

Is Laughter a Form of Therapeutic Medicine?

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Laughter therapy reduces anxiety and increases life satisfaction, giving you a natural way to calm your mind and feel more fulfilled
- › Spontaneous laughter lowers cortisol, your main stress hormone, by about one-third, protecting you from stress-related problems like weight gain, weakened immunity, and heart disease
- › Studies show laughter therapy improves sleep, mood, and even reduces inflammation, making it a powerful tool for both mental and physical health
- › Older adults who laugh more often are less likely to develop disability, depression, or insomnia, helping them stay independent and resilient
- › You can use laughter like medicine by scheduling daily laughter sessions, sharing humor with others, and mixing structured approaches like laughter yoga with spontaneous laughter

Laughter has always been seen as a source of joy, but it's also a powerful force for health. Unlike casual humor, laughter therapy is a structured practice that uses guided exercises to trigger laughter and, with it, measurable shifts in your body. This approach treats laughter as more than a reaction – it becomes an intentional tool to calm your nervous system, ease tension, and strengthen emotional balance.

Anxiety is one of the most common conditions people face today, marked by racing thoughts, pounding heartbeat, muscle tightness, poor sleep, and a lingering sense of dread. When it's ignored, anxiety spirals into depression, substance abuse, or long-term illness. Finding simple, safe ways to break that cycle is essential, and laughter offers one of the most direct paths to relief.

Stress physiology explains why this works. Cortisol, your body's primary stress hormone, surges under pressure and fuels problems like weight gain, weakened immunity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. By disrupting that stress response, laughter helps restore equilibrium and protects your long-term health.

Seen in this light, laughter stops being “just fun” and instead stands out as a no-cost, side effect – free intervention that influences both mental and physical well-being. With this foundation in mind, the next step is to look at what researchers discovered when they put laughter therapy to the test.

Laughter Therapy Reshapes Anxiety and Life Satisfaction

In a paper published in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, scientists reviewed 33 randomized controlled trials involving 2,159 adults to examine whether structured **laughter therapy** could reduce anxiety and improve life satisfaction.¹ The review applied strict bias controls, and the findings showed consistent positive outcomes, even when the type of laughter intervention differed.

- **Laughter therapy significantly reduced anxiety levels and boosted overall life satisfaction** – For example, adults who took part in laughter yoga sessions experienced measurable improvements compared to those who received no intervention or usual medical care.

The meta-analysis also reported that laughter therapy decreased anxiety. This means that adults receiving laughter interventions experienced substantial relief from racing thoughts, tension, and worry compared to control groups.

- **Life satisfaction increased across multiple settings** – Beyond easing anxiety, laughter therapy improved satisfaction with life itself. This outcome matters because life satisfaction reflects how people judge the quality and meaning of their lives. Higher life satisfaction is linked to longer life expectancy and stronger resilience to illness.
- **Laughter yoga outperformed other techniques** – When broken down by type, laughter yoga consistently showed the strongest benefits in reducing anxiety and increasing life satisfaction. Other methods, such as watching humorous videos or listening to comedy tapes, also worked but produced smaller effects.

Laughter Therapy Broadens Thought Patterns and Social Bonding

The study explained that laughter therapy works through multiple psychological theories. Barbara Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory suggests that positive emotions like laughter expand mental flexibility, helping people see challenges in new ways.² This lowers perceived threat and reduces anxiety. At the same time, laughter strengthens social connections, providing emotional support that promotes life satisfaction.

- **Coping strategies are rewired through humor** – Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman's Coping Theory supports the idea that laughter reframes stressful situations, making them feel less overwhelming. By laughing in the **face of stress**, people shift their mindset from defeat to resilience, which increases their sense of control and self-efficacy – the belief that they can handle difficult situations.
- **Biological changes support emotional stability** – James Gross's Emotion Regulation Theory shows how laughter reduces stress through physiological mechanisms, lowering activation in the autonomic nervous system and balancing hormone output. This dampens negative emotions while encouraging positive ones. Over time, repeated laughter therapy sessions stabilize mood and reduce the likelihood of chronic anxiety symptoms.

- **Laughter shifts overall life evaluation** – Edward Diener’s Subjective Well-being Theory ties these outcomes together by explaining that frequent positive emotions combined with fewer negative ones improve how people judge their lives. This means that laughter therapy does not just provide temporary relief – it enhances the broader perception of living a fulfilling life.

Laughter Directly Lowers Stress Hormone Levels

In a study published in PLoS One, scientists conducted a systematic review of eight interventional studies involving 315 participants to determine whether laughter reduces cortisol.³ Often labeled merely as a stress hormone, cortisol fulfills many other functions within your body. Its main role is to act as a vital defense mechanism, ensuring that your blood glucose levels don’t plummet to hazardous lows.

By maintaining these levels, cortisol safeguards you against the severe danger of a hypoglycemic coma.⁴ Cortisol is released when you feel stressed or threatened, and while it’s useful in short bursts, chronic high levels damage your health. The analysis revealed that laughter significantly decreased cortisol compared to control groups, showing that it works as more than just a mood booster.

- **Participants were adults exposed to laughter interventions** – The studies included men and women who were guided through different forms of laughter, such as spontaneous laughing sessions, humor therapy, and structured exercises. Across these groups, the research found a consistent pattern: people who laughed had lower cortisol after the intervention compared to those who did not.
- **Cortisol dropped by nearly one-third overall** – The pooled data showed that laughter **reduced cortisol** by 31.9%. This is an unusually strong effect for a nondrug intervention and highlights laughter as a powerful natural stress reliever.
- **Single laughter sessions had immediate impact** – Just one session of laughter reduced cortisol by 36.7%. This means you don’t have to commit to weeks or months of therapy to feel results – your body responds to laughter right away.

- **Cortisol reduction worked across different laughter methods** – Whether people laughed in groups, watched comedy, or joined structured sessions, the outcome was consistent: cortisol went down. This suggests you have flexibility in how you apply laughter as a stress therapy. The method matters less than the act of engaging fully in laughter.

Laughter Therapy Reduced Stress During Global Crisis

As noted in a paper published in *Current Research in Physiology*, prolonged use of medications for anxiety and depression leads to drug tolerance, resistance, and harmful side effects.⁵ During the COVID-19 pandemic, when stress, anxiety, and depression surged across populations, researchers emphasized the urgent need for safe, nondrug strategies. Laughter therapy was identified as a universal, low-cost, and effective intervention to reduce stress and anxiety without the risks tied to long-term drug use.

Surveys showed a threefold rise in depression among U.S. adults during the early months of COVID-19, with about 39% reporting psychological distress, 42% experiencing anxiety, and 39% suffering from depression. Vulnerable groups – including women, the elderly, and low-income communities – were hit hardest. Researchers warned that untreated stress could progress to serious mental illness, cardiovascular problems, obesity, and diabetes. Laughter therapy was proposed as a simple way to buffer these effects.

- **Laughter linked to lower risk of disability in the elderly** – Data from the Japan Gerontological Evaluation Study, which followed 14,233 older adults, showed that those who laughed less frequently had a 1.42 times higher risk of developing functional disability. This means that laughing regularly helps preserve independence and mobility in aging adults. Laughter was not only a coping tool during the pandemic but also a predictor of long-term health outcomes.
- **Biological effects include lowering stress hormones and boosting feel-good brain chemicals** – The paper explained that laughter suppresses stress-related chemicals such as epinephrine, cortisol, and dopamine breakdown products, while

enhancing serotonin and dopamine activity. These neurotransmitters regulate mood and motivation. By tipping the balance toward “anti-stress” factors, laughter reduces anxiety and depression and improves overall emotional stability.

- **Clinical trials confirmed immune and hormonal benefits** – One trial in patients with **rheumatoid arthritis** found that laughter therapy lowered growth hormone and inflammatory cytokines, both of which are linked to pain and disease progression.

Another study in schizophrenia patients found laughter therapy increased brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a protein that supports brain function, although levels dropped once the therapy stopped. These results show laughter therapy triggers measurable physiological improvements across different conditions.

- **Laughter improves sleep and mood in older adults** – Meta-analyses and trials in elderly populations demonstrated that laughter programs reduced anxiety, depression, and insomnia, leading to better general health.

Community-dwelling seniors in Japan and South Korea who laughed daily reported improved well-being, while those with **poor oral health** and fewer teeth were less likely to laugh and, as a result, reported worse overall health. These findings tie something as simple as laughter to broader health outcomes, including resilience in older age.

- **Five categories of laughter show multiple paths to healing** – The paper categorized laughter into spontaneous (natural), simulated (self-induced), stimulated (tickling), induced (drug-related), and pathological (caused by brain damage). Among these, simulated and spontaneous laughter are most useful in therapeutic settings. By practicing these types, people intentionally activate the body’s **relaxation response** and reduce the weight of daily stress.⁶

How to Use Laughter as Real Medicine in Your Life

Laughter is not just entertainment – it is a practical tool that lowers stress hormones, eases anxiety, and improves how you feel about your life.⁷ If you think about it, that’s exactly what you want from any therapy: something that works quickly, is easy to do, and gives lasting benefits. The science shows that your body responds within minutes, which means you don’t have to wait months to feel the difference. Here are five steps to start using laughter as medicine in your daily life.

- 1. Schedule daily laughter sessions** – Treat laughter like exercise. Just as you plan your workouts, block out 10 to 15 minutes a day for intentional laughter. You could join a local laughter yoga class, watch a comedy you enjoy, or even practice forced laughter, which often turns into real laughter. The key is making it a regular habit so your nervous system learns to relax consistently.
- 2. Use laughter before stressful events** – If you’re facing a job interview, medical procedure, or tense conversation, prime your body by laughing first. The research showed even one session dropped cortisol by more than a third, which puts you in a calmer state of mind and helps you think clearly instead of being hijacked by stress hormones.
- 3. Share laughter with others** – Your results get stronger when laughter happens in groups. Invite friends, family, or coworkers into the practice. If you’re a caregiver or a nursing student under stress, creating shared laughter routines gives you both relief and stronger social bonds. This not only lifts your mood but also makes tough situations easier to handle.
- 4. Reframe challenges with humor** – When problems feel overwhelming, use laughter to shift perspective. If you’re dealing with ongoing stress, consciously seek humor in the situation – even if it feels forced at first. By laughing, you rewire your brain’s coping strategy and tell your body that you’re in control. This makes you less likely to get stuck in fear or anxiety.

5. Mix structured and spontaneous laughter – Different styles work, and each has its place. Use structured options like laughter yoga when you want a guaranteed session that targets both mind and body. Balance that with spontaneous laughter from funny videos or playful interactions. Your body responds to both, so give yourself permission to mix them depending on your mood and schedule.

FAQs About Laughter Therapy

Q: How does laughter therapy improve mental health?

A: Laughter therapy lowers anxiety by easing racing thoughts, tension, and worry while boosting life satisfaction. Structured practices such as laughter yoga and guided humor sessions help reframe stress, regulate emotions, and strengthen social bonds in ways that improve overall well-being.

Q: What effect does laughter have on stress hormones?

A: Research shows that laughter reduces cortisol – your body’s main stress hormone – by about 32%, with a single session dropping it by nearly 37%. Lower cortisol means less strain on your heart, immune system, and metabolism, helping protect against chronic diseases linked to stress.

Q: Is laughter therapy just about feeling happier, or does it change my body?

A: It changes your body. Studies confirm measurable effects, including reductions in inflammatory markers, improved hormone balance, better sleep, and even higher levels of brain-supporting proteins like BDNF. These biological shifts explain why laughter therapy works as more than simple entertainment.

Q: Who benefits most from laughter therapy?

A: Everyone benefits, but the effects are especially strong in vulnerable groups such as the elderly, patients facing surgery, those with chronic illness, and people under high stress. Older adults who laugh regularly are less likely to develop disability, depression, or insomnia.

Q: How can I start using laughter as medicine in daily life?

A: Treat laughter like exercise: schedule daily sessions, laugh before stressful events, share humor with others, reframe problems with humor, and mix structured approaches like laughter yoga with spontaneous laughter from comedy or playful interactions. These steps give your body and mind lasting resilience.

Sources and References

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