

## - Laughter

WellBeing

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# The laugh's on you

Words by Terry Robson

**Humans laugh before we talk. Laughter is an inevitable part of daily life, but do you know why you do it? Laughter has fascinating evolutionary roots and some even more interesting psychological effects.**

**L**aughter is a very natural thing. Babies laugh well before they can talk and even as adults, we laugh every day. Admittedly, kids do laugh a lot more than adults. The research tells us that children laugh on average 400 times per day, whereas adults only get their chuckle on about 15 times daily. Maybe we get distracted as we get older and we don't see the humour in life quite so easily, or maybe children have needs that are fulfilled by laughter. Either way, laughter is something we do without thinking, so we are going to reverse that trend here and give laughter some thought. This is not going to be one of those "join a laughter club and burn calories" explorations, it is going to be a deep dive into what laughter is and why we do it. So, snorkels off, don your scuba tanks filled with nitrous oxide on and let's get giggling.

## The first laugh

The fact that babies laugh tells us that it is an instinctive behaviour. There is nothing surprising in that, but what might be less expected is that laughter has a wide evolutionary purpose. We know this because humans and apes are not the only animals that laugh.

Many animals produce sounds during play that are unique to that form of interaction. This "play vocalisation" is a version of human laughter and according to a study published in the journal *Bioacoustics*, there are 65 species that laugh while playing. Most of those species are mammals but a few are birds. The Australian magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*) and the New Zealand kea parrot (*Nestor notabilis*) are two bird species that vocalise during play. In fact, one study found if a kea's warbling laughter is recorded and then played back to other keas, those keas will start playing.

It is possible, too, that the 65 species estimate is low-balling the laughers of this world. Rats, for instance, do laugh but it is a high-pitched chirping that is above the register for normal human hearing. We have had to use technology to measure rat laughter, so it is highly possible that many other mammals laugh too, if only we had the ears to hear it.

As far as humans go, the belief is that our "ha, ha, ha" laugh evolved from the panting that occurs during

play. The estimates (such as those published in *The Quarterly Review of Biology*) are that laughter became a customary behaviour in our hominid ancestors somewhere between two and four million years ago. Researchers from the University of Sussex have pushed that date back further and suggest that the evolutionary origins of laughter can be traced back between 10 and 16 million years. These are estimates based on theoretical evolutionary frameworks because we just didn't have the smartphones on hand to record those first laughs, but we do have a good idea of what happened when those initial laughs occurred.

## Remote grooming

Humans have been wondering what is happening when we laugh for a very long time, thousands of years in fact. Plato and Aristotle both worried that laughter might undermine authority structures, and they realised that we can laugh when doing some very bad things as well as when we are doing something pleasurable. What we now know that the ancient philosophers did not know is that the physical nature of a "ha ha" laugh and the muscular movements that it requires stimulates the release of endorphins in the brain. These feel-good chemicals are why a laugh can make us feel better and why Oxford University researcher Professor Robin Dunbar has quipped beautifully that laughter is "grooming at a distance". We know that grooming, brushing or stroking another individual, is a way of bonding and it functions through the release of these endorphins, but laughter acts in another way to modulate your mood as well.

Cortisol is a hormone released by your adrenal glands in response to stress. Cortisol levels are an indicator of your stress state and high cortisol levels for a prolonged period have negative health effects. Research published in the journal *PLoS ONE* in 2023 showed that laughing can reduce your cortisol levels by between 32 and 37 per cent.

Laughter is a mental soother, a form of remote grooming, that eases your stress levels and boosts your mood. The utterly beneficial nature of laughter begs the question as to what makes us laugh in the first place.



Images: Babi Akp

## Mind &amp; Body • Laughter

**What's so funny?**

You know the feeling when someone makes a remark and you just can't help but laugh. In those moments of genuine (also known as Duchenne) laughter, neural pathways have been triggered at a sub-cortical level in your brain so that you do not even consciously think about why something is funny. You don't need to worry, though, because philosophers and researchers have plenty of time on their hands to consider what causes something to make you laugh and there are a few generally accepted theories.

**Social signalling:** Laughter is generally considered to be a social signal and to have evolved out of play vocalisations to indicate that no threat is present and that there is an affiliation between the people laughing. Hence, laughter can be prompted by the need to show approval for or agreement with what has been said.

**Schadenfreude:** A darker side of laughter is when it arises from feelings of triumph or superiority over another person, think of the Bond villain who has James in a dire situation and indulges herself in a wicked chuckle. We call this "schadenfreude", the positive feelings that arise in response to the misfortunes of others, and it is an involuntary cause of laughter in even the best of us. It is why pathetic characters are often comedic and why seeing someone fall over gets such airplay on social media.

**Incongruity:** Incongruity arises when expectations are not met by reality. This is a fundamental truth of life. Buddha called it suffering, and we are programmed to laugh when it happens. Philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer acknowledged that these unexpected, sometimes absurd, moments are what stimulate laughter. Philosophers and psychologists agree that laughter is a way of mentally resetting and reconciling when expectations don't meet reality and, given the regularity with which this occurs, laughter is a psychological survival mechanism.

**The pleasure principle**

Life is hard but laughter helps. Millennia of our evolution have provided us laughter to strengthen our social bonds and ease our existential angst. Laughter is an unconscious thing on many levels, but you should not take it for granted. In the *Harvard Gazette*, psychologist Natalie Dattilo observed, "When you are not regularly activating the pleasure/reward centres of the brain, they go offline. So in order to feel good, we have to practise feeling good. And laughing is one of the most cost-effective ways to do that." The moral is to put yourself in positions where laughter can happen, embrace absurdity, give yourself permission to laugh and invite pleasure into your life. 🌟



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