

Even fake laughter is good medicine

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Psychologists say a minute of forced laughter can help the blues, writes Richard Morin in Washington.

The news is grim these days, so we all could use a good laugh, even a fake one, says a psychologist who claims that a minute of forced laughter can chase away the blues.

"Forced laughter is a powerful, readily available and cost-free way for many adults to regularly boost their mood and psychological wellbeing," said Charles Schaefer, psychology professor at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Teaneck, New Jersey.

Professor Schaefer also found that self-imposed smiling is a mood enhancer. But howling like a wolf for a minute didn't do anything - except make a racket, Professor Schaefer and his research colleagues reported in two separate studies in Psychological Reports.

His findings come from two experiments he conducted on 39 college students and Teaneck residents.

While additional studies with larger samples are needed to bolster his conclusions, Professor Schaefer said, these initial results are important enough to warrant attention.

Professor Schaefer said he uncovered the salubrious effect of artificial laughter in a study of 17 Fairleigh Dickinson students. He first asked them questions that measured their mood. Then he directed them to laugh heartily for a minute, and tested them again. On average, test subjects reported feeling significantly better after 60 seconds of fake merriment.

Why would phony laughter work? Because your body doesn't know it's fake, even though your brain might, Professor Schaefer said. "Once the brain signals the body to laugh, the body doesn't care why. It's going to release endorphins, it's going to relieve stress as a natural physiological response to the physical act of laughing."

Intrigued, Professor Schaefer designed a second study to compare the effects of forced laughter with continuous smiling or howling.

He directed 22 study participants to smile broadly for 60 seconds, laugh heartily for 60 seconds and howl for 60 seconds. Laughing and smiling both helped boost their spirits, but howling didn't, he found. Forced laughter was the best medicine. "One minute of forced laughing showed a significantly greater improvement than one minute of smiling," Professor Schaefer said.

How did test subjects know exactly what to do?

"My research assistant and I would demonstrate," Professor Schaefer said.

"We stood before them and laughed hysterically and then howled. I instructed them to imagine a wolf howling at the moon. When they saw a senior professor howling, it took away some of their natural self-consciousness."

- Washington Post