Laughter for Pain Relief: Does It Really Work?

by ANGELA FINLAY

A Look at Laughter for Pain Relief

Doctors have been using humor to distract from pain for centuries, but more recently there has been serious investigation into laughter for pain relief, as it could have therapeutic benefits.

It all began in the 1960s with Norman Cousins, a renowned journalist who was diagnosed with a painful spine condition known as ankylosing spondylitis. He nursed himself back to health and mobility with hours of comedy programs, insisting laughter allowed him to relax enough to sleep well, which in turn helped his body heal and energize.

Since then, there has been a good deal of research in the field of gelotology, the science of the physiological and psychological effects of laughter. Today, researchers confirm the process of laughing can bring a range of biological benefits, from boosting immunity, to fighting heart disease, to reducing pain immediately and significantly.

How Laughter Fights Pain

When you think about it, there really is no other movement or feeling quite like laughter. Your mouth twists into a smile, you let go of your thoughts, and you breathe rhythmically, all the while bonding with the people who are sharing that laugh. If you need scientific reasons to cultivate laughter for better health, here are a few happy facts to keep in mind:

Surge of Endorphins

A good bout of laughter encourages a release of endorphins — natural brain chemicals that act like opiate drugs (but without any of the nasty side effects).

These endorphins feel good throughout your body, but they also raise your ability to ignore and tolerate pain. One study found that watching about 15 minutes of a comedy show increases pain tolerance by about 10%. That can be a monumental relief when your pain is severe.

There is a physical explanation for this endorphin activity. Laughter changes your breathing pattern — you begin to draw out your exhalations — and this will exhaust the abdominal muscles, triggering the release of endorphins in the same way physical exercise would.

Stress and Tension Relief

Laughter works on the hormones, too. When you laugh, your levels of cortisol and adrenaline will drop almost immediately, and along with them, your sensitivity to pain.

In fact, one study found even the anticipation of laughing can reduce the level of stress hormones. This means that what you think could have a strong impact on how you experience and control stress (and pain).

While your stress response dulls, so will your muscular tension. A strong bout of body-shaking laughter will contract dozens of muscles in several different muscle groups, and after that tensing action comes a pronounced release.

In fact, stress management techniques like yoga and progressive muscle relaxation depend on this dynamic contraction and release for their therapeutic effects to take hold.

Psychological Diversion

Happy distraction can play a major role in pain management, and laughter is one of the easiest and most pleasant ways to distract yourself. The act of laughing is mentally consuming; it is difficult to think, feel or react in any other way until you stop laughing altogether.

However, some researchers have found that only real laughter will do you any good. Simply wearing a smile and forcing a giggle will not activate the biological response that brings all the benefits. Therefore, you will need to find a way to tap into your genuine humor response.

How to Find the Bright Side in a Dark Situation

Chronic pain is more than just pain; it is a debilitating, paralyzing change to mind and body that chips away at your personality. When you have struggled with pain for years, you lose your motivation and buoyancy, and the future can begin to look grim and grey.

Laughing can seem strange and misplaced when you are feeling crummy, but an attitude adjustment is a powerful antidote to pain. If you are having trouble finding things to laugh about, tap into some of the resources around you.

Join a Humor Group

Some hospitals, clinics and community centers host support groups centered on laughter as therapy, so check out what is offered in your local facilities. Joining in on a therapist-led “laughter club” session can be the best addition to your weekly routine.

Not only will a change in atmosphere help you shift your mindset, but studies have shown that laughing with a group of people brings more health benefits than laughing on your own. Make the effort to meet up for a laugh.

Find a Laughter Yoga Studio

If you are after a more casual, less clinical experience, look for a laughter yoga class where you can connect with all sorts of different people over a good chuckle.

Laughter yoga gurus insist deep yogic laughing massages the organs of the body, and promotes circulation in the lymphatic system. In turn, participants can enjoy relaxing and pain-relieving effects for two hours or more after the class ends.

Expose Your Mind to Funny Things

You probably do not feel like laughing all the time. Even people without pain do not giggle their way through their days. However, you might find that a little push in the right direction is all you need to get into a happier mindset.

Watching a humorous movie, some stand-up comedy or a slapstick show can elicit a laugh, and one laugh can quickly lead to another. If you really cannot summon a giddy response, you can always follow the “fake it ‘til you

make it” approach. Try wearing a smile for a minute, then pretend to laugh for a bit. You might start laughing for real in no time at all!

Laughter as a Complement, Not a Supplement

Laughter, though helpful, is not a cure-all. Like any therapy, it has its limits and will likely work best when paired up with other pain management techniques.

Regular exercise is a good partner for laughter, since it also brings immediate physical release and has been proven to lift your spirits. Work in some social time, too; emotional support can play a big role in your treatment plan, and laughter is the perfect gateway to closer, more comforting relationships.