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Role of laughter in anti-stress therapy

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News
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The popular folk-idea that 'Laughter is the Best Medicine' has never had much basis in strict medical research until now. It was always assumed to be a psychological effect only. But recent findings are starting to identify laughter as an effective anti-stress therapy.

A couple of years ago, it was shown that laughter lowered the blood pressure, though the reasons remained obscure.

Since then, researchers have begun to see a link between laughter and the suppression of those stress-hormones that appear to damage the heart, predispose towards diabetes and weaken the immune system. One test showed that the mere anticipation of laughter could achieve this effect.

A group of men were told that they would be shown a comic film. Immediately their bodies' production of two major stress chemicals - cortisol and adrenaline - dropped by about half.

Attention is starting to centre on the fascinating idea of a 'humour zone' of the brain, though there may be more than one of these. Laughter is known to be one of our survival-emotions, buried deep in the brain's primal region.

But neurologists are only now starting to trace the complex pathways that link the respiratory aspect of laughter with the satisfaction/reward reflex and the release of mood-elevating hormones.

Equally obscure is the mechanism by which laughter can help to protect the heart. But it seems that deep, prolonged laughter lowers the level of cortisol, the stress-hormone which can attack the protective lining of the blood-vessels and lead to cardiac problems.

Laughter has also been shown to boost the antibodies that reduce the deposit of atheroma in the arteries.

Although these research findings are recent, there is nothing new about laughter therapy, which can be traced back to Buddhist Forced Laughter (yogic asana), but both psychologists and 'new-worlders' have been quick to harness the beneficial effects of laughter for purposes of therapy.

Humour therapy may be conducted on a group basis, sharing humorous experiences, however, as one person's sense of humour may differ from the next person's, it has been found more

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effective on a one-to-one basis.

This enables a personal humour profile to be built up from the client's own background, and a programme of laughter-inducing exercises to be constructed.

One branch of meditation also utilises laughter, though it treats laughing and crying as two halves of the same emotional response.

The main part of this programme is a slow-motion laugh, starting with a gradual smile and climaxing with a deep belly-laugh that may turn to tears under the emotional charge. As this is not spontaneous, some find it awkward to perform in a group.

Others prefer the communal atmosphere, and in India, many yoga practitioners incorporate laughter into their routines. China has also seen an explosion of laughter-related movements.

Key points: Humour Zone

- The medicinal effects of laughter are now being confirmed by research.
- New theories about 'humour zones' of the brain are being debated.
- Humour therapies, old and new, are increasingly popular worldwide.

The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.

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