

# How is laughter the proverbial “best medicine?”

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Last night our [Young Professionals Board](#) hosted the second annual #StandUpForMentalHealth comedy fundraiser at [Gotham Comedy Club](#). I am so not funny that I am always in awe of someone who can stand up on stage and make a crowd of strangers laugh. The comedians last night did not disappoint. From little titters to belly aching guffaws, they delivered a fabulous dose of laughter in support of mental health.



[Photo Credit](#)

*Research in neuropsychiatry is uncovering what happens in the brain to explain what we all know intuitively – laughter feels good. It really does have the potential to improve our mental health. How?*

**1. Laughter stimulates the pleasure center of the brain.** Neuroimaging studies shed light on the regions of the brain that process laughter and humor. Laughter engages [a network of subcortical regions](#), including the nucleus accumbens, a key component of the reward system in the brain. Laughter, particularly ticklish laughter, also [activates the insular cortex](#), a brain region crucial for the experience of emotions. In fact, humor has similar effects on the brain as cocaine, seeing a pretty face, and joyful celebrations.

**2. Laughter helps us form social bonds.** What words or images do we use to describe the sound of laughter? “Haha,” “LOL,” perhaps a wide-grinned emoji with a tear? However you write it, the actual sound of laughter has real impact on our emotional state and the experience of connection. The brain responds to laughter with the same positive effects as when primates engage in grooming each other – leading some to say that laughter is like virtual “grooming.” Affection and bonding are shared by the sounds of laughter. Laughter is also an efficient tool for solving problems in groups. [It builds trust, breaks down barriers, and promotes teamwork.](#)

**3. Laughter relieves pain.** Like exercise, laughing has the effect of releasing endorphins that improve our ability to ignore pain and [increase our pain threshold](#). Also like exercise, laughter increases heart rate, contributing to cardiovascular health. And it isn’t just spontaneous laughter that’s good for the heart. Even [simulated laughter](#) that increases heart rate has cardiac benefits.

**4. Laughter promotes learning.** Humor attracts and sustains attention and makes the learning process more enjoyable and memorable. Laughter in the classroom can help improve learning by reducing anxiety, enhancing participation, and increasing motivation to learn. On a [biological level](#), laughter stimulates the brain areas that activate emotions. The more emotion an activity elicits, the more intensely we remember the details, and the more likely we are to remember the experience.

**5. Laughter reduces stress.** Laughter [decreases stress hormones](#) like cortisol and epinephrine. Even smiling, spontaneous or intentional, can help to reduce stress. Laughter yoga classes are based on the principle of intentional 'fake' laughter, which has the infectious power to convert to organic and real laughter. In fact, a [study of seventy women in Tehran](#) with depression found laughter yoga to be just as effective as group exercise in reducing depression scores. When we laugh, we experience increases in lymphatic circulation, positive regulation of cortisol levels and improved production of infection-fighting antibodies. It is remarkable that even when we are in stressful situations and not really laughing, if we manage to "[grin and bear it](#)," our brains and bodies respond with improved cardiovascular and stress states.

*A shout out of thanks and gratitude to all the members of the [Young Professionals Board](#) for the good laughs and for all the good work you do. Your creativity and passion were on full display last night, and the crowd that was gathered laughed the night away. We all came away feeling all those good things described above, and, what's more, the evening raised funds for mental health training and education for our Global Mental Health Scholars Program.*

*Laughter really is good for our mental health. No joke!*