

The following article was written by Steve Barrett, an American Legion lifetime member (Chapter 201), a member of the VFW (Post 9143), and a Clinical Social Worker at the Atlanta VA Medical Center. He works primarily with Vietnam veterans, and Steve is a Vietnam veteran himself. He was stationed in the Central Highlands in 1967. Steve is also a retired military social worker.

LAUGHTER FOR WHAT AILS YOU

The doctor says "you'll live to be 60!" "I am 60!" "See, what did I tell you?" If you got a chuckle out of Henny Youngman's joke, then you may be laughing your way to a healthier life; because laughter is very important in maintaining our physical and emotional health. You have probably noticed that you simply feel better after a good belly laugh. Not only can humor and laughter foster a positive, hopeful attitude; but humor and laughter can also keep us healthy. Laughter helps to remove the negative effects of stress. It inhibits the release of stress related hormones thus reducing blood pressure and inducing relaxation. Laughter helps to boost the immune system and our body's ability to fight off infections. By increasing blood flow and levels of oxygen in the blood, laughter also improves brain functioning and enhances alertness and memory. Of course, laughter is also good for our mental health because it makes us feel good! It serves as an antidote to depression and anxiety by boosting the production of the serotonin, a natural antidepressant. Humor also increases energy. With increased energy, we may perform activities that we might otherwise avoid.

Research supports the healthful benefits of humor. Studies at the University of Maryland School of Medicine in Baltimore indicated that laughter is linked to a healthier heart. The research concluded that blood flow increased 22% during laughter, and decreased 35% during mental stress. Laughter exercises the cardiovascular system by raising and lowering heart rate and blood pressure. Research has also shown that laughter alleviates pain, and gives a sense of well-being by releasing endorphins; the body's painkiller hormones. Additionally, a study at UCLA revealed that viewing funny videos increased the tolerance of pain for children undergoing painful medical procedures.

Beside scientific research, personal testimonies about the healthful effects of humor are numerous. The author Norman Cousins literally laughed himself back to health from a disease that was causing spinal deterioration and severe joint pain. In his book Anatomy of an Illness, Cousins detailed how laughter proved to be an important aspect in his recovery. He noted that 10 minutes of hearty laughter brought on by viewing episodes of the Marx Brothers and Candid Camera afforded him two hours of pain-free sleep. Personally, I can testify laughter is good medicine. My wife and I had a two-year tour in Turkey in the mid 80s. This was my first overseas tour since Vietnam, and I was somewhat apprehensive of going overseas again. In preparation for the move, I videotaped 50 episodes of the Three Stooges, my personal favorite comedy routine. Each time I could not sleep or felt stressed out, I watched a Three Stooges videotape and found myself laughing out loud; until my eyes teared up (which is another medical benefit of laughter). It really worked! We always have the **choice** to laugh, instead of cry, at daily frustrations.

How can we create opportunities to develop humor and laughter? First, we can start by simply smiling. We all have heard how it takes more muscles in our face to frown than to smile. Smiling is the beginning of laughter. Hang out with people who have incorporated humor in their lives. Deal with your stress: stress is a major barrier to humor and laughter. Refer back to my article on stress management several months ago, to gain a handle on managing stress in your life. Learn to laugh at yourself! Try sharing an embarrassing life moment with a trusted friend or family member. Remember,

laughter is contagious. Read something funny. The Reader's Digest has long espoused the value of humor and laughter with sections called "Humor in Uniform" and "Laughter is the Best Medicine." Finally, watch funny DVDs, funny television shows (especially from the 50s), or movies like the Marx Brothers or Laurel and Hardy.

Laughter is a birthright, a natural part of our life. Steven Wright said "if it first you don't succeed, then skydiving definitely isn't for you." Go ahead, have a good laugh, and give your heart a break.