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Characteristics of People Who Live Long & Love It!

Win Arn

For centuries, laughter and positive emotions have been known to contribute to people's health, healing, and happiness. Scripture records that "a cheerful heart is good medicine." So senior adults — or anyone else who desires to live long and love it — will want to keep a twinkle in their eye and a merry heart.

To be able to laugh at oneself, at the foolishness of the world, at problems — to laugh when things aren't funny — that is a secret of those who enjoy a long and happy life. There is healing in humor.

While I was in physical therapy recovering from a stroke, I made an attempt to build relationships through humor. Since doctors, nurses, and therapists hear so many complaints and problems, I set out to begin each therapy session by sharing a joke or humorous story. It turned out that even some of my dumbest little quips made their way around the hospital.

My joke one day was the one about the young snake who came to its mother and asked, "Mother, are we poisonous?"

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“Yes,” replied his mother, “very, very poisonous. Why do you ask?”

The little snake answered, “Because I just bit my tongue.

When a different therapist a few days later asked me if I had heard about the young snake, I realized many people had enjoyed my humor therapy.

Humor as Therapy

When Norman Cousins, author of over 20 books, was confronted with the diagnosis of a terminal illness, he began fighting back by using both medicine and humor. He looked at all the old Three Stooges movies, reruns of “Candid Camera,” and other humorous videos he could find. He found joke books and combed them for the funniest stories. After a time, his prognosis changed and he recovered and lived for many more years. He credited his healing, in large part, to the power of the mind over the body. Following his recovery, Cousins spent many years as a counselor to physicians on the value of positive mental attitudes in the healing process.

How does laughter help people get well? Certainly, humor is not a cure-all. But when used with appropriate medication prescribed by a physician, humor brings a positive and healing dimension. Remember, the words of Solomon in Proverbs: “A cheerful heart is good medicine.” (Prov. 17:22)

It has been shown conclusively that our emotions actually produce measurable physical changes — some positive, some negative. *Anger* increases the heart rate. Add *fear* to anger and heart rate increases even more. *Worry* triggers gastrointestinal juices that contribute to ulcers.

In contrast, *happiness* and other positive emotions produce positive effects in the body. Scientists believe that hearty laughter helps the human brain produce endorphins. These morphine-like molecules serve as painkillers and help to release the full range of positive emotions. I read recently in Reader’s Digest, that one good belly-laugh increases one’s life expectancy by 7 minutes.

What Does an Endorphin Look Like?

As a layman thinking about medical science, I try to visualize what endorphins look like. Since I have never seen a picture of them, my imagination gives them fanciful forms. At one time, I see them as something like a tadpole. When I give a hearty laugh, their tails massage my organs.

At other times, I envision them with long whiskers protruding like those of a Cheshire cat. As they go through my System,

their whiskers tickle my insides. What they look like isn't that important, I suppose, except as our imaginations give us the full benefit of a good laugh.

Try this. Take a moment and draw a picture on your napkins or place mat of what you think an endorphin looks like. [pause] Then show the picture to some friends and see if they can guess what it is. If they don't immediately shout, "Why, that's an endorphin!" then you might need to enlighten them.

While many studies have been done on the benefits of laughter in recovering from illness. A report by Dr. James Walsh, medical director at Fordham University in New York, summarizes the key insight: "Healthy laughter stimulates internal organs, making them work better through the increase of circulation that follows the vibrating massage that accompanies it and heightens resistive vitality against disease."

Dr. Walsh goes on to detail the benefits of laughter on the lungs, liver, heart, pancreas, spleen, stomach, intestines, and brain, and writes that: "laughter has the effect of brushing aside many of the worries and fears that set the stage for sickness."

Learning to Laugh

If humor is so physically, mentally, and emotionally therapeutic, can we focus this healing power on ourselves? Or is the tonic of laughter randomly bestowed on a select few who always seem to delight in seeing the lighter side of life?

First, it is important to realize that becoming a humorist is not the same as developing a sense of humor. Carolyn Wells, author of *The World's Best Humor*, observes: "Many great humorists have little or no sense of humor. Such was the case with Dickens, Carlyle, Twain, and many other renowned wits. The humorist without a sense of humor is a bore. The person with a sense of humor is a joy to know and to be with."

While you or I may never become a great humorist, we can all develop and cultivate our sense of humor. I used to believe that a sense of humor, and the ability to see the funny side of life, was something people are born with. I have come to realize, however, that such is not the case.

Cultivating a sense of humor is actually much like developing a taste for music or the fine arts. While a particular taste or sense may be more natural in some people than others, we can all broaden our enjoyment of good humor.

Aristotle thought a great deal about humor and sought after it. He defined humor as: "that which is incongruous — out of its proper place and time, yet without danger or pain."

The great Roman orator Cicero suggested that: "The most

enjoyable kind of humor is when we expect to hear one thing and hear another." Cicero and Aristotle might well have enjoyed this true story of an early American preacher:

The minister, on Temperance Sunday, wanted to offer indisputable proof of the evil effects of liquor. He created an elaborate demonstration with a live worm from the pulpit. First, he first dropped the worm into a glass of crystal clear water, where it wiggled about with apparent delight. Then he removed it and dropped it into a glass of whiskey, where it promptly died. "Now," the preacher asked, beaming with satisfaction, "what can we learn from this vivid example?" Whereupon, a red-eyed brother in the back row rose and answered: "If you drink plenty of whiskey, pastor, you'll never have worms!"

Here are four suggestions on how to begin cultivating your sense of humor:

Step 1: Expose yourself to good humor.

There are plenty of good humorous books that make for enjoyable reading in your evening hours. Authors like Erma Bombeck, Bill Cosby, Art Buchwald, and Andy Rooney have created masterpieces of good humor. You don't even need to buy the books. Just go to your local library and check them out for a few weeks. If you hear of a famous comedian coming to your area, buy some tickets and go enjoy a good laugh.

Step 2: Do something silly.

We tend to lose one of the wonderful joys of childhood as we move into the self-conscious years of adolescence, and many people don't ever get it back. It's the fun of being silly.

A few months ago my daughter and her family came from Arizona to visit for a few days. It so happened that on one night of their stay there was to be a full lunar eclipse. I don't recall now how the idea first came up, but someone suggested we should have "moon party."

Now, no one in either of our families had any experience at moon parties, so we all began offering our suggestions, and creating what was probably one of the first such events of its kind . . .

As the party began, each of us received a special "moon hat" that, unless you knew better, looked curiously like those newspaper pirate hats we used to make when we were kids. We then played a round of "moon charades," where each person had to

act out the name of a planet. Following that, we adjourned to the kitchen for some “moon juice” (not moonshine, mind you).

After a few more moon-games, we all went out onto the front driveway to watch the eclipse. Then, as we had practiced earlier, just at the moment the earth’s shadow moved completely in front of the moon, we all crossed our arms in front of us, waved them up and down, and let out the most unearthly “moon howl” you have ever heard. One of our neighbors came outside to see who was hurt! But we all had a wonderful time. (Maybe it is true what they say about the effect of the full moon on people’s behavior!)

Your assignment for this step is to go do something silly within the next week. It’s more fun when you do it with other people, rather than hidden behind a locked door. But if it helps, you can try a few silly things there first. Don’t worry about your reputation. If anything, it will improve!

Step 3: Laugh out loud, whether you feel like it or not.

Hearing yourself laugh actually causes you to laugh even more. In just a moment we’ll try it together. Just start laughing out loud. Then listen to yourself, and those in the room. Pretty soon you will be laughing at your own laughing. Or, at your neighbor’s.

I remember a game we used to play when our kids were growing up. Everyone in the family would lie on the floor, each with his or her head on someone else’s stomach. Then one person would begin laughing. The chain reaction of heads bouncing on laughing stomachs would spread, and soon our entire family would be howling hysterically. As we thought about how silly we must all look, we found ourselves laughing even harder.

The next time you hear or see something funny, laugh out loud. Don’t just smile or chuckle. Laugh! You’ll find that it is both therapeutic and contagious. And the time after that, you’ll find you won’t have to work as hard to get the laugh out.

Step 4: Tell one funny story each day for the next two weeks.

You may have to go down to the library if you run out of ammunition. That’s okay. But, see if you can get one person to laugh aloud each day at something humorous you share. If you’re telling a joke, practice it beforehand to get the greatest impact. And be sure, when you finish the punch line, to enjoy it and laugh at the joke yourself. Pretend it is the first time you’ve heard it

Speaking of good stories, I heard one the other day that was placed in the early days of this world’s history. God had just cre-

ated Adam and Eve. Adam began to question his Maker: "God, when you made Eve, why did you give her such nice hair and smooth skin?"

"So you would like her," God responded.

"But God, you made her body different from mine. she has bumps and bulges in places that are quite different from mine. Why did you make her like that, God?"

Again God replied, "So you would like her, Adam."

A third time Adam spoke to God: "But God, there is one thing. She is quite dumb. In fact, she is downright stupid. Why did you make her like that?"

Patently God responded, "So she would like you, Adam."

I heard the other day of a ninety-eight-year-old husband and his ninety-four year-old wife who visited their attorney to seek a divorce. "Why, after all these years, would you now decide to get a divorce?" the lawyer asked.

"Oh, that's easy," replied the husband. "We wanted to wait until the children died."

So, as we all face the prospect of our years catching up to our bodies, we are faced with the option of laughing or crying. If you choose laughter, there will be far few tears, and far more joy in the life and years God has given us.

By the way, did you know there are three ways you can tell if you're getting old? The first is, you start forgetting things.

Let's see . . . what were the other two?