

# Laughter is the essence of humanity

“Laughter is the sun that drives winter from the human face.” Victor Hugo

**By Mark Pavilons**

I think we could all use a pick-me-up as we endure the gloomy days of winter. Not a day goes by where I don't break down and laugh out loud. And that's a very good thing. Who would rather cry than laugh from the belly? A sense of humour is what separates us from lower life forms. But I swear my dogs have pulled some practical jokes on me in the past! By the same token, don't we laugh at the antics of our pets at least once per day? They're like kids in a candy store, free to express themselves with no limits, no bounds and no discretion! We can't figure out just what's going on in those tiny brains of theirs, but our family members have been brought to teary laughter by both Marley and Lola. I firmly believe dolphins have a fine-tuned sense of humour because they laugh at us all the time. Laughter identifies us as a species like nothing else. We may among the select few intelligent creatures in the universe who can engage in knee-slapping, falling over, uncontrollable giggle fits. Mark Twain believed that laughter was a really effective weapon. I believe there's nothing sweeter and more uplifting than laughter. And modern medicine supports this. One of the most recent studies on laughter shows that laughing with others releases endorphins in the brain, those feel-good chemicals, via opioid receptors. Laughter fosters rigorous brain-region connectivity that kicks in when we hear a laugh, as our brains work to decipher what sort of communication is coming through. A study showed that women laughed about 126% more than their male counterparts, while men seem to instigate laughter the most. Women typically rate a sense of humor as a top-three trait for a potential mate. If you can't be handsome, be hilarious, I say. Laughter has an effect similar to antidepressants. Laughing activates the release of the neurotransmitter serotonin, the same brain chemical affected by the most common types of antidepressants, SSRIs. It's not clear from the research how long this effect sticks around, but the burst of brain activity laughing triggers is undoubtedly potent, at least for short periods of time. Research has shown that laughter has an anti-inflammatory effect that protects blood vessels and heart muscles from the damaging effects of cardiovascular disease. How this happens isn't entirely understood, but it seems related to lessening the body's stress response, which is directly linked to increased inflammation. Regular, hearty laughter should probably be part of every heart disease prevention program. Parents know full well the healing power of a kid's cackle. Hearing your children laughing and playing together like they actually love one another is not only one of life's most cherished sounds, it's like a salve for the soul. It's the cheapest, cleanest resource on the planet! We all have different things that make us laugh. My wife and son really like slapstick humour and watching people trip and fall gives them the greatest pleasure! This ranks 8th on the list of top 10 things that make us laugh, released recently. My boy child, like his mother, prefers slapstick humour and quite enjoys painful fail videos along the lines of The Three Stooges. Both of my charges got quite a chuckle when I cut into a hard-boiled egg that had just spent some time in the microwave. Trust me, don't try this at home! My youngest tends to laugh at life's simple things. Whether it's a comment on one of her TV shows, funny pictures in a book or on AFV, her funny bone is very close to the surface. I find it very interesting that even babies laugh and have a sense of humour, indicating it's inherent not learned behaviour. How can amusement be pre-programmed in our DNA? It must be deemed vital by the Creator, and subsequently boosted by evolution. In my youth, I honed my rapier-sharp wit and espoused levity. My Grade 5 principal didn't share my sense of humour when I was caught playing handball in the girls' bathroom. I told her it had to do with acoustics and wall structure, but that did not win her over. With my parents present, I was rewarded by a few whacks on the back of the hand with a ruler. As I continued to snicker, my dad requested that I be whacked a few more times for good measure. Oh, how things have changed! In high school, I was more apt to provide caustic responses than serious revelations. Being a good student, teachers put up with me, but my barbs seldom got me out of detention. Being a class clown took hard work, convincing a rather tough crowd. Like any standup comedian, my material had to be fresh. I tried standup once in college and believe me, it's much harder than it looks. Wearing a chicken costume, I thought I had a good shot, but mid-way through my routine, my classmates literally carried me off stage. I've since learned humour is merely finding the light-hearted aspects of life and society. It abounds all around us. Humans are the best source of jocularity in the universe. Humour is also about tolerance and laughing at our shortcomings. Humour won't save our planet, but it does make life a lot more palatable. We simply have to laugh in the face of danger, tragedy and sorrow. We need to poke fun at our plight. Yes, the world presents us with plenty to frown about. Right next to a healthy diet is an ample helping of laughter to keep us fit and trim. I welcome the laugh

lines that come with old age. Bring them on! A day without laughter is a day wasted, according to the late Charlie Chaplin. How true.

