



**LAUGHTER IS THE BEST
MEDICINE**

Background

Laughter is known to have many positive physiological effects including muscle relaxation, reduction of hormones associated with the stress response, positive immune system changes, and pain reduction, as well as being a great cardiovascular workout. Laughter and humour are seen as so important in maintaining and improving health that many hospitals now employ clowns to brighten the days of patients, and laughter clubs have sprung up all around the world modelled on the laughter yoga sessions devised by Indian physician, Dr Madan Kataria.

While regular laughter has obvious physical advantages as outlined above, research has shown that it is the impact of a sense of humour on mood and emotional states that leads to good health. Humour helps us to cope better with stress, control our feelings in difficult situations, to be more creative in solving problems, and improves interpersonal relationships. Regular laughter helps put people in a positive frame of mind, gradually making them positive thinkers. It is this positive thinking and optimism that is linked to better health outcomes.

This session aims to show students the importance and benefits of humour in maintaining good emotional and physical health. This week in the video, the contestants are feeling very uptight and stressed. They are introduced to the concept of laughter as a stress management strategy. Students will consider and experience both the physical and emotional changes that occur when we laugh by participating in a number of laughter activities. They will understand the benefits of regularly including fun activities in their lives and will plan ways of doing this.

Learning outcomes

In this session students:

- Plan for a balance of work and fun in daily life
- Describe the benefits of laughter and humour on physical and emotional health
- Identify and practise ways to make themselves feel better
- Identify ways to regularly schedule pleasant activities in their lives

Key messages

- *To stay well and happy we need a balance of work and play, and seriousness and fun in our lives.*
- *Having a sense of humour has many physical and emotional health benefits.*
- *Humour helps us to relax, cope with stressful situations better and look at challenges more creatively.*
- *Regular laughter or humour puts us in a positive frame of mind and gradually makes us more positive thinkers.*
- *Positive thinking and optimism are linked with better health outcomes.*
- *Planning to include enjoyable activities in our lives will help us to stay happy and healthy.*

Skills: *practising coping strategies, scheduling pleasant activities, stress management*

Session outline

- 7.1 **Brainstorm**
- 7.2 **Video** – Episode 7 of Strongbbox
- 7.3 **Discussion** – Humour: What is it? [if time permits]
- 7.4 **Activity** – Laughing school
- 7.5 **Discussion** – Humour and health: The facts!
- 7.6 **Extra activity** – Test your sense of humour
- 7.7 **Out of class activity**

Materials

- Video set at Episode 7
- OHT of Resource 7.1
- Photocopy of Resource 7.2

Session Plan

7.1 Brainstorm

3 mins

Learning environment Individual

Preparation/materials

- No specific requirements

Procedure

1. **Ask** students to list very quickly the activities they have been involved in and really enjoyed doing during the last week. These might include watching a favourite TV show, playing/practising a musical instrument, hanging out with friends, going to the movies, playing sport, going to the beach/pool, etc. **Ask** students to list them on page 40 of the book.
2. **Ask** students to note how many times they did each activity in the last week.

7.2 Video – Episode 7 of Strongbox

8 mins

What's happening this week? *Tensions are running high in the house and Dr Solomon introduces the contestants to the notion of a sense of humour as a coping strategy.*

DO THIS ACTIVITY ONLY IF TIME PERMITS

7.3 Discussion – Humour: What is it?

10 mins

Learning environment Whole class

Preparation/materials

- OHT of Resource 7.1 – Definitions of sense of humour

Procedure

1. **Discuss** with students what humour is and why it is important to have a balance of work/seriousness and fun/pleasure in our lives.

Example discussion questions:

- Define sense of humour (display definitions on OHT Resource 7.1).
- Why might it be important to have a sense of humour?
- What makes people laugh?
- What might some of the benefits of laughing be?
- How might humour help you challenge negative thinking?

- Why does humour differ – some people find one thing funny, others don't?
- Discuss how jokes can be specific to a region, nationality, culture, age group, gender, etc.
- When are jokes inappropriate?
- Are there times when you shouldn't laugh?
- Is laughing really infectious? Why might that be?
- What makes people laugh?

7.4 Activity – Laughing school

15 mins**Learning environment** Groups of 4 - 6**Preparation/materials**

- Photocopy Resource 7.2 – Laugh like a ... [cut up to hand out 1 type for each group]

Procedure

1. **Explain** that each group will be asked to lead the class in a laughing activity.
2. **Hand out** a different laughing activity (Resource 7.2) to each group. Each slip outlines what the groups have to do (example – laughing like a lawn mower trying to start, the handshake laugh, the kookaburra laugh, the milkshake laugh, a hyena laugh, snorting laugh, laughing like a horse whinnying, and a wicked or witchy laugh). Give groups time to prepare. If possible, groups could move outside the classroom to practise.
3. **Ask** each group to demonstrate their laugh and then lead the class through their laughing exercise. The class might need to try a laugh more than once if it is difficult to do, although it doesn't matter if it is not quite right. The object is for the students to just have a good laugh. The class may like to choose their favourite laughing activity.



NOTE: This activity is really active and infectious and you may need some strategy to bring the class back to task. A good way to do this is to orient the class before you start that you will be using a clapping pattern to signal the end of one task and when they hear the clapping they are to join in as well and focus their attention back on you. When required you would then start clapping and have the class follow your lead. This will have the effect of reducing noise and allow for the next group to start their demonstration.

Alternative procedure

Teacher leads a whole class laughing activity using a number of the examples in Resource 7.2 or any other method they prefer.

7.5 Discussion – Humour and health: The facts! **10 – 15 mins**

Learning environment Whole class

Preparation/materials

- No specific requirements

Procedure

1. **Ask** students to describe the physiological changes that occur when they laugh, e.g. heart rate increases, stomach muscles contract, facial muscles contract, gasping breath, snorting, sometimes face goes red, can have tears, get out of breath, and have a sore stomach.
2. **Refer** students to the information on the physical effects of laughing on page 41 of their books (and below) and discuss as a class.

The physical effects of laughing**What happens when you laugh?**

Fifteen facial muscles contract and there is electrical stimulation of the zygomatic major (cheek) muscle in particular. The epiglottis half-closing interrupts respiration so that intake of air becomes irregular and gasping. These behaviours are usually accompanied by noises that can range from sedate giggles to boisterous guffaws.

Source: <http://people.howstuffworks.com/laughter.htm>

Humour and Physical Health!

What the research shows:

- Muscles relax more quickly after watching funny cartoons than after looking at beautiful scenery.
- Laughter reduces some of the hormones associated with the stress response.
- Watching 30 – 60 minutes of comedy results in beneficial changes to the immune system that are still present 12 hours later.
- Humour has been found to reduce pain in some patients.

One minute of laughter is equal to 10 minutes on the rowing machine.

Laughing is contagious!

Humans have a detector in the brain that is specifically devoted to laughter. It responds to laughter by triggering neural circuits that generate more laughter.

Source: McGhee, 1999.

Words that describe laughter!

cackle, chortle, chuckle, crack up, hee-haw, hoot, giggle, guffaw, snigger, snort, titter

3. **Ask** students to describe the changes to emotions/mood that occur when you are laughing and having fun, e.g. *feel happier, improved mood, feel more positive, helps you change negative thoughts, things don't seem as bad.*
4. **Refer** students to the information on the emotional benefits of laughter and humour on page 42 of their books (and below) and discuss as a class.

Humour and emotional health

“Laughter is like an instant vacation” – Milton Berle, Comedian

How does humour assist emotional health:

- Seeing a smile, and returning it changes our brain chemistry and **gives us a natural high**. It gives us more pleasure than eating chocolate, shopping, being given money, or drinking coffee.
- Humour helps people **cope more effectively with life stressors**.
- Laughing promotes feelings of happiness and joy and under these conditions it is much **easier to think creatively around a problem**.
- Humour is an easy way to **get in touch with your feelings and control them** in difficult situations.
- Laughter brings people together and **improves interpersonal relationships**.
- Regular laughter puts people in a **positive frame of mind** and gradually makes them **positive thinkers**.
- Humour makes it easier to **challenge negative thoughts**.
- **Positive thinking and optimism are linked with better health outcomes**.

Your sense of humour is one of the most powerful tools you have to make certain that your daily mood and emotional state support good health. (McGhee, 1999)

5. Based on the information considered above, **discuss** the benefits of including a fun event or events in our lives each day. Ask the class to consider the following:
 - What are the things you really enjoy doing? Students might refer back to the individual lists they made earlier.
 - How often do you do them?
 - Do you actively plan to do fun things regularly?
 - Would this be a good idea?
 - What would be the benefits?
 - What would make this difficult to do? How could you overcome these difficulties?

7.6 Extra activity – Test your sense of humour

10 mins

If your class has access to computers and the internet, you could have the students go to the following website:

<http://www.members.shaw.ca/canadahumour/humoureval.html>

and complete the test that measures sense of humour.

Students may also like to explore the humour-related websites listed below.

<http://library.thinkquest.org/25500/index2.htm>

<http://people.howstuffworks.com/laughter.htm>

http://www.holistic-online.com/Humor_Therapy/humor_mcghee_article.htm

<http://www.canadahumour.com>

www.thehappinessinstitute.com

These websites are also listed in the student book on page 45.

7.7 Out of class activity

1 min

1. **Refer** students to page 43 of their books.
2. **Instructions:**

Experiment 1 - Planning for pleasant events

The aim of this experiment is to see if you can improve your mood by increasing the number of pleasant or fun activities that you do each day.

Using the list created at the start of the lesson as your baseline, you should aim to increase the overall number of pleasant events you undertake in your week. You should **include at least one activity each day**. You don't have to stick to the list only – add any new activities you think of.

To check the change in your mood you should do a *mood rating* twice a day. The first rating should be done early in the morning (e.g. in the bus or car on the way to school, or when having breakfast) and then in the evening (e.g. immediately after dinner or before going to bed). The ratings should be done at the same time each day. **The rating scale is from 1 – 10** and is explained below.

Very low/bad mood

Neutral mood

Very happy/positive mood



Use the rating sheet to record your activities, the length of time spent on fun activities (roughly), and your mood ratings for the week.

Experiment 2 - Pay it Forward

Recent research, carried out by computer company Hewlett Packard, indicated that a simple human interaction is worth far more than material pleasures. The study showed that the emotions triggered when someone important in our lives smiles at us and we smile back changes our brain chemistry. It creates a short-term high that is better than eating chocolate, shopping, or receiving money.

As part of the study, researchers smiled at strangers on the street and found that 80% or 4 out of 5 Scottish people returned the smile.

Source: <http://www.thehappinessinstitute.com/forum/messages.aspx?topicId=62&replies=2>

Do you think Australians are more likely to return a smile than the Scots? To find out **conduct your own experiment.**

During the next week, choose a day or a set time to smile at the people that you pass as part of your daily routine – like the people at school or in your neighbourhood.



NOTE: Please only do this in a safe environment, when you are close to other people you know and trust.

Keep a record of how many people you smile at and how many smile back at you. Then calculate the percentage to work out how the Australians compare with the Scots.