

# Fall N2 Fitness

Why does Humpty Dumpty love autumn? Because he always has a great fall.

## Challenge: Enjoy The Health Benefits of Laughter Today

Abraham Lincoln is quoted as saying, “A good laugh is good for both the mental and physical digestion.” While he may not have had the medical, neuroscientific and psychological research to draw on at that time, we now know that laughter alters brain functioning and boosts production of dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with the brain’s reward and “feel good” system. It reduces cortisol, the brain’s stress hormone, and may even improve memory.

Laughter does more than make you feel good: health actually varies according to the amount of laughter.

According to James J. Walsh, MD., people who laugh actually live longer than those who don’t laugh. A hearty belly laugh has many of the same physiological effects as exercise — laughter reduces arterial wall stiffness as it increases pulse, blood pressure and respiratory rates. It oxygenates the brain while delivering oxygen throughout the body and stimulates the release of nitric oxide, which enhances blood flow and reduces inflammation. Vigorous sustained laughter even burns calories!

Laughter is a free and accessible way to relieve stress and connect with others. So keep your brain active by finding the humor in situations, especially when you’re in need of some relief from stress or frustration. No amount of running or other exercise massages our insides and settles or resets our mood the way laughter does. People of all ages can do it together and it’s fun. Children laugh about 425 times a day. Adults a mere 13 times a day. Perhaps, adults take life a little too seriously for their health.

Not only is laughter universal, it is ageless. Picture a baby’s first belly laugh or seeing an older adult’s eyes light up with laughter. No matter what your age, laughter is good medicine and is an exercise everyone can enjoy doing. Laughter therapy has been practiced for centuries to help heal and today laughter is fast becoming the preventative exercise of choice due to its physical, mental, emotional and spiritual powers.

In the book, “Laughter Therapy” by Annette Goodheart, Ph.D.; a whole chapter is dedicated to the physical benefits of laughter. You learn that laughter engages every major system in the body. Have you ever fallen out of your chair laughing or seen kids fall onto the floor and spitting food out of their mouths from laughing? Yes, it is known to cause us to wet our pants occasionally too! When we laugh, we literally lose muscle control.

The diaphragm is a muscle that separates our abdominal cavity from our chest cavity and is the only muscle in our body that is attached to other muscles. When we laugh, our diaphragm convulsively pulls on our side muscles and shakes up our stomach and other vital organs. We get an internal massage, which leaves our organs invigorated, juicy, pumped-up and alert. Laughter has been clocked exiting our lungs at speeds up to seventy miles per hour. Needless to say, it gives our respiratory system a massive work out. Laughter sessions can provide a cardiovascular, pulmonary workout as well as massage your insides.

## Laughing to relieve stress

No amount of running or other exercise massages our insides and settles or resets our mood the way laughter does. Negative stress is both mentally and physically draining and can manifest as physical illness if not identified and managed. Laughter can help you manage stress similar to how physical exercise does. Laughter is both a pulmonary and cardiovascular workout in that it makes the heart and lungs work faster, which in turn pumps oxygenated blood to your cells faster, this stimulates your brain to make you more resilient to stressors.

Laughter is free, natural and you can access it easily. In fact, as Goodheart explains you don’t even need to find something funny or be feeling happy to practice laughter and benefit from it. Don’t let emotional tension build to the point of tears. Set a goal to be aware or mindful of how many times per day you laugh. Think of it as an attitudinal exercise for your mind. Schedule time to practice laughter or join a laughter club.

## Laughter education

Laughter education comes in a wide variety of forms and can be called clubs, classes, circles, programs or sessions. The most beneficial of these involve systematic programmable activities, typically provided in a group setting that provides laughter exercise and attitudinal mindfulness to achieve general or targeted goals. Laughter session objectives can include:

- Increase awareness about attitudes and feelings towards laughter.
- Provide opportunities for individuals to laugh.
- Promote laughter in everyday life.
- Provide respite from daily stress and worries.
- Teach how laughter can be an effective mood regulator.
- Encourage healthy choices and laughter, humor and mirth as self-care strategies.

Depending on the setting, individual participation in a therapeutic laughter program can be encouraged as a way to meet individual goals such as socialization, emotional expression, communication, focus, concentration and use of muscles and joints.

Sources: West Virginia and Michigan State Cooperative Extension Service

**Did you know that Atchison County Extension offers a fun program— The Magic Of Laughter. Schedule a bit of mirth for your organization’s next meeting.**