

# LAUGHTER - THE BEST MEDICINE – Dr Susan Kloot

A recent article in the daily papers announced with breathless journalistic certainty that it has now been proven that laughter is good for you. We have all heard this before. Patients have heard it before. But is it true?

We live in an age when all the old truisms are scrutinised, tested and assessed according to best evidence. We now demand PROOF.

And funny as it may seem, there is indeed proof.

A study by Dr Michael Miller of the University of Maryland reported earlier this year at the American College of Cardiology revealed that –

- Laughter helps your blood vessels function better. It acts on the endothelium, causing vessels to relax and expand, increasing blood flow.
- Thirty minutes of exercise three times each week and 15 minutes of laughter on a daily basis is probably good for the vascular system.

Earlier studies by various researchers had already shown that -

- A daily laughter workout of 15 minutes can burn 40 calories and melt away 4 pounds in the course of a year.
- Laughter can lower blood pressure, trigger a flood of endorphins – the brain chemicals that can bring on euphoria and decrease pain, and enhances our immune systems. Gamma- interferon, a disease-fighting protein, rises with laughter. So do B-cells which produce disease destroying antibodies, and T-cells which orchestrate our body's immune system. Laughter lowers the flow of stress hormones, which suppress the immune system, raise blood pressure, and increase the number of platelets which cause clots and potentially fatal coronary artery blockages.
- Laughing 100-200 times per day is the cardiovascular equivalent of rowing for 10 minutes.
- Laughter reduces blood sugar levels, increasing glucose tolerance in diabetics and non-diabetics alike.

So there are good medical reasons for introducing or enhancing humour in our lives and the lives of our patients. In fact, doctors are taking humour so seriously they are even prescribing comedy for patients. In a study at Utah University patients suffering from depression were told to watch 30 minutes of comedians' tapes each day. The researchers found a 42% reduction in the severity of their symptoms. Humour workshops are being marketed in the US for self-healing and reducing stress. In the UK a cruise company announced the first ever holiday devoted to laughter therapy – the Laugh Alive cruise.

Locally, nationally and internationally there is a network of 'laughter clubs' based on the work of Dr Matan Kataria and the published book *Laugh for No Reason*. Laughter yoga is the practice of combining yogic breathing techniques and simulated laughter exercises. Sessions include light stretching, deep breathing and laughing exercises. Participants join in and interact with each other. The group dynamic ensures that in no time at all the laughter becomes real. To find out more about laughter clubs in Victoria visit [www.laughterclubsvic.org](http://www.laughterclubsvic.org)

For some practical work, the following may be useful.

Sometimes we can laugh at the absurd -

*Dr Jones goes to the retirement home for his monthly rounds. He sees Joe and asks him "Joe, how much is three times three?" Joe responds "59". He goes over to Tom and asks "Tom, how much is three times three?" Tom responds "Wednesday". He finally goes over to John and asks "John, how much is three times three?" "NINE" replies John. "That's right... now how did you come to that answer? "It was easy.... I just subtracted 59 from Wednesday!"*

Sometimes we can laugh at others (particularly specialists!)

*What do you call two orthopaedic surgeons reading an ECG?*

*A double blind study!*

And it is always good to be able to laugh at ourselves -

*As the doctor completed an examination of the patient, he said, "I can't find a cause for your complaint. Frankly I think it's due to drinking."*

*"In that case," said the patient, "I'll come back when you're sober!"*