

HA HA FOR HEALTH

A humor
therapist
reveals the
PHYSICAL and
EMOTIONAL
benefits of
laughter
and offers tips
for a more
HUMOROUSLY
healthy you!

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SEALOC



It's infectious yet healthful, silly yet serious, aerobic yet effortless, priceless yet free for the taking. It's humor, says Karyn Buxman, an expert and a kind of dealer in that elemental human behavior. She's not a humorist who makes her living being funny; in fact, she can't even remember punch lines. Instead, she is a nurse who has studied the therapeutic uses of humor. A member of the Speakers Hall of Fame, Buxman has traveled the country since 1991 speaking to groups about how to lighten up for a happier, healthier and more productive life. Relax, says the nurse. This won't hurt a bit.

Martial and Medical

As a Hannibal, Mo., native and Mizzou graduate, Buxman, MSN '90, has one of the toughest possible acts to follow in honorary Mizzou graduate Mark Twain, DHL 1902. Twain once remarked that "The human race has one really effective weapon, and that is laughter." Buxman acknowledges that Twain could outgun her. "Luckily," she quips, "Mark is no longer taking engagements."

Humor may be a weapon, but it's also a treatment. Perhaps the most famous proponent of therapeutic humor was Norman Cousins, who claimed in the 1979 book *Anatomy of an Illness* to have laughed his way to a cure for the usually terminal disease ankylosing spondylitis, which causes chronic inflammation of the spine. Researchers have followed up on his lead and measured many of humor's benefits, Buxman says.

Experiencing or even anticipating humor can bolster the body's ability to stave off infection by boosting the immune system and by lowering levels

of stress hormones. Some of these improvements can last for weeks.

Humor's benefits extend to muscles, too. For instance, a belly laugh provides a mild aerobic workout, which can be a boon even for people bound to bed, wheelchair or home. "Anybody can laugh without buying a health club membership," Buxman says. "I'm not claiming that laughter cures anything, but it can be complementary to other treatments."

Take It Where You Find It

The key to making use of humor's benefits is not the ability to tell jokes, Buxman says. It's being alert to what's funny in everyday life. She calls it "seeing funny." Like the time she gave her own slapstick reading to the *Hannibal Courier-Post* headline, "Two Injured in Rear-End Collision." And there was the airport sign, "Terminal Luggage," which she figured is the place where old duffel bags go to die.

Although it's good to recognize humor, it's even better to search for it habitually, Buxman says. Perhaps the most committed strategy for this is to join a group that meets regularly with the sole purpose of laughing. In 1991 she co-founded World Laughter Tour, a collection of 100 laughter clubs. She and co-founder Steve Wilson have trained about 1,000 laugh leaders, who take their charges through a series of exercises beginning with forced laughs that soon turn into the real thing. Some businesses are offering laughter clubs to employees to boost morale and improve productivity.

Practice Makes Perfect

Beetle Bailey creator Mort Walker, BA '48, once said, "Seven days without laughter makes one weak." Buxman

might rephrase that in the affirmative: Practicing humor habitually prepares us to use it as a coping mechanism during tough times. Although Buxman has long preached that message as a professional speaker, she had the unfortunate luck of having to test it during her son's cancer treatment in 2003. David Buxman, then a junior majoring in sociology at MU, learned that he had a tumor in his chest in January of that year.

"This stuff really works," she says, recalling an inside joke she had with David, BA '04. "He had given himself the nickname Tonto, and during his 12 weeks of chemotherapy he started calling himself Chemo-sabe." But the crowning bit of good humor came in the form of a haircut.

"He had been asking me for years if he could have a mohawk, and I always told him, 'No,'" Karyn says. "Then when I realized his hair was going to fall out from the chemotherapy, I said, 'Let's go for it.'" She says the pictures of the mohawk were great comic relief. She even posted them on a Web site, where friends and family kept track of David's progress.

Mithridates, He Died Old

Legend has it that King Mithridates lived in a treacherous world where assassins used poison to do their dirty work. The king trained for just such a tragedy by taking small daily doses of many venoms. Then when his food was actually poisoned one day, he not only survived but also caught his attackers. Our world, however, is one of stress and other less tangible poisons, so Buxman prescribes her favorite antidote accordingly: Laugh often and well. ☼

HOW TO SELF-MEDICATE WITH HUMOR

Follow These Five Tips

1. It's a skill: Exaggerate until it's funny. "Humor is the ability to play with perceptions," says nurse and humor consultant Karyn Buxman. She teaches a step-by-step approach to "catastrophizing your icky moments." When in a difficult situation, exaggerate until it becomes absurd enough to put things in perspective. For instance, if you are nervous before giving a speech, try a pregnancy scenario: "It's not that bad, I could be pregnant. Or what's worse, I could be nine months pregnant. Or even worse than that, I could be leaking water in front of all these strangers." Buxman used to take this one step at a time, she says, "but now I just leap to the end."

2. Joke break: Register at a Web site that will e-mail a daily joke to you.

3. It's magic: Keep a toy handy to lighten your load. Buxman is partial to magic wands for days when the impossible demands just keep coming.

4. Nice outfit: Wear an oddball necktie, crazy socks or a funny pin. One of Buxman's pins reads, "Stop me before I become my mother!"

5. I've been a great audience: Don't wait for others to give you a pat on the back for good performance. Hop up and give yourself a standing ovation.

For more information, check out Buxman's Web site at humorx.com.

Nurse and humor consultant
Karyn Buxman advises
people to go poking
around for the
humor in
everyday life.