

Laughter Community

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When we laugh, we automatically become relaxed as our blood pressure and heart rate decreases and endorphins (our brain's natural painkillers) are stimulated (Doskoch, 1996). These are just a couple of examples of laughter's numerous physiological benefits. While the connection between laughter and health has been well documented, laughter in the context of socialization has been less studied. Yet laughter can be a basis of understanding how humans socialize with each other and can reflect heavily on the way in which we connect with one another.

With this in mind, let's begin with the relationship between men and women. In a study that looked at 3,745 personal ads spanning eight different newspapers on one day in April of 1996, 62% of women were more likely to mention laughter in their ads and to seek out a "sense of humor." Men were more likely to offer it (Provine, 2000). In another laughter-related study, researchers observed conversations between mixed-sex pairs of young German adults meeting for the first time. The more a woman laughed aloud during the conversation, the greater her self-reported interest in the man she was conversing with. On the flipside, men were more interested in women who laughed readily while in their presence (Provine, 2000). (One must note here that published research in this area has been limited by including only heterosexual couples.) It seems clear from these studies that laughter plays a key role in initial attraction between men and women. But, *why*? Although the answer might be partially explained through evolution and its effects on how we go about choosing our mates, an overlooked factor may be human beings' capacity and need to connect with one another.

The history of laughter is quite intriguing. As one article from *Science* magazine that touches on how research on animal laughter can bring to light the outer-reaches of this supposed uniquely human trait illustrates, laughter goes back a long way. "Research suggests that the capacity for human laughter preceded the capacity for speech during evolution of the brain. Indeed, neural circuits for laughter exist in very ancient regions of the brain, and ancestral forms of play and laughter existed in other animals eons before we humans came along with our *hahas* and verbal repartee (Panksepp, 2005)."

Quite interestingly, there are actual "laughing clubs" where people get together at local hospitals and members' homes with one express purpose: to laugh, and to laugh without reason. Most often, the meeting starts with one member laughing and the rest join in without much effort, as laughing is uncontrollable - even if there is no reason for it.

Considering that the average child in kindergarten laughs some 300 times a day, while the average adult laughs a feeble 17 (Doskoch, 1996), it may be that the amount of laughter we experience -- or choose to exhibit -- may be socialized out of us by the time we reach adulthood. This is something to address as we consider how laughter might build a literal human community through its natural workings.

As mentioned before, there has been much focus on laughter and the health benefits it provides. Most of this information is founded in empirical research that is valid and helpful. Yet, might the health benefits of laughter be a consequence of its ability to bring people together? One need only go to his/her local laughing community. The

answer might be found there.

References:

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