The Benefits of Laughter for Anxiety

by BRANDY OSTLER

Could Laughter Really Be the Best Medicine for Anxiety?

I'm sure you have heard the phrase, "Laughter is the best medicine," but have you ever wondered about the wisdom behind the words? Is there any evidential truth based in the popular saying?

Many experts would answer that question with a resounding, "YES!" So, what is it about laughter that mimics the results of medication?

Virtually everyone experiences feelings of anxiousness from time to time, but for those who suffer from an anxiety disorder, those feelings can be severe and disabling. One might be plagued by fear, worry, apprehension, unease, tension, agitation or nervousness that has no apparent cause.

Often, this state of excessive angst can lead to isolation, fatigue, sleep problems, digestion problems, a "worst case scenario" mindset, and the inability to function in daily life. It is normal to feel anxious when anticipating an event or experiencing a situation with an unknown outcome; however, when your anxiety becomes persistent and interferes with your life, chances are, there is more going on.

Although the medical community cannot pinpoint an exact cause, more evidence is showing that environmental stress and changes in the brain (such as a dysfunction in the transmission of information between circuits) may be primary sources.

When anxiety becomes crippling, medications are often prescribed and psychotherapy is often recommended. While the medications can certainly reduce the symptoms of anxiety, they carry a number of risks when used long term.

Benzodiazepines (classified as anti-anxiety medications), such as Valium, Ativan, and Xanax can become habit forming. Additionally, some antidepressants, anticonvulsants, and antipsychotic drugs have been used "off label" to treat a number of anxiety disorders and carry their own risks.

So, is there more we can do? Are there other ways to relieve the symptoms of anxiety without medication? Certainly, there are a number of dietary and lifestyle changes that can help, and any kind of relaxation therapy will prove beneficial; however, you may be surprised to learn that laughter can significantly reduce the feelings of anxiety in much the same way as medication.

When we take an anti-anxiety medication, it works by slowing down or attacking the chemicals in the brain that have become unbalanced. Laughter, on the other hand, triggers the release of endorphins, which are the body's natural "feel good" chemicals. By doing so, the scale is tipped in the other direction and an overall sense of well-being is promoted. This can greatly reduce symptoms of anxiety.

Furthermore, we know that stress heavily contributes to feelings of anxiety. Laughter is a natural stress reliever. It works by decreasing stress hormones and relieving physical tension. Additional health benefits of laughter include

an increase in immune cells, infection-fighting antibodies and blood flow, which improves blood vessel function, protects the heart and boosts the immune system.

It is difficult to feel anxious when you are laughing and research shows that the effects of laughter last even after it subsides. This provides an opportunity to see life from a different perspective, one that is perhaps less threatening and more realistic.

Anxiety can be draining on daily life but through laughter you gain energy, which promotes focus and allows you to accomplish more. You may also find newfound courage and strength when you allow humor into your life. A positive, optimistic attitude — even when faced with a negative situation — can help you avoid feeling overwhelmed.

Some of those who suffer from anxiety have problems with relationships. In fact, disagreements, disappointments, resentments and unfulfilled expectations in connection with others may greatly contribute to anxiety disorders. However, laughter and humor can actually strengthen relationships by triggering positive feelings and fostering emotional connections.

You have probably heard people say that “laughter is contagious,” and if you have ever seen it or experienced it, you know how true it is. Laughter is more fun when shared with others. It adds joy to your life and can unite souls during hard times. Humor can effectively create vitality and resilience, which improves quality of life.

In all the ways that anxiety can cripple you, laughter can renew you. Through humor you are better able to express your feelings, release inhibitions, let go of defensiveness and become more spontaneous, which will, in turn, make life far more enjoyable.

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Seeking Out Laughter

Do not simply wait for opportunities to laugh to come find you; instead, seek them out and find ways to incorporate humor into your daily life.

- When you hear laughter, move towards it. Don’t be afraid to ask, “What’s so funny?” Most people are perfectly happy to share a funny story. Remember, laughing makes them feel good too, and by giving it to you, they are able to laugh again by enjoying the humor you experience.
- Spend time with “playful” people. There are people that are naturally upbeat and happy. They laugh often and easily. They find humor in everyday events and bring up the absurdities of life. Seek them out.
- Children are experts when it comes to playing. They are lighthearted and laugh often. Pay attention to them, spend time with them and emulate them.
- Although not people, you may find that spending time with pets will result in an abundance of laughter. Play with a Frisbee, a tennis ball, or just wrestle around on the floor.
- Try not to take yourself so seriously! Laugh at yourself when you can. Share embarrassing moments, tell a funny joke or story, keep a framed photo of yourself doing something silly where you can see it, keep a toy in the car that makes you smile, pick a funny screensaver, or try to find the humor in a bad situation.
- Participate in “fun” activities. This might include watching a funny movie or TV show, going to a comedy club, reading the comics, perusing the humor section of a bookstore, playing miniature golf, bowling, participating in karaoke, or having a game night with family and friends.

There is no question that anxiety can be debilitating. However, it doesn’t have to completely ruin your life. When you feel those anxious feelings creeping up, remember to ask yourself a few questions to keep it contained and put the situation into perspective: Is it really that bad? Is it my problem? Is it worth getting upset over? Is it worth upsetting someone else? Is it important? Is it irreparable? Obviously, if the answer is yes, you need to proceed accordingly. However, if you find that you respond with several, “no’s” – see if a healthy dose of laughter will help alleviate the impending feelings.

Granted, we don’t always know what causes our anxious feelings, and that can be frustrating and aggravate the problem even more, so seek help when necessary.

You should always follow your doctor’s advice, take medication as prescribed and do whatever you can to reduce the stress in your life, but by incorporating humor and laughter as often as you can, you may actually discover that it is, indeed, the best medicine.