

# The Psychology Newsletter

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Issue III

Psychology is the science of the mind. It is the foundation of who we are. It allows us to understand our children, others and our own behaviours and thoughts. Psychology makes you a more insightful person, allows change to be possible, helps improve the way you live your life and increases overall performances in your work, social or personal environment. It is important to be non-judgmental, open-minded and want to learn more about our psychology.

This newsletter is written by qualified professionals in the field in order to provide **brief** evidence-based information and advice to the general public on different psychological issues that may be affecting our health and well-being. This newsletter will be offered to you on a monthly basis.

## The Laughing Cure

Have you ever laughed so much you felt as if you couldn't stop? Or had tears running down your eyes as you laughed? Or even felt sore in your chest and stomach after a good laugh?

'Gelotology' comes from the Greek word 'Gelo' which is the physiological study of laughter. Laughing is more than just a person's voice and movement. Laughter requires the coordination of many muscles throughout the body.

According to numerous studies, laughter has shown to have many **health advantages**: from stimulating your organs, strengthening the immune system, increasing vascular flow, lowering blood pressure to reducing food cravings and even increasing one's pain threshold. Laughter will not only reduce the production of hormones like cortisol, adrenaline, dopamine and growth hormones which accumulate stress, but will also increase the production of endorphins that helps fight disease. When we laugh, the released endorphins in our brain will have the same effect in our body as opium or morphine only without the adverse side effects. One study showed that immunosuppressive hormones (or hormones that harm the immune system) such as cortisol and epinephrine were lower in participants that laughed than in those that didn't. Another study indicated that laughing increases the amount of endorphins in our body when watching a humorous video. Laughter is therefore a form of anti-stress, a natural coping mechanism that helps release negative emotions that cause harmful chemical effects on the body.

**Laughter is like an exercise.** It gives the abdominal, respiratory system and facial muscles a complete workout. A person's heart rate can reach up to 120 beats per minute when laughing.

Mark Twain once said, "The human race has only one really effective weapon, and that's laughter. The moment it arises, all our hardnesses yield, all our irritations and resentments slip away, and a sunny spirit takes their place."

## Do we laugh because we are happy, or are we happy because we laugh?

Both of these are probably true, but we only exercise the former.

Robert Provine is one of the first to study laughter. According to him, there are 3 basic reasons why we laugh:

1. When we expect one thing and see or hear another (The Incongruity Theory).
2. When someone else makes a mistake, is silly or has a misfortune such as falling down (The Superiority Theory).
3. And when we experience a lot of tension and then the tension ends (The Relief Theory).

Laughter, unlike most medical drugs, affects mostly everyone in the same way, making them feel more relaxed. So why not laugh a little more? When one laughs, it relieves mental as well as physical tension, allowing you to be kinder to yourself and bond more easily with people. Try laughing yourself to work every morning and see how you manage the rest of your days. Let's all laugh together!

There is even an emerging therapeutic field known as '**humor therapy**' to help people heal more quickly, among other things. Hospitals around the world, such as the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City, are beginning to want to launch new humor programs for patients. We shouldn't be surprised if hospital stays start getting shorter.

However, it is important to keep in mind that some or too much laughter is not always advisable in some people with specific heart conditions, post abdominal surgeries or even people with broken ribs. Extra care should be taken in these circumstances.

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## Insomnia

Trouble falling asleep? Waking up many times during the night? Trouble going back to sleep when awake? Waking up too early in the morning feeling tired even after sleeping between 7 to 8 hours?

This is what we call insomnia. It is a sleep disorder that will not only affect you during the night, but the consequence of lack of sleep will also affect your overall functioning during the daytime, such as having trouble concentrating, feeling irritable, or somewhat low in mood and being less productive.

Most people will require approximately between 7 to 8 hours sleep, however, other people may require less.

Studies seem to suggest that women are twice as likely to suffer from insomnia than men. And further research suggests that social factors such as being divorced or unemployed are related to poor sleep, increasing the risk of insomnia in women.

## There are different types of insomnia.

These are known as: '**Transient**' (lasting from a single night to a few weeks), '**Intermittent**' (from time to time) and '**Chronic**' (lasting 3 nights a week over a period of a month or more).

There maybe different causes to insomnia. It can either be caused by a medical condition (such as cancer, parkinson, arthritis, Alzheimer, heart problems or asthma), by drugs, stress, depression or another mental health condition. The environment may also be an influential factor such as living in a noisy area, or living with a person that snores.

**Insomnia can be treated** in different ways depending on the type. For instance if your sleep disturbance is caused by a short-term change in your cycle, as with jet lag, your sleep pattern may return to normal on its own. If your sleep disturbance is more chronic, then seeking the help of a medical or a mental health professional such as a psychologist is advised. They will help identify the cause and treat the problem either through changing your lifestyle habits (such as reducing or removing caffeine, nicotine and alcohol that are known to affect sleep), use relaxation therapy and/or possibly use sleeping pills (although controversy surrounds the long-term use of sleeping pills).

Consult your doctor if you think you have insomnia or another sleep problem.

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## My Child Won't Stop Moving!

In the last few years, the family unit seems to have been propelled by a wave of mass media into the realm of 'overactivity'. The positive side of this is that it seems to have helped improve detection and diagnosis of varying problems displayed by children. The down side seems to have paved the way to an overabundance of diagnoses and the risk of misdiagnoses, leading sometimes to erroneous drug prescriptions such as the famous 'Ritalin'. **'Hyperactivity Child Syndrome'** appears to have hijacked families as well as consultation rooms. Why?

If we hear so much of hyperactivity today it may be because we give so much more attention to children's behaviours than we ever did before. There might not necessarily be an increase of children with disruptive behaviours, only an increased observation, improved understanding and shift in our attention. The following are causal factors that may be contributing to agitated and restless behaviours in children:

- The increased pace of life
- The over stimulating environment of the 21st Century
- Junk food
- Parenting quality

Without forgetting to mention, predisposing genetic, brain anomaly and brain chemical factors that can also explain a child's hyperactiveness.

**It is a friendly but firm approach that will stand the better chance of calming your child** and not an authoritarian, critical, confrontational and aggressive approach which could only exacerbate and reinforce the hyperactiveness.

It is important to note that **children are by nature active. Only about 5% of cases will have the disorder better known as ADHD** (or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). So how do we differentiate between 'normal' hyperactivity, ADHD or ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder)? Especially when they display similar behaviours:

- Inattention (i.e. easily distracted, poor concentration, forgetful, 'dreamer', passive)

- Impulsivity (i.e. acts without thinking, short temper)
- and/or Overactivity (i.e. restless, fidgety).

Observing which behaviours predominate, their magnitude and how well they are being handled will be essential if we are to determine whether the child is 'normally' active, 'emotionally' reactive, ADD or ADHD.

Behaviours that are usually associated with ADHD are as follows:

- Insatiability (i.e. never stops, confrontational)
- Social clumsiness (i.e. misreads social cues which lead him into trouble)
- Poor coordination (i.e. clumsy)
- Disorganisation (i.e. messy)
- Variability (i.e. the child may suffer from mood swings (sad/happy)- with good and bad days to the extreme)
- Specific learning disabilities (i.e. language problems such as dyslexia or difficulties with maths, poor performance in school)

It is essential to proceed with caution when we notice behavioural changes in our children. As the saying goes: 'better stay safe than sorry' and avoid rushing into hasten conclusions (such as saying the child is ADHD) that could be both damaging to the child as a whole and to the family as well. Sometimes, negative punishments, 'time outs' and other exclusion techniques will only work to your disadvantage, by reinforcing the problem at hand, rather than solving it. So **take your time.**

Taking the advice of different child mental health professionals who have experience with hyperactivity and ADD/ ADHD; and really **being an active detective** in informing yourself about the different possible reasons that could make a child act out, **will be essential, if you, as a parent, school teacher or other, want to really listen to and help your child.**

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## The "Feeling Good" TIP OF THE MONTH

There are many ways of helping oneself relax. The following is a simple method which you can learn to develop through **using your creative imagination**. You can carry out this exercise with or without the use of calm and relaxing music in the background.

1. First, make yourself nice and comfortable. Make sure you find yourself in a place you know you will be reasonably undisturbed. You can sit or lie down.
2. Take a deep breath with your eyes open. Breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth.
3. Pay attention to what you can see, hear and/or feel.
4. Now close your eyes. This will allow your brain to take a sensory rest. And start paying attention to what you can see, hear and/or feel with your eyes closed. Do this for a few moments.
5. Then start letting your imagination take you somewhere relaxing, and every time you exhale, you begin to feel your body become more and more relaxed.
6. Start by feeling your feet and legs and arms relax, then move to your torso, follow through with your neck and head to finish with your entire body feeling nice and comfortable in your relaxing place.
7. Take all your time. There is no need to rush!
8. When you feel you've relaxed enough, you can gently begin to open your eyes feeling nice and refreshed.

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If you have any questions or would like a particular topic to be covered in one of the next issues, please send an email to the following address:

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