

You crack me up!

Laughter really IS the best medicine

JOANNE RICHARD
Toronto Sun

Crack up tomorrow ... and add some laugh to your life.

According to some laughter experts, kind-hearted fun on April Fools' Day promotes happiness and health all-around.

"April Fools is a good reminder to lighten up — whole-hearted laughter bonds people together and the best part is that it's contagious," says laughter expert Steve Wilson, adding that "the richest laugh is at no one's expense."

There's a lack of laughter going on, says Wilson, and there's nothing funny about today's seriously stressful, hectic pace: "There's been a hardening of the attitudes. People have lost balance and perspective; they've become disconnected and pulled the plug on laughter and it's a mistake."

We're natural-born laughers — it's an ancient phenomenon that predates language, says the psychologist educator, but our laughter levels are barely audible anymore: Studies report kids laugh up to 400 times a day; adults laugh a mere dozen times.

We desperately need to incorporate more laughter into

our lives, says Wilson. It's a vital coping mechanism, an important stress-management tool, boasting profound positive health benefits.

Many medical studies say that a few good laughs a day keeps the doctor away. Laughter has provable physical and mental health benefits, including fighting heart disease, viruses and bacteria.

A study done by Dr. Lee Berk shows that anticipation of laughing alone actually boosts well-being and the immune system. The University of California Irvine medical professor reports that scheduling in humour, like watching a funny movie, reduces depression, anger, fatigue and tension.

Stress wreaks havoc with the immune system, while a good gut-buster releases endorphins, adds Wilson. Cheerman of the Bored of World Laughter Tour, an Ohio-based laughter club with branches throughout Canada (worldlaughter-tour.com).

Wilson trains and certifies "laughter leaders" to spread health and happiness through laughter clubs, which are not about telling jokes but promoting laughter exercises.

"Think about it — there's no downside. Laughter is free, has no calories and it's a nat-



ALEX BROSEVIC/SUN

Catherine Lawrence, CLO of Survival of the Funniest.

ural resource." And 15 minutes of laughing a day can burn off more than four pounds of fat a year. Call it "internal jogging."

Catherine Lawrence is a lawyer who practices laughter not law. The former "beer" lawyer is now a certified laughter leader and "CLO — chief laughter officer" of her company, Survival of the Funniest.

"Laughter is free, has no calories and it's a natural resource."

Steve Wilson

The Toronto resident wants people to take responsibility of their laugh life; she teaches individuals, educators and corporate types, including health care professionals, about the value of laughter as a tool and skill in all areas of life, and utilizing its healing powers.

"It's a jungle out there. Humour has so many benefits in the work place — people work harder and are reluctant to leave if they're challenged, get along and share some laughs together."

She admits she's laughing all the way to the bank — but now only to give courses.

Motivational humourist and speaker Barb Bartlein says that developing a funny bone in the workplace boosts morale and output. "Humour at work makes work more fun and actually increases productivity. It helps teams come together and build trust and communication."

Besides decreasing stress levels, learning to laugh at work actually encourages employee retention and job satisfaction, adds Bartlein, of Great Lakes Consulting

Group, who advises creating a humour bulletin board featuring cartoons, jokes and quotes where employees can go for a quick lift.

Ancaster critical care nurse Pam Tracz runs Happy Healthy Hearty Laughter Club.

"Presently I work at a long term care facility and residents as well as staff enjoy laughing with me ... all it takes is a few minutes to laugh for no reason, a willingness to participate and of course, because laughing is contagious, before you know it everyone is laughing with you."

Even if you don't feel it, fake it to make it, say the experts. Forcing yourself to laugh can actually bring on real smiles, laughter and feelings of merriment.

"Your body cannot tell the difference and you will still enjoy the benefits," says Tracz. "Members of the club take part in the laughter exercises/workout and other activities that encourage playfulness, fun and mental balance, as a result, they enjoy the social as well as the physical experience."

Meanwhile, laughter therapist Dr. Annette Goodheart is all for getting a whole lot of laughs — just not at someone else's expense. She's op-

LAUGH A LITTLE, GET A LOT

The benefits of laughter:

- Lowers blood pressure.
- Boosts the immune system.
- Releases endorphins, the body's natural painkillers.
- Decreases stress hormones.
- Promotes a sense of well-being.
- Increases muscle flexion.

posed to April Fools' Day as well as joke telling. "Most jokes are derisive and hurtful."

People need to concentrate on making themselves laugh, not on making others laugh, she says. "April Fools' day is an ancient celebration that needs to evolve; it should be about acting foolish and making fools of ourselves, not of others — ever. It's very healthy to make fools of ourselves."

"Get your laughter motor going and you'll feel better and think better," she adds.

Adds Wilson, "Remember, on April Fools', different jokes for different folks, so tread carefully."