

# Why We Laugh

## The Science Behind Humour

What happens in your brain when something is funny — and why laughter is the best medicine

■ B1 Reading ■ 30 min ■ Fun & Culture

<b>Level</b>	B1 (Intermediate)
<b>Skill</b>	Reading
<b>Topic</b>	Fun & Culture
<b>Duration</b>	30 minutes
<b>Age Group</b>	Teens & Adults

### Learning Objectives

- ◆ Read and understand a text about the science and psychology of laughter
- ◆ Learn 15 key vocabulary items related to humour, health, and social behaviour
- ◆ Understand why laughter is both a social tool and a health benefit
- ◆ Discuss cultural differences in humour
- ◆ Write about a personal funny experience

## 1 Before You Read — What Makes You Laugh?

Think about humour in your life and discuss:

1. What was the last thing that made you really laugh? What happened?
2. Do you think people from different countries find different things funny?
3. Can you think of a time when laughter helped you during a difficult situation?

## 2 Reading: The Science of Laughter

### The Science of Laughter

Laughter is one of the first sounds a human baby makes — usually around three to four months of age, even before they can speak. By the time we reach adulthood, the average person laughs approximately seventeen times per day. We laugh when we hear a joke, when we see something unexpected, when we feel nervous, and sometimes for no apparent reason at all. But what exactly *is* laughter? And why did humans **evolve** this strange, involuntary behaviour of pushing air out of our lungs while making **rhythmic** sounds?

Scientists have been studying laughter for decades, and their findings reveal that it is far more complex — and far more important — than most people realise. Laughter is not just a **response** to humour. It is a powerful social tool, a stress reliever, a pain reducer, and possibly even a form of medicine.

### Why We Find Things Funny

The most widely accepted theory of humour is called the "**incongruity** theory." It suggests that we find things funny when our brain detects a gap between what we expect to happen and what actually happens. A joke sets up a situation that leads our mind in one direction, then the **punchline** suddenly takes us somewhere completely different. This surprise creates a small burst of mental pleasure, and we express that pleasure through laughter.

For example, consider this joke: "I told my doctor I broke my arm in two places. He said, 'Stop going to those places.'" The humour comes from the **unexpected** interpretation of "places" — your brain expected a medical response, but received a literal, silly one instead. This tiny moment of surprise and reinterpretation is what triggers the laughter response.

## Laughter Is Social

Here is a fact that surprises most people: you are thirty times more likely to laugh when you are with other people than when you are alone. Despite what we might think, laughter is not primarily about humour — it is about **connection**. We laugh to show that we agree with someone, to signal that we are friendly and not threatening, to strengthen **bonds** within a group, and to reduce tension in uncomfortable situations.

This is why laughter is **contagious**. When you hear someone laughing, your brain automatically activates the same neural circuits, making you want to laugh too — even if you do not know what the joke was. Television comedies use recorded "laugh tracks" precisely because of this effect: hearing laughter makes the audience at home more likely to laugh along and enjoy the show.

## The Health Benefits of Laughing

Doctors have long suspected that laughter is good for health, and modern research confirms it. A genuine laugh increases your heart rate, expands your lungs, and stimulates the release of **endorphins** — the body's natural painkillers. Studies have shown that watching a comedy for thirty minutes can increase pain **tolerance** by up to 10 percent. Some hospitals have introduced "laughter therapy" programs, where patients watch comedies or participate in laughter exercises to reduce stress, lower blood pressure, and boost immune function.

Laughter also reduces **cortisol**, the body's main stress hormone. People who laugh frequently report lower levels of anxiety and depression, better sleep, and stronger social relationships. It is, as the old saying goes, truly the best medicine — and unlike most medicines, it has no side effects and costs absolutely nothing.

## Cultural Differences in Humour

While laughter itself is **universal** — every human culture laughs — what people find funny varies enormously across cultures. British humour tends to be dry, ironic, and self-deprecating. American comedy is often more direct and physical. Japanese humour frequently involves wordplay and **absurdity**. German comedy — contrary to the stereotype — has a rich tradition of sharp, intellectual wit.

Understanding these differences is important for anyone learning a foreign language, because humour is one of the last things language learners master. Jokes rely on cultural knowledge, double meanings, and timing — all of which require a deep understanding of both the language and the culture. Being able to laugh at a joke in a foreign language is one of the truest signs that you have reached a high level of **fluency**.

So the next time you laugh — whether at a joke, a funny video, or just the sound of a friend giggling — remember that you are doing something profoundly human. Laughter connects us, heals us, and reminds us that even in the most serious moments, there is always room for joy.

### 3 Key Vocabulary

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
<b>evolve</b>	to develop gradually over a long period of time	Humans evolved laughter as a social and survival tool.
<b>rhythmic</b>	having a regular, repeated pattern of sounds or movements	Laughter is a rhythmic pushing of air from the lungs.
<b>response</b>	a reaction to something; an answer or reply	Laughter is not just a response to jokes — it is a social signal.
<b>incongruity</b>	a lack of match between what is expected and what happens	The incongruity theory explains why surprises make us laugh.
<b>punchline</b>	the final part of a joke that makes it funny	A good punchline takes your brain in an unexpected direction.
<b>unexpected</b>	not predicted; surprising	We laugh when something unexpected happens in a familiar situation.
<b>connection</b>	a feeling of closeness or understanding between people	Laughter builds connection between people in social situations.

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
<b>bonds</b>	strong ties or links between people	Shared laughter strengthens bonds within families and friend groups.
<b>contagious</b>	spreading easily from one person to another	Laughter is contagious — hearing it makes you want to laugh too.
<b>endorphins</b>	natural chemicals in the brain that reduce pain and boost mood	Laughing triggers the release of endorphins — natural painkillers.
<b>tolerance</b>	the ability to endure pain or difficulty	Comedy can increase pain tolerance by up to 10 percent.
<b>cortisol</b>	a hormone produced by the body in response to stress	Laughter reduces cortisol, helping you feel less stressed.
<b>universal</b>	found everywhere in the world; common to all cultures	Laughter is universal — every human culture does it.
<b>absurdity</b>	the quality of being ridiculous or illogical	Japanese humour often involves wordplay and absurdity.
<b>fluency</b>	the ability to speak a language smoothly and accurately	Understanding jokes is a true sign of language fluency.

## 4 Useful Collocations

sense of humour · burst out laughing · laugh out loud · crack a joke · funny story · stand-up comedy · comic relief · inside joke · nervous laughter · laugh track · good mood · stress relief · social bonding · cultural difference · body language · facial expression

## 5 Reading Comprehension

1. How many times does the average person laugh per day?

- a) About 5 times
- b) About 10 times
- c) About 17 times ✓**
- d) About 30 times

**2. What is the 'incongruity theory'?**

- a) A theory that laughter is always about intelligence
- b) The idea that we laugh when reality differs from our expectations ✓**
- c) A theory that laughter is caused by physical tickling
- d) The idea that only humans can understand jokes

**3. When are you most likely to laugh?**

- a) When you are alone watching television
- b) When you are sleeping
- c) When you are with other people ✓**
- d) When you are reading a book

**4. What are endorphins?**

- a) A type of comedy show
- b) Natural brain chemicals that reduce pain and boost mood ✓**
- c) A stress hormone
- d) A type of laughter exercise

**5. Why do TV comedies use laugh tracks?**

- a) Because the actors are not funny enough
- b) Because laughter is contagious and makes viewers laugh along ✓**
- c) Because it is cheaper than hiring a live audience
- d) Because the law requires it

**6. Why is understanding jokes in a foreign language so difficult?**

- a) Because jokes are always too long
- b) Because jokes rely on cultural knowledge, double meanings, and timing ✓**
- c) Because foreign languages have no humour
- d) Because translating jokes is illegal

**6 Vocabulary Exercise — Fill in the Blanks**

Complete the sentences with the correct word from the box:

**contagious · endorphins · incongruity · universal · cortisol · fluency · bonds · punchline**

1. Laughter is \_\_\_\_\_ — when one person starts, others cannot help but join in.
2. Laughing triggers the release of \_\_\_\_\_, the body's natural painkillers.

3. The \_\_\_\_\_ theory says we laugh when reality is different from what we expected.
4. Laughter is \_\_\_\_\_ — every culture in the world does it.
5. Laughing regularly reduces \_\_\_\_\_, the body's main stress hormone.
6. Understanding humour in another language is a sign of true \_\_\_\_\_.
7. Shared laughter strengthens social \_\_\_\_\_ between friends and family.
8. A good \_\_\_\_\_ takes your mind in a completely unexpected direction.

## 7 Answer Key

### ■ Vocabulary Exercise Answers

1. contagious
2. endorphins
3. incongruity
4. universal
5. cortisol
6. fluency
7. bonds
8. punchline

## 8 Speaking & Writing Tasks

### ■ ■ Speaking Task: Discussion

Discuss these questions with a partner or your teacher:

- What type of humour do you enjoy most — slapstick, irony, wordplay, or dark comedy?
- Do you think you could be a stand-up comedian? What would you joke about?
- Is there a joke that works in your language but cannot be translated? Why not?
- Do you agree that laughter is 'the best medicine'? Can you give a personal example?

### ■ Useful Phrases for Telling Stories and Jokes

- **Have you heard the one about** the doctor and the broken arm? It is hilarious.
- **What makes this funny is** the unexpected twist at the end.
- **I could not stop laughing when** my friend accidentally sat on the cake.
- **The funniest thing that ever happened to me was** when I called my teacher 'mum'.
- **What I find amusing about this is** how different cultures react to the same joke.

 **Writing Task: The Funniest Moment**

Write a paragraph (120–160 words) about this topic:

**"Describe the funniest moment of your life. What happened? Who were you with?  
Why was it so funny? Do you still laugh about it today?"**

Use vocabulary from this lesson. Tell the story clearly, build up to the funny moment, and explain why it still makes you smile.