

Laughing for life

It seems that people are paying closer attention than usual to levels of anxiety and stress around them. Have you noticed that people who can readily laugh out loud do not show the same kind of response to stress as do people who find it 'hard' to laugh? Which one are you?

Personally, I am convinced it is no small thing that smiling and laughing are 'built' in to homo sapiens from birth. Smiling and laughing are human actions which serve social and physiological functions and there are many interesting things to learn about this aspect of our functioning, for instance:

- You might have observed that an infant in her first few days smiles spontaneously, fleetingly, in response to sensory stimuli like soft sounds.
- Charles Darwin, recorded in *"The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals"* that by 45 days of life an infant is smiling and laughing to engage others.
- In more recent times, Frank Caplan has described an infant's development in the book *"The First Twelve Months of Life"*. He and his team record that by week 12 most babies are regularly smiling to another person and by week 16, spontaneous social smiling and laughing out loud are growing to be a way of life.

So, from our earliest days we develop smiling and laughing habits. Why?

We know the aerobic nature of laughing stimulates the circulatory, respiratory, vascular and nervous systems and the effects of smiling are many and widely reported. For example, smiling is associated with positive feelings. Paul Eckman, the researcher in facial expression, reported that when he and Levenson were mimicking facial expressions their mood changed with the expressions they were trying to imitate. They discovered fake smiles and laughter trigger pleasure centers in the brain. Their conclusion, that motions create emotions has great utility and is captured in the colloquial expression: "fake it 'til you make it".

Smiles and laughter are very potent, natural forms of self-management which trigger the release of serotonin [the 'happy chemical'] in the brain. Like a thermostat in an air conditioning unit, smiling and laughing regulate the body-mind. Their function is to assist in restoring and maintaining the body-mind's delicate balance and to provide resilience for recovering from various kinds of damage.

- For an infant, the act of smiling and laughing is self-calming as well as pacifying and provides feelings of connectedness.
- For adults, the effects are the same - bringing connection with oneself and others; relieving stress and mitigating the potential for stress-related illness and depression.

My main points are that it is never too late to revive these habits and that each one of us can deliberately, at any time, trigger the benefits of this inheritance.

From the work of brain researchers like Michael Merzenich, we know it's possible to build neuronal pathways at any age and how "neurons that fire together wire together". In more recent times, Dr Madan Kataria (of Laughter Yoga fame) has been teaching people how to strengthen laughing habits with regular practise. These days, health and medical practitioners suggest that a healthy life includes laughing about 400 times, or for 20 mins, every day.

So, what's it like in your world?

Are you, and those around you, smiling and laughing, a lot and often?

No?

Believe it or not, this simple 'put on a happy face' exercise[®] can change your brain and your life. To benefit, you need to do it. This process works because the actions you perform tap into the neuronal pathways your body was creating while you were still in your crib.

Give yourself permission and time to do this process a few times every day for a month and smiling and laughing will become your 'default mode' – a life enhancing habit.

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A “put on a happy face”[©] exercise

This easy exercise will refresh your whole body by gently stimulating and tuning your breathing and laughing systems. Laughing stimulates your circulatory, respiratory, vascular and nervous systems.

Do it 3 times a day for three or four weeks and be amazed by the changes in you. Be playful. Allow yourself at least 5 mins for your first go and then extend the time as it suits you.

Pout and Smile[©]

Step 1: Let go of tension (Do your own routine or try this.)

- Sit comfortably with the soles of your feet on the floor. Allow a comfortable distance between your knees and check your feet are away from each other. Let each hand rest on your thighs, near your knees.
- Exhale. Pause for a comfortable length of time.
- Breathe deeply into your lower abdomen. Pause before you exhale. Exhale and feel the exhalation coming from your lower abdomen.
- Inhale again into your lower abdomen. Pause.
- Repeat this breathing process and allow your body to progressively relax.
 - While you inhale identify any place where there's tension in your body.
 - Imagine this tension leaving your body as you exhale.
- Pace your breathing so that it feels comfortable and natural to breath in this way.

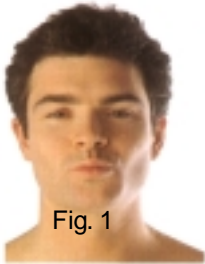


Fig. 1

Step 2: Pout then Smile with your breathing

Begin with an exhalation

- Fig. 1 Gently pout your lips as you exhale through your mouth.
 - Pause and hold your breath.
 - Use this time to notice how the muscle around your mouth has contracted.
 - Feel the shape of your cheeks.

Follow with an inhalation

- Fig.2 As you inhale through your nose, create a broad smile.
 - Pause and hold your breath.
 - Use this time to notice how the muscle around your mouth has changed and feel the shape of your cheeks.
 - Did you notice your nostrils flaring slightly during the inhalation?

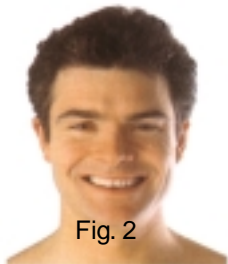


Fig. 2

Step 3: Repeat this process many times.

- Repeat this pout/smile breathing process at a comfortable pace; pause between in and out breaths.
- Notice and release any residual tension in your neck, shoulders and arms.
- Allow yourself to **laugh out loud**.

Step 4: Return to your normal breathing

Notice your feelings as well as any physical differences you might experience. What is different from before doing this process?

Does it feel good?

Remember to laugh for life!