

## Discover Your Simple Power to Increase Happiness

**By Bonnie Budzowski, President, inCredible Messages LP**

Next time you need to boost your mood, head for a playground and watch the youngest children play. If you catch a glimpse of toddlers being pushed on swings or chasing balls for fun, you'll hear one of the best sounds in the world—laughter—and you'll feel better. Watching a baby or toddler in the act of play will lift your mood and bring a smile to your face.

Why does the sound of a child's laughter—even a child who is a stranger to you—have the power to lift your mood? How can someone else's laughter make you a little happier? The answer is simple: moods are contagious. Laughter has the power to enter into your very person and alter you and your mood, for good.

If you find this surprising, think about the reverse experience. We all remember days when our good mood was snuffed out by an angry boss, co-worker, or family member. We know bad moods are contagious. We have been victim to them.

We are, perhaps, less aware that smiles and laughter are contagious too. We might be unaware altogether that we have the power to spread good moods and enrich our own happiness in the process.

In *Primal leadership: Learning to lead with Emotional Intelligence*, authors Goleman, Boyatzis, and Mckee tell us scientists have begun to describe our limbic system, which is the seat of our emotions, as an open-loop system.

This is easy to grasp if we look, in contrast, at the circulatory system. Your circulatory system doesn't care about what is going on with toddlers at a playground or your colleagues at work. That's because the circulatory system is a closed-loop and self-regulating system—in many ways like your heating system at home.

Your limbic (emotional) system is a whole different story: what goes on with the people around you enters your system and alters it. In other words, the emotions and moods of the people around you are contagious. Some of the contagions are helpful and healthy. Some are definitely not.

Goleman and his co-authors tell us that scientists can now verify—by recording physiological data as two people have a conversation in a lab—that one person transmitting an emotional signal can literally alter the following functions of another:

- Hormone levels
- Cardiovascular function
- Sleep rhythms
- Immune functions

With this knowledge, you discover your own power to increase happiness, in yourself and in the world.

1. **Choose carefully the people whom you give access to your mood.** Minimize your contact with people who spread a pessimistic, grumpy, or critical approach to life or to you. Seek out people who are optimistic and upbeat. Build relationships with people who are positive contagions. Seek out people who infect your life with laughter!
2. **Spread the good mood you wish to find in the world.** Schedule time in every week for some sort of playful activity. Give yourself permission to watch movies, shows, or YouTube skits that make you laugh. Schedule time to have dinner, play board games, or share an evening out with people who know how to enjoy themselves.

Play is the work toddlers do to explore and grow. Play and laughter is the work adults do to balance out the demands and stresses that threaten our health and happiness. A good belly laugh is never a waste of time. It's an investment in your good health and happiness.

I first began to think about the power of laughter decades ago when I read the story of physician, Norman Cousins, chronicled in *Anatomy of an Illness*. The story takes place in 1964. Cousins is battling a debilitating illness in which the connective tissue in his spine is disintegrating. He is in extreme pain. The diagnosing specialist gives Cousins the bad news: "You have one chance in five hundred to recover."

In light of the odds against him, Cousins decides to check himself out of the hospital. With the help of his physician, the sick man undertakes a serious experiment with laughter and other affirmative emotions, like faith, hope, love, and the will to live.

Cousins begins the laughing part of his experiment with films of the classic TV show, "Candid Camera" and some Marx Brothers films. If you are not familiar with "Candid Camera," think of it as the original version of "You've Been Punked." Hidden cameras record people's reactions to ridiculous situations. You can't help but laugh when you watch this show, just as you can't help but laugh at the slapstick humor of the Marx Brothers.

Here is how Dr. Cousins describes the initial outcome of his experiment:

*I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep.*

Cousins won his battle with illness in the 1960s. His book describing the journey is a classic, still available today, nearly 30 years after it was first published. I keep the book on my shelf because it opened my eyes to some of my own power for happiness.

In the introduction to my 1974 edition of *Anatomy of Illness*, Cousins talks about a new class of hormones doctors were just discovering at the time of his illness, a class of hormones called endorphins. Think of how far we've come in our knowledge about endorphins and other "happiness" hormones that we influence by laughter, exercise, and love.

For example, in 2002 Daniel Goleman and his co-authors of *Primal Leadership* wrote this, based on the work of neurologists:

*In a neurological sense, laughing represents the shortest distance between two people because it interlocks limbic systems. This immediate, involuntary reaction, as one researcher puts it, involves "the most direct communication possible between people—brain to brain—with our intellect just going along for the ride.*

Notice the level at which laughter hits. It's at an involuntary, emotional, high-impact level. You see, smiles are good contagions. Laughter is even better. In fact, research shows that bosses who are upbeat and optimistic attract and retain employees better than bosses who are negative and pessimistic. If you want to be surrounded by relationships that can enrich your happiness, be playful.

I'm not suggesting you go out and buy joke books, but I do have a few suggestions:

1. **In tense situations, be the one who finds a reason to laugh or lighten up the mood.** Look for ways to break up tension in one-on-one relationships and groups. Keep your tone light and find humor in the moment, even in tough moments and hard times.
2. **Cultivate the ability to laugh at yourself.** Keep your own tasks in perspective, and avoid taking yourself too seriously.
3. **Assess the level of your own optimism.** Read *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* by Martin E. P. Seligman. Seligman is a renowned psychologist and clinical researcher who has been studying optimists and pessimists

for a quarter of century. After an explanation of the thought patterns that distinguish optimists from pessimists, the author teaches readers skills need to change from pessimism to optimism, with worksheets to guide along the way.

The topics of optimism and laughter figure into a discussion about seismic changes that are occurring in our culture today. Daniel Pinks, author of *A Whole New Mind*, claims the skills of what he terms the information and knowledge age are no longer sufficient—due to the abundance of goods in our society, the outsourcing of jobs to underdeveloped countries, and the automation that frees up much of our time.

Pink describes six aptitudes that will determine success in the new conceptual or design-focused age. These are design, story, symphony (mixing disparate parts into a harmonious whole), empathy, play, and meaning. The list is a far cry from qualities you find in traditional MBA schools.

As an example of the importance of play in our emerging culture, Pink points to an Indian physician from Mumbai named Madan Kataria. Dr. Kataria is committed to spreading laughter as a way to increase both health and productivity.

To put Dr. Kataria in perspective, Pink suggests we consider Henry Ford, who, as you know, was a key figure in the industrial age. Ford considered laughter a disciplinary offense. Dr. Kataria and other neurologists and scientists are pointing to the health benefits and productivity benefits of laughter in the workplace. We are now encouraging behavior that was considered a disciplinary offense around 100 years ago.

Kataria is so serious about the importance of play that he has made it his mission to trigger an international laughter epidemic. In fact, in 1995, he began a laughter club. After awhile, Kataria began to realize that to be truly effective, laughter had to come from inside a person. It couldn't be dependent on a comedian, a good movie, or something external. Kataria invented a thing called yoga laughter, which combines yoga breathing with self-generated laughter.

If you think this is crazy, take note. The first laughter club started with five people. By the time Pink published *A Whole New Mind* in 2005, he could report 2500 laughter clubs around the world. Today, the official Laughter Yoga site boasts 6000 laughter clubs worldwide. One club is conveniently located in my geographic area.

Humor and play are respected attributes and behaviors as part of our emerging culture. In addition to the ability to increase happiness, research shows that these elements play a role in good health and work-related success.

Most people I know can't imagine themselves joining a laughter yoga club. With work, family, and community responsibilities, most of us are looking for opportunities to increase our happiness without another commitment or event—especially one that seems odd to us.

Even the busiest among us can afford the time to visit a playground to watch children play. Those of us who are lucky enough to have young children in our lives can find time to play with them. We can all manage the time to watch a funny movie or schedule a lighthearted evening out with friends.

We can all spend a bit of time checking our relationships to assess the type of contagions we are inviting into our lives. And we can all spare a few hours to learn about optimism and how we control our thought patterns. After all, our own happiness is at stake. What could be more important?

**Bonnie Budzowski, President of inCredible Messages**, is a recognized expert—helping people to use influence and persuasion to sell their ideas and move business forward. Bonnie is a professional speaker, author and coach. She recently launched a new coaching project to help her clients **"Write the Book of Their Dreams."**

Clients appreciate Bonnie's practical, humorous and high-energy approach. She holds an MA in Communication and has been called upon to work with corporations, entrepreneurs, universities, and associations.

If you'd like to sell your ideas, boost your influence, or advance your career through a book or presentation, call Bonnie at 412-828-1629, [bonnie@inCredibleMessages.com](mailto:bonnie@inCredibleMessages.com) or visit her website at [www.inCredibleMessages.com](http://www.inCredibleMessages.com).