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Psychological Benefits of Laughter

Humor Makes Us Hopeful

A study conducted at Texas A&M and published in the *International Journal of Humor Research* has found that people who enjoyed a 15-minute comedy video scored higher on a survey of hopefulness as compared to those who did not get to laugh at the video.

The study involved 200 volunteers 18-42 years old. It calculated not only smiles and laughter, but also incorporated surveys to identify additional ways the volunteers reacted to humor. One of the psychologists commented on the results by explaining that laughter can provoke thought and lead you to discard automatic behavioral responses in preference of more creative approaches.

Laughter Increases Altruism

A new study at Kent University has found that laughter increases altruism towards strangers. In the study, psychologists had participants watch a funny or serious video before playing an altruistic game with total strangers. The results showed that those who laughed at the funny video were more conducive to give their money to strangers. The authors point out that further research indicates that this altruism may be the result of laughter's effects on endorphin (natural feel-good neurotransmitters) production.

Why People Laugh

Theorists have been wondering for centuries why people laugh. Recently, two neuroscientists, (Robert Provine at the University of Maryland and Jaak Panksepp at Washington State University) made some important insights into this question. Here are some of their observations.

The first insight about laughter is that it's about getting along with other. While occasionally, we're surprised into laughing at something funny; most laughter has little do to with humor. Laughter is an instinctual survival behavior for social animals – not a response to clever wit. Laughter is an honest social signal because it's hard to fake. We're dealing with a powerful and ancient behavior revealing the roots that all human beings, maybe all mammals, have in common.

The human ha-ha evolved from the rhythmic sound – pant-pant – made by primates like chimpanzees when they tickle and chase one another while playing. The two neuroscientists figure that the first primate joke, the first action to produce a laugh without physical contact – was the feigned tickle, the same kind of coo-chi-coo move parents make when they thrust their wiggling fingers at a baby.

They speculate that the brain has ancient wiring to produce laughter so that young animals learn to play with one another. The laughter stimulates euphoria circuits in the brain and also reassures the other animals that they're playing, not fighting. Primal laughter evolved as a signaling device to show readiness for friendly interaction. Human babies are laughing by the age of four months and then progress from tickling to the Three Stooges to more sophisticated triggers for laughter.

Laughter seems to be an automatic response to your situation rather than a conscious strategy. Scientists have found that during laughter three parts of the brain light up: a thinking part that helps you get the joke, a movement area that tells your muscles to move, and an emotional region that elicits the "giddy" feeling.