

# OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Robert Grace, DC & Jared Wiskind, DC

## Humor and Healing

*What would you do if your doctor at Duluth MultiCare told you to rent a silly movie and read the “funny page” of your local newspaper? Laugh out loud? Great!*

*Your doctor at Duluth MultiCare is one of a growing number of chiropractors teaching patients that humor isn't all giggles: It's powerful medicine — minus the potentially dangerous side effects. And, study after study supports this. Read on to learn about groundbreaking research regarding the healing power of laughter.*

### Why Doctors of Chiropractic Suggest Patients “Lighten Up!”

Doctors of chiropractic, like your doctor at Duluth MultiCare, prefer all-natural methods of healing rather than reliance on medication. Laughter may tickle your funny bone but it won't cause injury. Despite the popularity of the common phrase “they died laughing,” few people do.

Chiropractors are committed to helping patients adopt the *chiropractic lifestyle*, a way of life that focuses on preventing health problems rather than masking symptoms with medication. This lifestyle centers on the correction of dysfunctional areas in the spine called *vertebral subluxations*. This common condition occurs when spinal movement is restricted or spinal bones (vertebrae) become misaligned.

Vertebral subluxations are linked with a myriad of health concerns, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, headaches, backaches, infantile colic and ear infections. Your doctor at Duluth MultiCare corrects vertebral subluxations with safe and gentle maneuvers called *chiropractic adjustments*.

In addition to chiropractic adjustments, chiropractors teach patients about all-natural ways to prevent illness, such as nutrition, exercise, stress-reduction — and laughter.

### Immune-Boosting Giggles

In the movie *Patch Adams*, actor and consummate funny man Robin Williams portrayed real-life physician Hunter D. “Patch” Adams. The 53-year-old Virginia doctor's message — that humor heals — took the world by storm.

Researchers believe humor may boost immune systems, preventing illness and speeding the healing process. In his 1979 best-seller, *Anatomy of an Illness*, the late journalist/author Norman Cousins credited laughter with helping “reduce his pain from a debilitating joint disease called ankylosing spondylitis.” (*Pain & Central Nervous System Week* Sept. 22, 2001.)

Research reported at last year's annual scientific sessions of the American Heart Association supports Cousins' theory. Dr. Michael Miller, director of preventive cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center, Baltimore, told those assembled there that “laughter has been shown to augment immune system functioning and to diminish systemic inflammation.” (*Family Practice News* 2001;31:19.)

One way humor may aid healing is by triggering smiles and laughter: both of which stimulate the release of endor-



phins. These naturally occurring chemicals promote a sense of calmness and well-being.

A giggle a day won't keep all of your ills away. But there are a number of empirical studies supporting the healing aspects of humor. “Laughter has many clinical benefits, promoting beneficial physiological changes and an overall sense of well-being. Humor even has long-term effects that strengthen the effectiveness of the immune system.” (*Health Prog* 1992;73:66-70.)

Additional research supports the health-boosting properties of comedy. For example, at the schools of medicine and public health at Loma Linda University in Loma Linda, California, 52 healthy men were shown a one-hour humorous video.

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The result was an immediate and sustained (up to 12 hours) boost to their immune system function. “Laughter may provide beneficial health effects for wellness and a complementary adjunct to whole-person integrative medicine therapies.” (*Altern Ther Health Med* 2000;7:62-72,74-6.)

### Reduce Pain

A sense of humor is an invaluable coping tool in times of stress and illness. It can also cut pain. One scientific study concluded that “laughter, and not simply distraction, reduces discomfort sensitivity, suggesting that laughter has potential as an intervention strategy for the reduction of clinical discomfort.” (*J Behav Med* 1987;10:139-44.)

Humor can even prevent anticipated pain. Discomfort ratings produced by inflating a blood pressure cuff on the upper right arm were recorded immediately before and after exposure to either a humorous or a relaxation video. Both videos raised discomfort thresholds: the level at which pain is felt. (For example: Pain that would normally occur at 20 seconds was occurring at 60 seconds.) The effects of the videos were further enhanced by the patients’ expectations that less pain would be felt after viewing (*J Gen Psychol* 2001;128:217-26).

In another study, 50 post-operative patients were told one-liner jokes prior to the administration of potentially painful topical medication. Afterwards, all of the patients perceived less pain than normally associated with the application of the medication (*J Holist Nurs* 1993;11:66-79).

### It’s All in the Timing

The timing of the distraction — like the timing of a joke — may also be a key component when it comes to comedy’s pain-reducing effects.

An experiment with 72 undergraduate students from the University of California’s psychology department tested this theory. The volunteers were divided into two groups and subjected to painful stimuli. One group was highly distracted while the pain was inflicted; the other group was only slightly distracted.

The study’s authors explained that “half of each group rated the pain immediately, and half waited 10 minutes after the event to rate the pain. The participants who gave immediate ratings showed no effect of distraction, but for participants who waited 10 minutes before giving their ratings, high distraction led to reduced reports of pain.” (*Health Psychol* 1997;16:327-30.)

### Care for Caregivers

Chronic stress suppresses the immune system’s ability to fight disease. It’s difficult to care for someone else when your own health is in danger.

Humor benefits those caring for loved ones, providing a mechanism for coping with the demands of work and family.

One study concluded that “humor and laughter are currently being employed by psychotherapists and other care givers as tools to promote and maintain health, as well as intervention and rehabilitation tools for a host of mala-

dies and illnesses related to stress and life-style.” (*Health Prog* 1992;73:66-70.)

### Laugh at Anger

It’s virtually impossible to laugh and be angry at the same time. Why? Because in an emotional tug-of-war, humor always wins.

In a recent study, 10 women underwent heart and lung function testing before, after and during a double feature: a comedy followed by gloom and doom. The volunteers also completed a questionnaire detailing their moods. The result? Anger-hostility scores decreased and happiness quotients increased significantly after watching the comedy video. Depression-dejection scores increased significantly after watching the unhappy alternative (*J Physiol Anthropol Appl Human Sci* 2002;21:159-65).

Simply *anticipating* a funny event — such as attending a local comedy club — may also lower levels of stress-causing chemical messengers in the blood and increase levels of chemicals known to reduce tension.

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### Fun Ways to Lighten Up!

- ☺ Visit the video store and rent a half-dozen of your favorite funny-bone ticklers.
- ☺ You know that friend of yours, the one that always cracks you up? Call him or her!
- ☺ Fit some fun into your workouts: swing on a swing, climb a jungle gym or dance to silly music.
- ☺ Learn to laugh at yourself.
- ☺ Start a humor file. Keep adding clippings from humor calendars, e-mail jokes, comics and joke books.

