

THE POWER OF LAUGHTER

If you are feeling stressed about Christmas, get ready to laugh yourself better.

When we went into that first full on lock down in March the idea of being holed up indoors for weeks on end didn't exactly sound like a bundle of laughs. Yet a recent survey* revealed that laughter is what got 79% of us Brits through. The survey showed that laughter (23%) ranked higher than exercise (19%) and sex! (13%) for its feel-good factor, with 53% getting their laughter fix via funny videos, 38% by virtual calls with family and friends, 22% by listening to the radio and 16% by reading funny books. Now, if humour can bring a spark of joy to lockdown, then surely, we can all do with a dose of laughter over Christmas?

Christmas can be stressful for many people but humour can help to diffuse difficult situations. Laughter makes everyone feel more relaxed, barriers come down and this creates a lovely social bond. When you laugh, this triggers the release of feel-good neurotransmitters in the brain that make you feel calmer, happier and more energised.

But did you know that laughter also interrupts cognitive flow.

If you are thinking about something serious and then something makes you laugh, this mentally takes you down another path. It breaks the flow of negative thoughts that were making you feel anxious, sad, angry or stressed. When you laugh it's like jump starting your brain to feel better. And we probably all need a jump start from time to time.

What's more, laughter also has physical benefits – it lowers the blood pressure, reduces the stress hormones and boosts your immune system. It even works your abs, as a good belly laugh expands and contracts your abdominal muscles!

Sure-fire tactics to get you laughing this Christmas

Laughter lens – look for humour

One way to cope with everyday life is to see the absurdity in it. Laughter takes the mind to a more abstract place where it's possible to see things from a different perspective. It's a form of distraction, and can take our mind away from the unpleasant situation. You can reframe negative situations by viewing them as ridiculous and not worthy of your negative feelings. If you can't control it; let it go.





The laughter bank – invest in laughter for greater returns

As social creatures we look to others for guidance and support, and if we can make people laugh, we establish an important bond with them. This is why we often use laughter to break the ice.

When you amuse someone, this positively reinforces their behaviour towards you – and they'll tend to reward you in turn. The more you try and share laughter with your friends and family this Christmas - by telling funny stories, watching old comedies together, or even playing games, the more relaxed everyone will be.

Laughter triggers – focus on the things that make you laugh

We all have funny memories that make us laugh, it's just that when life gets serious, we tend to forget. Yet, even just thinking about something amusing can trigger endorphins and give your mood a boost. One way to activate your laughter triggers is to get into the habit of asking yourself at the end of each day – what has made me laugh or smile today?

Focusing on the things that have made you laugh has an uplifting, calming effect. Happy memories trigger the release of serotonin in the brain which, as well as being a mood booster, is also a precursor to melatonin, the sleep hormone. Which means we are happy to go to bed!

Laughter heroes – spend time with people who make you laugh

These are the people in our life that we know will always have a good laugh with us; the friends that always crack you up when you talk to them. When you spend time with them, you always come away feeling happy and energised and they feel the same. Sometimes just thinking about your laughter buddies is enough to bring a smile to your face. Even if you can't see them over

Christmas, make sure you stay in touch with phone or video calls.

Laughter tricks – fake it till you make it

If you want to cheer yourself, pretend to laugh! Do all the things you would normally do – smile, shake your shoulders. Apparently, by mimicking the movements and actions of laughter, this triggers the supplementary motor areas (SMA) in the brain. The SMA creates a feedback system that links movements to emotions; it basically 'remembers' which movements are linked to certain emotions.

By acting as if you are laughing, this triggers positive emotions that make you feel better. Laughter is contagious too. Research shows that when someone hears you laughing it triggers a response in the premotor cortical region of their brain, which prepares the muscles in the face to correspond to the sound – so they start laughing too.

So, all round it's good to laugh for real or even if you fake it to make it!

* Survey: Laughing Cow