in daily life.

“He who laughs, lasts”

Mark Twain



Studies of laughter

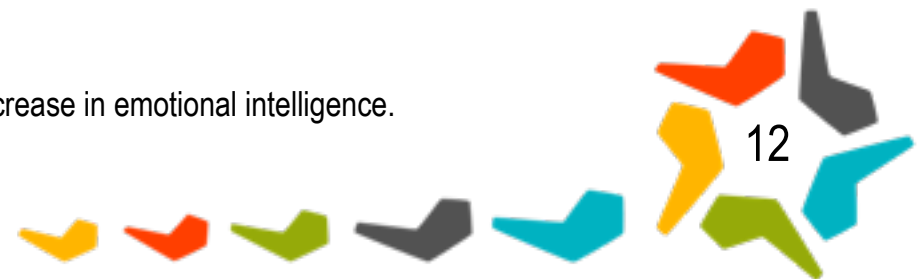
There have been a series of tests and studies about the effects of laughter.

In 2004 laughter consultant Thomas Flindt had sessions of laughter with an IT company. Everyday for a month 14 of this company's employees laughed for 15 to 20 minutes. These employees experienced a lot of positive effects. Their mood got better and the work flowed more easily. The test was also the subject of scientific scrutiny. Stress expert Anders Lonedahl from Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm kept a check on four of these employees by measuring the blood pressure, pulse and other indicators of stress throughout the test. Before the test, all four displayed characteristic stress behavior. After laughing 15 minutes a day for one month, only one of these four tested positive for characteristic stress symptoms.

In 2006 there was a scientific study conducted with 200 Indian IT workers. Over a period of 18 days, half the group had a daily session of laughter yoga. The 100 workers that attended the laughter sessions experienced a lot of positive effects. Among these where:

- Significant decrease in blood pressure and pulse
- Significant drop in the level of Cortisol
- The perception of stress decreased
- Positive emotions increased by 17%
- Negative emotions dropped by 27%
- The level of Alexithymia dropped by 9%, indicating an increase in emotional intelligence.

Another study in the United States also recently showed an increase in personal efficiency as a result of daily laughter sessions.





The physiological effects of laughter

These are a few of the documented results of laughter. If you are like me, this leaves you with one question: What happens within our body to cause this great effect? As previously mentioned, the body can't tell the difference between real and stimulated laughter. This means that similar reactions happen both with spontaneous laughter and stimulated laughter. The following are some of the ways the body is effected by laughter:

- **Endorphins**

Endorphins are the hormones of happiness and pain relief. We produce endorphins when we do strenuous physical workouts, experience success or are in love. Some might know the concept “runners high” – where active athletes experience a big feeling of happiness that is described as a “high”. The reason for this phenomenon is that during a hard physical workout, a certain amount of endorphins are released into the blood. Through laughter we experience a similar sensation.

- **Cortisol**

Cortisol is a hormone that causes an increase in blood pressure and blood sugar. It is often called the stress hormone, because it is a part of the physical relaxation to stress. During laughter the level of cortisol drops.

- **Exercise**

Most people are aware of the importance of exercise. Yet many are not getting enough. Laughter is an excellent form of exercise, and more fun than jogging.

One study shows that 1 minute of laughter has the same effect as 10 minutes on a rowing machine.



The physiological effects of laughter

- **White blood cells**

White blood cells are a part of the body's immune system. In the blood it is the job of the white blood cells to fight infections, parasites and bacteria. Studies have shown that the production of white blood cells increases during and after laughter.

- **Blood pressure**

Increased blood pressure is counted as a common lifestyle disease in the western world. At the same time it increases the risk of cardio-vascular diseases. Study has shown that laughter decreases blood pressure.

- **Alexithymia**

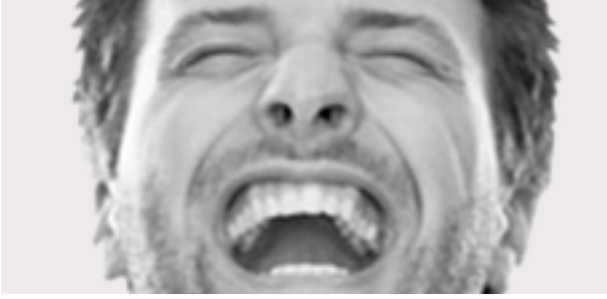
Alexithymia is a word used to describe a condition with lack of emotional understanding as well as reduced ability to describe and process feelings. Studies have shown that laughter yoga causes alexithymia to drop, which indicates an increase in the level of emotional intelligence.

These are just a few of the proven ways laughter effects a range of conditions in the human body.

The following are a few of the conditions that laughter brings about a positive effect upon.

Digestion, depression, pain, anxiety, bronchitis, arthritis,
creativity, confidence, personal well being





Thank you

I hope that you have been able to use some of the information in this ebook.

Sincerely
www.latterbooking.dk

