

Born to Laugh

“The most wasted of all days is one without laughter.”
E.E. Cummings

Maybe you are a natural snorter—one of the estimated 25% of women or 33% of men who laugh through their nose. Or perhaps a practised pigeon laugher, who keeps your lips sealed to produce a humming noise akin to the bird.¹ Or maybe you embrace a true belly laugh and are often left wanting for air. Regardless of your style, laugh and you are participating in a universal unconscious human behaviour that turns out to be simply complicated.

History tells us, “surgeons used humor to distract patients from pain as early as the 13th century.”² Modern medicine has built up evidence attributing laughter with health benefits ranging from burning calories, to boosting immune and circulatory systems, reducing stress, relieving pain, easing digestion and enhancing sleep. Laughter therapy is credited for helping to improve the quality of life for chronically ill patients. Formal laughter therapy programs teach patients how to laugh as a form of regular exercise.³ No humour or jokes necessary for a rib-rattling chuckle.

And yet gelotology, the formal scientific study of laughter, is a relatively recent field. The term was coined in 1964.⁴ Today’s technologies are showing that there is no single source in the brain for the built-in laughter response. Rather, research shows the brain draws on a range of primitive and more evolved zones to produce a laugh or two. Have a big laugh and muscles from your face to your arms, legs and torso are involved.⁵

Some theories say that the foundation for human laughter goes back to the panting behaviour of ancient primate ancestors.⁶ Along a similar vein, the social brain hypothesis says laughter evolved as our primitive brains coped with the demands of living in large groups. Language evolved as a way of building and strengthening bonds and laughter became another important means of connecting, without having anything in particular to say.⁷

Consider how much easier it is to laugh with others around—in fact it is estimated a person is 30 times more likely to laugh in company than solo.⁸ Consider a three- to four-month-old baby’s first laugh, connecting them with parents and caregivers long before a word is formed. As adults, we know a joke is not required for a good laugh with the right people. Laughter at the most embarrassing times can be simply contagious.



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We are not the sole purveyors of laughter, as dogs have been shown to emit laughter-like vocalizations when playing and rats apparently give off ultrasonic notes of laughter when tickled. However, adult humans, burdened by the deluge of daily headlines, may arguably be the most laughter challenged.

Given all the proven health benefits, perhaps a worthy resolution for this New Year is to let laughter loose at least once a day. It may just do a world of good.

1. Molly Edmonds and Joseph Miller, “10 Different Types of Laughter,” *HowStuffWorks*, June 4, 2009, <http://science.howstuffworks.com>.
2. “Laughter Therapy,” Cancer Treatment Centers of America, www.cancercenter.com.
3. “Laughter Therapy.”
4. Barbara Butler, “Laughter: The Best Medicine?” *OLA Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (2005): 11-13.
5. Robert Provine, Ph.D., “A big mystery: Why do we laugh? Contrary to folk wisdom, most laughter is not about humor,” *Mysteries of the Universe, NBC News*, <http://www.nbcnews.com>.
6. Provine, “A big mystery: Why do we laugh?”
7. “The Evolutionary Origin Of Laughter,” *MIT Technology Review*, October 29, 2010, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/421480/the-evolutionary-origin-of-laughter>.
8. Alan Bellows, “Humoring the Gelotologists,” *Damn Interesting*, Updated March 22, 2016, <https://www.damninteresting.com/humoring-the-gelotologists>.
9. Bellows, “Humoring the Gelotologists.”