

A LAUGH A DAY KEEPS THE DOCTOR AWAY.

By

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The actor Cary Grant had a long and successful career during most of which he maintained a very good physical appearance. His press-agent grew tired of being asked what age Cary Grant was. He had already been asked that same question twice the morning he received a telegram from a fan-magazine editor, asking concisely, 'How old Cary Grant?' He sent back an equally concise reply: 'Old Cary Grant fine. How you?' Please give free rein to your mirth as you contemplate this amusing anecdote. Humour and laughter is not only an enjoyable sensation in its own right, but it may also be good for your health.

The idea that humour is good for the general health has been put forward by various people, going back even to the time of Aristotle. A 13th century surgeon, Henri de Mondeville, proposed that laughter be used as an aid to recovery from surgery. He also noted that negative emotions might interfere with recovery. Richard Mulcaster, a 16th century physician, believed that laughter was a physical exercise and, as such, was healthy.

Laughter has been recognised as an important aid to digestion and our ancestors acknowledged this by employing jesters and clowns to entertain them both during and after dinner. Herbert Spenser proposed, in 1860, that laughter is a way of releasing excess tension, and, therefore, is an important restorative mechanism. This idea has since been extended to propose that the beneficial physical effects of laughter are caused by psychological factors i.e. laughter reduces anxiety and thereby influences and improves various bodily functions.

The idea that laughter and humour are beneficial for health is currently quite popular in medical circles. This popularity owes much to the case of Norman Cussins who published his story 'Anatomy of an Illness' in the New England Journal of Medicine in 1976 and later in a best selling book in 1979. Cussins was afflicted with a disease called Ankylosing Spondylitis, a progressive disease inflaming the joints of the spine. He recovered remarkably from this disease after self-treatment with Vitamin C, to combat inflammation, and laughter, to produce positive emotions.

The case of Norman Cussins excited a lot of interest in the medical profession. However, it is not unambiguously clear that Norman Cussins literally laughed his way back to health. In Ankylosing Spondylitis, cases of spontaneous remission can occur and this may have been what happened in Cussins's case. The whole subject deserves serious scientific investigation.

Morally and socially, laughter has not been well regarded throughout history. Prior to the last hundred years or so, laughter in public was about as socially acceptable as vigorous breaking of wind would be today. In Medieval times, physicians located each emotion in some organ of the body. Love for example was seated in the heart - if they had chosen another particular organ which would seem to be a more logical contender, we would be sending each other quite different shapes on Valentine's day. The seat of laughter was the spleen, apparently to indicate that laughter was viewed as a 'low' form of behaviour.

It is no surprise that Victorian England was not big on laughter. Nevertheless, Queen Victoria did deliver one immortal quip in comment on a man charged with the attempted murder of the British Prime Minister, and who was pleading insanity - 'We do not believe that anyone could be

insane who would wish to murder a Conservative Prime Minister'. Neither was laughter popular with the Church. The Puritans in particular looked upon it with disdain and permitted it only when it served to illustrate a moral lesson.

Sigmund Freud distinguished between malign and benign laughter. Laughter was malign, he argued, when it indicated an underlying pathology, i.e. served as an outlet for underlying sexual and aggressive impulses. Benign laughter did not indicate any underlying pathology. An example of benign humour is where a person masters unfortunate or unpleasant situations by turning them around and making a joke of them.

In humour, as in everything else, there are different levels of quality. This can range from the sparkling wit of Oscar Wilde to the crudity of the drinking-club 'blue' joke. In my opinion the ethnic joke is fairly low on the totem pole. The object of these jokes is to highlight supposed negative characteristics in the target group, e.g. in the Irish joke, Paddy is always stupid. Of course this does not mean that many such jokes cannot be funny, simply that, as a genre, they are cruel and biased. Here is one I read recently, of American origin - Question: 'What is a real quick way to learn Irish?' Answer: 'Repeat the following words in quick succession - WHALE, OIL, BEEF, HOOKED'.

Since the mid 1940s it has gradually come to be well accepted that tension and stress are bad for the health. We know that someone with a 'Type A' personality, characterised by seriousness, cynicism, stress, concern with time, hostility and impatience, has a greater risk of having a heart attack than the 'Type B' personality. Type B personalities are defined as those who do not exhibit the characteristics itemised above for Type A, i.e. they are less serious, more relaxed, not particularly competitive, slow to anger, more patient, etc. If psychological factors such as stress and tension can cause illness, and they can, then, surely, opposing psychological factors such as a sense of humour, which will lessen and deflate stress and tension, must have a positive effect on health.

Although it remains to be unambiguously demonstrated that humour is good for your health, there is no doubt that it enhances the quality of life. There are few more pleasant sensations than sharing a laugh with friends. Well, I will leave it at that, and I hope that your opinion of my musings on this subject is more favourable than Dr. Samuel Johnson's reply to an author who had sent him his manuscript for review - 'Your manuscript is both good and original; but the part that is good is not original and the part that is original is not good'. Or, Groucho Marx's reply under similar circumstances - 'From the moment I picked your book up until I laid it down I was convulsed with laughter. Some day I intend reading it'.

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