



# e-quilibrium

- *"electronic briefs on behavior and health"*

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## Humor

Did you hear about the restaurant on the moon? Great food but no atmosphere!

What does a dyslexic, agnostic, insomniac do? Stay up all night and wonder if there is a DOG!

If you laughed at either of these silly jokes, is it good for your health?

In 1979, Norman Cousins published his book, "Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient," in which he advanced his belief that humor enhances the body's ability to heal itself. The book was based upon Cousins' personal success in dealing with his own disease. While this certainly wasn't the first time that humor and laughter were proposed to be physically healthy, it certainly popularized the belief.

Although we might expect that such a popular notion would have been widely studied, research on the topic has neither been extensive nor thorough. Reviews of the existing research typically reach the conclusions that studies are generally of poor quality, the results are inconsistent, and that more research is needed.

More specifically, the studies do not yet answer the questions of whether or not humor and laughter enhance immune function and affect health outcomes. For example, there is no clear and reliable evidence that laughter decreases stress hormones, although there is some indication that there is greater muscle relaxation after a period of laughter. Likewise,

studies of changes in immune system functioning (e.g., natural killer cell activity) as a result of laughter have yielded inconsistent results.

There are lots of reasons to hypothesize that humor and laughter should benefit physical health. It certainly seems like research would support this notion if enough high-quality research were done. However, studying humor and laughter isn't so simple. Humor is a very subjective phenomenon. What one person finds funny may be offensive to another. People vary in their thresholds for laughter, and in how heartily they laugh, and this may not reflect how funny they perceive something to be. (My favorite scene in "Marley and Me" is when John Grogan, played by Owen Wilson, is sitting in his newspaper editor's office while the editor is reading Grogan's first column, which Grogan intends to be a humorous description of the antics of his Labrador retriever. The gruff and stoic editor, played by Alan Arkin, makes no comment and shows no expression while reading the column. Nervously and apologetically, Grogan begins to say that he can write a new column or make changes, but the stone-faced editor stops him saying, "What do you mean? This is great! I'm laughing my ass off!")

What we do know is that humor and laughter can help us manage stress, and improve mood. One function of positive emotions is to undo negative emotions. For example, humor can sometimes be a very effective way to take the edge off of anger (although this can also backfire). Subjectively, it typically feels good to find something to be funny and to laugh. Having a sense of humor is an asset and can enhance quality of life.

So, did you hear the one about...

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