

# PhysioBiz

Health newflashes

for bodies busy moving, working, playing, being.



## Laughter, the great healer

**Welcome to PhysioBiz, with healthcare advice and information you can trust and rely on, brought to you by the South African Society of Physiotherapy!**

Did you watch the iconic comedy film, *Dinner for One*, over New Year? If not, did you watch anything funny, something that made you laugh till your sides ached, whether your taste runs to *Bridesmaids*, *Borat* or *Bottom in a Midsummer's Night Dream*?

Maybe you didn't feel much like laughing, after the grim year that was 2020. And it's a little hard to muster some positive energy while 2021 looks like it's saying, "You think that's bad? Hey, hold my beer!"

We have to ride out this storm, keeping hope in our hearts and building resilience to manage the unexpected. What steps can we take to prepare ourselves for whatever comes our way? How can we dig deep and find the happy, optimistic, purposeful self we all have within us?

Aside from all the usual good advice, like masking and distancing to protect ourselves and our families, eating healthy food, getting sleep and packing in as much physical activity as we can... we can laugh.

The old adage is right: laughter *IS* the best medicine.

And here are a few reasons why:

- **Laughter is a physical workout**

Some 2014 research looked at laughter yoga in comparison to crunch and back lifting exercises and found that: "The activation level of internal oblique muscle during laughter yoga is higher compared to the traditional exercises. The multifidus, erector spinae, and rectus abdominis muscles were nearly half

activated during laughter yoga, while the activation of the external oblique muscle was comparable with the crunch and back lifting exercises.”

What does all that anatomical jargon mean? Well, laughter seems to be a good activator of the abdominal muscles. It's also an excellent workout for your facial muscles – which is why your face often feels sore after a belly-laugh.

- **Laughter's good for your lungs**

In the 1970s, a pioneering researcher, William F Fry, created the term gelotology, the study of laughter. In an early study, he found that laughter “resulted in increased ventilation, increased muscle activity, increased minute volume, and the creation of forceful exhalation that could mobilize and remove pulmonary secretions” – in other words, it's good for lung function too. When you laugh, says the American Lung Association, “your diaphragm, chest and abdominal muscles tighten. This makes the lungs work harder by forcing stale air out and allowing fresh air deeper into the lungs”, all good news for lung health.

- **Laughter makes you happier**

Duh, right? Of course it makes you happier; you feel light of heart when you laugh, don't you? With their usual curiosity, scientists have asked Why. They've found that laughter actually alters biochemicals in our bodies, decreasing stress hormones like cortisol. It also boosts neurotransmitters like norepinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin, which are decreased when people are depressed. So by pumping them up, laughter improves mood.

- **Laughter is good for relationships**

“Laughter is the closest distance between two people,” wrote Victor Borge, legendary Danish American comedian. Laughter forms and strengthens connections between people, and “Couples who laugh together have strong resiliency and bonds,” writes Beth Morris, who teaches a course on anxiety and depression at the University of Michigan in the States. Shared laughter forges strong relationships – something we all could use in the year ahead.

“Laughter helps mind and body and brings people together, and it's something we can share even when we're social-distancing,” says South African Society of Physiotherapy President Rogier van Bever Donker. “If you have a good belly-laugh once or twice a week, perhaps playing tickling games with your children or relaxing with a friend, you will be doing yourself a huge favour – and, like all kinds of exercise, it will make it easier to cope with whatever the world throws at you.”

To find a physiotherapist, go to [www.saphysio.co.za](http://www.saphysio.co.za).