

# Laugh your way to happiness



We've all heard the phrase, 'laughter is the best medicine', and according to science, it really can be. Gelotologists – scientists who study laughter and humour – have found that it is this uniquely human feature that has many benefits.

## Laughter can be a cure for all

Norman Cousins, a layperson with an autoimmune disease, pioneered research into the positive effects of laughter on his own health in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in the 1970s, demonstrating that he was able to put his disease into remission.

Since then, scientists have been investigating the effects of laughter on the body and found that laughter allows many of the body's systems to operate at optimum levels. Laughter has a modulating effect on the immune system by increasing the production of antibodies and protective cells, including T-cells that lead to a reduction in tumorous cells. It also has a moderating effect on some hormones, helping to decrease the levels of cortisol and epinephrine, which helps to reduce our levels of stress.

In fact, laughing frequently can cause the body to respond in ways similar to moderate exercise, helping to lower bad cholesterol and blood pressure, while improving mood, immune function, and decreasing stress.

And like exercise, laughter has been linked to a slimmer waistline. A good belly laugh can use

around the same energy as walking 0.8km. Just 10-15 minutes of laughter a day could burn up to 40 calories, which over a year could equal weight loss of 2.04kg.

In his book, *The Healing Power of Laughter*, Allen Klein says that through laughter we transcend our predicaments and can be lifted above our feelings of fear, discouragement, and despair.

## Only a belly laugh will do

Scientists have found that it is the ability to belly laugh that has the most healing effect physiologically; a mild chuckle or giggle doesn't make the grade.

Furthermore, research shows that the types of material that made their subjects laugh was interesting too, as slapstick seemed to elicit the most laughter such as the antics of Mr Bean, while wittier, more cerebral humour didn't provoke the same deep level of laughter.

Klein says that while it can be extremely difficult to use humour when we have suffered a tragic loss, accident, or are in the midst of depression, it is conversely during this difficult period that we need it most. So, where possible: get laughing!