

Laughter as a Life Aphrodisiac and a Booster of Productivity

Pavel Malovič

When did humans begin to laugh? French director Jean-Jacques Annaud shows in his movie *Quest for Fire (La Guerre du feu)* that some 50 000 years ago the hairy, bipedal creature found out that it could frighten off the enemies by laughter and at the same time inform the members of its tribe that the danger passed away. But this is only a movie and a guess, because nobody knows when did the laughter exactly origin. It is well known, at least many books say so that only humans and apes can laugh. Dog lovers can only smile at this. They know that the man's best friend can laugh too. However, human laughter is a little bit different.

Hippocrates, the founder of ancient medicine, emphasized a "cheerful state of mind facing up the difficulties of living". The Greek philosopher Plato's opinion was that laughter was not appropriate for a dignified man. A famous Roman physician Galen, the best known from all the Hippocrates's successors, noticed that women suffering from breast disease (cancer) were melancholic and laughed less in the period before the disease's outbreak. Charles Darwin claimed that the cry and laughter are typical attributes of humans, which distinguish them from animals. This famous biologist said that the man began to laugh when he stopped being frightened. More precisely, by laughing, the human organism frees itself from the surplus of strength needed to face the fear. This idea led the Vienna psychiatrist and philosopher Sigmund Freud to create his theory of laughter as a "controller of a mental consumption" as well as the idea that "the laughter is a cheerful return to the childhood" (children laugh up to 400 times a day). According to Freud laughter removes aggressive intentions from our minds and enables our spirit to rest by putting off the ordinary problems of our life for a moment.

Besides this 'liberating' type of laughter, there exist one more, the 'uniting' type of laughter.

Henri Bergson, the most significant representative of French philosophy of life wrote about this type of laugh. According to him, even if we laugh alone, our laugh relates to other people and connects us with them. Jean-Paul Sartre, a French existentialist philosopher writes about the similar theme in his book *The Family Idiot* (*L'idiot de la famille*). He says that the laughter is a collective work and the person who laughs, by his or her laughter shows the affiliation to his or her background even when parted from it. We can feel it when we find ourselves within a group of people laughing at something we do not know.

Anyway we cannot doubt one thing: the contagiousness and 'infectiousness' of the laughter. The authors of TV comedies, clips, sitcoms or soap operas know this and often use a pre-recorded laughter. They play it simultaneously with the picture to give the spectators the signal that they should laugh. Behind this 'infection' lies a subconscious wish to imitate.

The human laughter unquestionably expresses the feeling of utmost contentment. We are happy because of a good company, good food, good game, or because we are healthy. A baby makes contact with surrounding world by laughing in the fourth month already. According to psychologists the first laughter is a sign that the organism of the baby has gained the resistance necessary for the following life. The child does not only imitate the smile of parents, uncles and aunties around. Physicians know very well that even a child born blind laughs. A weak and helpless child tries to make positive contacts with the world by its smile. After all even adults, for example when dealing with their superiors at work, lower the tension with their smile, they try to 'disarm' their 'stronger' opponent. The laughter is an act of the defence and aggression together. To ridicule your opponent is often more efficient than a direct physical aggression. Travellers described the 'laughter duels' among the Inuit. The participants exchanged jibes and gibes and the spectators from both opposing tribes assessed who was wittier and who should win this

bloodless duel.

Great differences in people's reaction towards what is considered funny inspired a group of Californian scientists to create a table sorting people according to the type of their laughter. However, the scientists then found out that the assessment may be done only roughly, because the type of laughter is as typical for the individual as the fingerprints.

Medicine studies enabled us to understand the mechanisms underlying laughter. Eyes or ears notice something funny and almost simultaneously the nerves transmit the information through chemical and electric pathways to the cortex of the right brain hemisphere, where the centre of laughter is placed. Depending on the intensity of the received stimulus the centre decides how we will laugh. It involves the facial muscles and sets them into activity, followed by other muscles all over the body. The mouth widens and provides unusual sounds. It has been discovered that laughter influences positively human health. In the 1980s, practical Americans created a laughing therapy. Dr. William Fry from Stanford University in California says:

“Healthy laugh is as beneficial as jogging. The chest muscles and the muscles of upper extremities contract and relax and this positively influences breathing. Our breathing deepens while we laugh, the lungs ventilation improves and the blood takes oxygen better. Blood circulation accelerates and the sense of relief spreads all over the body. Moreover, the muscles shaken by laughter may help with headaches.”

Physicians proved that laughter increases the release of the hormones of adrenal gland medulla thus leading to the increased endorphins release. These hormones are released also during sport or sex and have an antidepressant and satisfying, even euphoric effect. Allegedly, laughter increases the production of the growth hormone. Laughter positively influences also vegetative nerve system, and scientists have proved that it stimulates the human immune system. The volunteers showed an increased level of the immunoglobulin A after they watched a comedy or a concert with humorous songs. Immunoglobulin A is a substance, which

is an important part of the immune system that defends the organism against a disease. Some American companies used these findings and established 'laughter rooms' for their employees, where various movies are showed to induce a good mood of the employees. The joke is therefore regarded a good investment.

A book concerning laughter therapy written by a journalist Norman Cousins became a bestseller in the USA. Cousins suffered from a severe form of inter-vertebral discs inflammation and he was condemned to paralysis and wheelchair. He requested to be released from hospital and he cured himself by watching comedies and cabarets, and by listening to funny songs. Gradually, he has managed to defeat the disease. He wrote the above-mentioned book about his miraculous recovery and called it *Anatomy of an Illness*. Naturally, not everybody believed him; they emphasized particularly the fact, that his recovery was very exceptional even miraculous. But many physicians share the opinion, that even if laughter is not a miraculous cure for every disease, it definitely helps. A well-known psychologist Robert McGhee from Texas University in Houston accomplished a scientific research of Cousins' findings. He recommends (or prescribes) comedies and humoristic novels and songs for example to people suffering from high blood pressure. He is successful. There are serious reports of Dr. Peter Rubinstein, who improved the condition of the patients suffering from angina pectoris (constriction of coronary veins nourishing the heart) by a 'laughing cure'; the therapy also regulated digestion, lifted drowsiness and strengthened the resistance against pain.

Other scientists claim that one minute of laughing is worth 45 minutes of other type of mental relaxation. Laughter is related to the personality. Extroverts usually laugh more than introverts and dominant people laugh more than submissive ones. Women laugh more often than men. Confident people laugh more loudly than shy ones. Optimists laugh more often than the pessimists. Laughter can also be related to nervousness: trying to disguise it, but more likely it highlights it. Laughter can also be an outcome of specific drugs abuse.

Laughter and humour as a life programme and philosophy, this is the real laughing therapy for millions of people. There are many cases of unexpected recovery. Laughter mobilises natural defence mechanisms of our organism. Despite all of these benefits people laugh still less and less. In 1939 people laughed in average for 17 minutes a day, whereas in 1984 it was only 6 minutes; in 1995 we were lucky to laugh for mere three minutes a day. Who knows what is like today.

Dr. Anette Goodheart, an American expert in psychotherapy has been performing her experiments with laughing therapy almost for thirty years. She teaches her patients, among whose are many businessmen and Olympic games winners, how to laugh, cry and undergo other releasing processes. During this procedure she tries to reveal and release suppressed emotions like depression, guiltiness or enmity. According to her results, laughter has unambiguous positive effects both on psýchical and physical level. It is an ideal complementary 'sport' eliciting positive vibrations, which leads to a better performance, desire for victory, overcoming personal limitations and records and improvement of internal balance of the organism.

P.S.: Since 1998, the first Sunday in May has been recognized as the World Laughter Day.

The List of Authors

PhDr. Helena Bretfeldová
Orlí 12, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic
e-mail: helenabrno@volny.cz

Ing. Petr Dorůžka
Zelený pruh 14, 147 00 Praha 4, Czech Republic
e-mail: pdoruzka@quick.cz
<http://world.freemusic.cz>

Mgr. Juraj Hamar, CSc.
Starhradská 12, 821 05 Bratislava, Slovakia
e-mail: juraj.hamar@chello.sk

Janyl Jusubjan Chytyrbaeva
Českomalinská 776/25, 160 00 Praha 6, Czech Republic
e-mail: ChytyrbaevaJ@rferl.org

MUDr. Pavel Malovič
Grösslingova 61, 811 09 Bratislava, Slovakia
e-mail: malovic@pobox.sk

Jiří Moravčík
Nádražní 105, 543 01 Vrchlabí, Czech Republic
e-mail: jiri.moravcik@world-music.cz
<http://www.world-music.cz>

doc. PhDr. Martina Pavlicová, CSc.
Ústav evropské etnologie FF MU, Czech Republic
Arne Nováka 1, 602 00 Brno
e-mail: mpavlicova@quick.cz

PhDr. Irena Příbylová, Ph.D.
Katedra anglistiky PedF MU, Poříčí 9, 603 00 Brno, Czech Republic
e-mail: pribylova@ped.muni.cz

PhDr. Jan Sobotka
Vrázova 3, 150 00 Praha 5, Czech Republic
e-mail: jan.sobotka@nkp.cz

Mgr. Milan Tesař
Radio Proglas, Barvičova 85, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic
e-mail: tesar@proglas.cz
<http://hudba.proglas.cz>

PhDr. Jiří Traxler
Etnologický ústav AV ČR, v.v.i.,
Na Florenci 3, 110 00 Praha 1, Czech Republic
e-mail: jiri.traxler@seznam.cz

doc. PhDr. Lubomír Tyllner, CSc.
Etnologický ústav AV ČR, v.v.i.
Na Florenci 3, 110 00 Praha 1, Czech Republic
e-mail: tyllner@eu.cas.cz

Mgr. Tereza Vrbová
Katedra Kinantropologie a společenských věd, FTK UP
Tř. Míru 115, 771 11 Olomouc, Czech Republic
e-mail: tereza.vrbova@upol.cz

PhDr. Lucie Uhliková, Ph.D.
Etnologický ústav AV ČR, v.v.i.,
Veveří 97, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic
e-mail: uhlikova@seznam.cz