

THROUGH **LAUGHTER AND PLAYFULNESS**



IMPROVING LIVES IN CARE HOMES **AND FOR OLDER PEOPLE**

**A companion guide to the Feelgood FirstAid
Toolkit on Laughter**



FOREWORD

**For everyone involved with care homes and related services,
and generally for people getting older everywhere.**

The focus of this guide is happiness through appropriate playfulness and laughter.

As we grow older we may laugh less because of what's happening in our lives. But laughter can lift us above the trials of life. Laughter itself often doesn't mean *happy*, but rather it's a way of releasing stresses and tensions associated with many emotions including sadness, anger and fear. At the same time, laughing changes our physiology, and we can become happier. By encouraging appropriate laughter, we can help ourselves and others to become as happy as possible.

The guide has been created by Robin Graham with support and advice from people living in, working in and visiting care homes across Wales and other parts of the UK and researchers based Cardiff Metropolitan University and in the Wales School for Social Care Research at Swansea University. The development and production of this guide was funded by Awards For All Wales National Lottery Community Fund. We hope that you will find some of the ideas and exercises that are contained in this book both interesting and helpful.

If anyone wants to know how to lead laughter activities in more detail, they are advised to refer to the **Feelgood FirstAid Toolkit for Laughter** at <http://www.feelgoodcommunities.org/toolkit>. The Toolkit contains Essential Guidance Notes on pages 4-7 and a Disclaimer on page 27 which need to be read and agreed before trying out any activities: the Toolkit provides advice on when and how to take appropriate action regarding health issues, risk assessments, insurance and other considerations.

Please contact us if you would like more information, staff training in Laughter Facilitation or Laughter Yoga, or us to lead facilitated workshops. We can change our world with laughter!



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I. A LAUGHTER-FRIENDLY CARE HOME

THE EVIDENCE:

SEVEN GOOD REASONS WHY WE SHOULD FOCUS ON LAUGHTER AND PLAYFULNESS

“You don't stop laughing because you grow old. You grow old because you stop laughing.”
(Michael Pritchard)

Being happy

Being happy is *a state of being* (unlike pursuing happiness), and releasing the happy hormones helps us achieve this state. This is how they were described to me:

- Dopamine is about working towards and having achievements;
- Endorphins are painkillers and bring a sense of euphoria;
- Oxytocin comes through physical contact, trust and relationships;
- Serotonin comes from positivity and service to others.

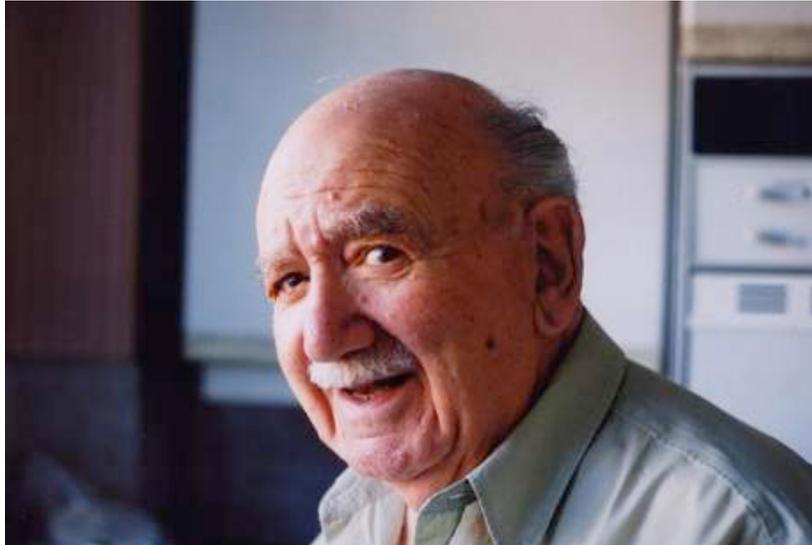
Laughter is so important because it releases dopamine, endorphins and serotonin. Doing something as simple as laughing with each other can uplift the spirits of older people and staff and volunteers and visitors. Even smiling can trick our brain into happiness. It's a social glue. We remember laughter with fondness. It brings us closer. It's free. No prescription needed.

The best medicine

Both research and our personal experience tell us that laughing brings people closer, breaks down barriers, helps positive thinking and creativity, reduces depression, and helps disempower those who would make fun of us.

Berk¹ (2001) reports on the psycho physiological benefits of laughter for older people; Houston and others² (1998) show it can promote psychological wellbeing in care homes. Other research shows:

- It boosts the immune, cardiovascular and respiratory systems, helping residents be healthier, preventing some illnesses and enabling them to deal more effectively with others; ³
- It neutralises stress hormones⁴ (cortisol, epinephrine), enabling everyone to deal more positively with everyday challenges and situations; ⁵
- It helps give relief from physical pain. Norman Cousins who lived with ankylosing spondylitis found that after 10 minutes of hearty laughing he could get two hours of uninterrupted sleep; ⁶
- It lowers blood sugar after a meal, so can help with diabetes; ⁷
- Laughter brings about the release of Endorphins, Serotonin and Dopamine. Even just thinking about laughter makes us feel good. The effects of a bout of mirthful laughter can last for hours, and even pretending to laugh (as long as you are enjoying the experience) will bring about beneficial physiological changes.



Dealing with life's challenges. With a smile.

A coping mechanism

Whilst acknowledging the need to think positively about old age, it is also important to recognise that it is also the time of life most associated with grief and the loss of loved ones. Deteriorating health, especially when living with progressive illnesses such as dementia can result in what is called *anticipatory grief*; a common experience for older people and carers⁸. Laughter can play an important role in dealing with grief and loss⁹ and worries.

Dr Annette Goodheart¹⁰ developed laughter coaching to help with release through laughter. We laugh with anxiety and fear and worry, and with anger and frustration and disbelief. Once we start to laugh, changes happen, positive feelings start to flow and the whole world changes. We can't laugh away our problems, but laughter may make our problems more manageable.

People may have resistance, saying, "I'm not going to laugh unless it's funny"; "I have nothing to laugh about". But we don't like being stressed, and we can choose to make use of our laughter as a way of releasing stresses. Laughter may also reduce our experience of physical pain.

Challenge ageism and stereotypes of older people as sufferers

Old age is often seen as a time of increasing disability and loss. This deficit-focused approach to old age often results in stereotypes of older people, particularly those with dementia, as *sufferers*¹¹. As a result, we can fail to see and connect with the person behind the label or diagnosis. Laughter is a universal language, dissolving the barriers of age, background, and status; laughter and playfulness can reveal the person as they are, as illustrated in the simple *magic moment* story by a frontline care worker:

There's more to me than meets the eye:

I was taking one of our residents somewhere in the car and we began to talk about her life. I know this resident had never been married and I had made assumptions about her past life as a spinster. I was therefore shocked and amused me when she said to me, "*I may have spent most of my life on the shelf, but that doesn't mean I was never taken down and dusted from time to time*". This made me laugh and challenged my misconceptions of older people.

Supporting connection and belonging

Human beings are social animals and our sense of self is often defined by the way people around us treat us¹². Feeling disconnected or socially rejected by other people results in feelings of despair and anger¹³. This is common in older people with dementia who can feel their connection with others slipping away. Advances in neuroscience demonstrate that laughter is a deeply embedded behaviour in humans, which has a very important role in supporting social connectivity and sense of belonging¹⁴. In fact, laughter is more about this than it is about being funny. This is nicely summarised in a TED talk on the subject of laughter by Professor Sophie Scott:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxLRv0FEndM>

Antidote to staff burn-out

Mental well-being is best maintained when people have mutual and reciprocal caring relationships, within which they are neither *over-benefitted* (i.e. others are doing everything for them) nor *under-benefitted* (i.e. they are doing everything for others)¹⁵. Care workers, especially in busy care environments can find themselves giving out to others all the time, which can create high levels of stress¹⁶. Those who truly care about the people they work with are also prone to *emotional labour*, which can take its toll on their health and well-being, unless they have the opportunity to talk and reflect on this¹⁷: laughter can play an important part in this process.¹⁸ Laughter, as part of the parasympathetic nervous system, helps take us away from a state of chronic stress. Even hearing laughter can help.

A Strengths based approach

When taking a strengths based approach to working with older people, it is important to recognise and build on the abilities they still have, rather than those that have been lost. This is particularly important when working with people with dementia. The areas of the brain that are least affected by dementia are those associated with imagination, feelings and emotions¹⁹. Engaging in laughter and playfulness taps in to these areas.



Dementia Café (photo by Nick Harrington)

DAVID'S STORY

When I was a child, my father had two ways to make us laugh. He might belly laugh, forcing it at first, until he was doing it with so much enthusiasm that we couldn't help but join in. Or sometimes he would look at us seriously and just tell us over and over, "Don't laugh. I know you want to. But don't laugh. Don't ...". He was always successful since we enjoyed playing these games which worked because they made us think about laughter even before we were actually laughing.

He was seen as a jolly man, a generous soul. He was a man who told us, "Laugh and the world laughs with you". He, like many other people, knew that laughter was the best medicine. But as he reached old age, as his eyesight failed, as he became less and less mobile, as he lost control of his physical side, he became angry and bitter. All the old resentments and regrets and injustices took on overwhelming importance. There were times when he would stare at the ground frowning, looking so sad and isolated. Here was the man who used to laugh so vigorously at my jokes even before I reached the punch line, and now he was hardly laughing at all.

I wanted to communicate this perception with him. I wrote him a poem. He laughed as I read it to him. It was called "Grumpy Old Man". When we laughed together, it uplifted him. The bitterness would melt away and the good memories would return. We were able to communicate. We were closer once again. And it left us both with a good feeling when it was time for me to leave.

He lived the last part of his life in a flat in sheltered accommodation and then in a hospital bed and finally a room in one care home and then another. When he moved in to the final care home, he had to give up his flat. The new room had just a couple of shelves for his memories and treasures. As I sorted things in his flat to choose what he might like to have with him now, I chose a teddy bear which I had given him twelve years earlier which had sat in his living rooms over the years looking incongruous and bringing him a smile. Some thought it was silly to bring it, but when we arrived in his room, and unpacked the things we had brought for him, it was the thing which brought most happiness. That teddy bear had everlasting happy memories associated with it.

The last time I visited him I was with my mum and brother, and we were smiling and laughing together and making emotional and everlasting happy memories for us.

Leading up to the day of my father's funeral, there had been no room for me to cry. Everything happened quickly, and in a city far from my home. Just before we went in to the chapel, I was behind the crowd, on my own for a moment. I turned away, smiled and laughed a couple of times at fond memories. I could feel the laughter helping me relax. And then the tears came.

2. WHERE TO START

“Laughter and smiling are the best antidotes to aging.” (Demi Moore)

A TOP DOWN APPROACH AND SETTING THE SCENE

Getting management buy-in and support

Before embarking in any kind of development work, it is important to secure buy-in from owners and managers within the care home or organisation. As well as giving permission for any new development or activity, they have a key role in supporting experimentation at the frontline. The things that worked well need to be celebrated and the things that did not work so well need to be seen as learning opportunities. Managers need to be leaders. The role of a leader has been summed up beautifully in a Harvard review of successful organisations that bring out the best in their workforce:

“The greatest leaders of innovation focus on setting the stage, not necessarily performing on it”. Linda Hill, Collective Genius

Developing the right kind of organisational culture for laughter and playfulness

The historical model of care for older people was focused primarily on the physical needs of residents, which had no room for laughter and playfulness. However, over the past few decades there has been a significant shift in thinking, perhaps best summarised by the work of Mike Nolan, who was until his retirement a Professor of Nursing at the University of Sheffield. Mike’s work with care homes and hospitals identified six **Senses** that need to lie at the heart of what he calls an *enriched environment of care* (within which laughter and playfulness can blossom and thrive). These senses need to be felt *not only* by residents and patients, but also by visiting family carers and, importantly, the front-line care workers. Within enriched environments of care, managers seek to ensure the *interdependent* well-being of residents, family carers and frontline care workers.

The Senses are:

- **A Sense of Security:** to feel safe and secure, not just physically but also psychologically.
- **A Sense of Continuity:** to feel that what we are doing in the present has links with our past.
- **A Sense of Belonging:** to feel *part of things*, maintaining existing relationships and forming new ones.
- **A Sense of Purpose:** to have valued goals to aim for and a feeling of *I have a contribution to make*.
- **A Sense of Achievement:** to feel able to achieve the above goals and feel satisfied with your efforts.
- **A Sense of Significance:** to feel that you matter, that your life has importance, and that other people recognise and value who you are.

Some of these tie in directly with the release of the happy hormones.

Before engaging in laughter and playfulness, it may be helpful to review the organisational culture of the care and to check out whether it is addressing these six Senses.

The following key principles for a laughter-friendly care home may also be useful:

10 key principles for a laughter-friendly care home

- **Attitude is everything.** The way we think about things influences the way we experience them. If we look for bad things, we'll find them. If we look for good things, we'll find them.
- **Only 100% commitment makes things change.** As a start, do things which are free or only cost little money and take almost no effort or extra time from staff.
- **Activities where we are totally engrossed bring us into the present moment.** When our mind is in the present moment we are happiest. Hobbies, activities, outings, things to observe, music, movement, appreciating nice food can all engage with our awareness. Being aware is being in the present moment.
- **We are here together,** so, where appropriate, involve residents, visitors and volunteers. Being empowered and choosing responsibilities can be uplifting, support some independence, and give a sense of achievement, belonging and home. This is people's home.
- **An uplifting energy in a person makes them more attractive to be around and encourages friendships.** Laughter can help us subtly change. Laughter is contagious, good for bringing people together. Good energy is also contagious.
- **Physical movement when possible changes how we feel.** In Laughter Yoga we say, "Motion creates emotion."
- **Encourage appropriate interaction for example by arranging chairs not in rows but facing each other.** Activity and interaction can relieve boredom and increase happiness; sitting on our own waiting for something to happen is not ideal.
- **Embrace the original meaning of silly.** The word derives from the old English word Seely, meaning happy, blissful, lucky or blessed.
- **The ART of good relationships is Acceptance, Respect and Trust;** it's the responsibility of the one who understands to bring these into their relationships.
- **Build up the right to engage.** Some people won't want to engage, and others will need to build and maintain trust.

A note on being in the present moment

Being in the present moment is a key to happiness. When we are engrossed in the present moment, we stop worrying about the future and regrets of the past. We can become engrossed, for example, in music, creativity and hobbies. It gives our mind a holiday and we find the greatest happiness, and relax, and laughter often follows.

People will engage when they choose to, maybe after seeing others enjoying themselves, and be open to new opportunities if it appears that nothing is really changing.

Recognising that frontline care workers are busy people, David Sheard has developed the *Butterfly Approach* to practice, turning every care task into an opportunity for human connection. Whilst a butterfly is busy, when it lands on a flower it gives it concentrated attention in the moment before flying on to the next flower. David suggests that every care task can be transformed into moment of human connection, tenderness and laughter, the effect of which lasts well beyond the moment itself. He explains the approach in the following film clip:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWpiggVpEys>

"We don't laugh because we're happy. We're happy because we laugh." (William James)

CREATING THE RIGHT KIND OF PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT FOR LAUGHTER AND PLAYFULNESS

No one wants to be told to be happy, but our physical environment can influence how we feel. David Sheard suggests the need to create an environment like 'home' that is filled with 'stuff' that residents, family and care workers can pick up and engage with. An example of this kind of physical and emotional environment, within which laughter and playfulness thrive, can be seen in the film **We are Family**, which can be found on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gcaElkEFfE>

With minimal effort, small changes may have an impact. For example, it may feel a lot friendlier to say, "hi" or "hello" with someone's name when you want their attention. "Hi Robert," may make a better connection than just calling, "Robert". And talking to someone with appropriate laughter while pushing them in a wheelchair for a couple of minutes can make an impact. Include appropriate playfulness and laughter in everyday life.

It may be that changes in the environment stimulate thoughts or encourage involvement. The effect and impact can be subtle. Changes need not be permanent. Some possible ways of creating a good physical environment for laughter and playfulness include:

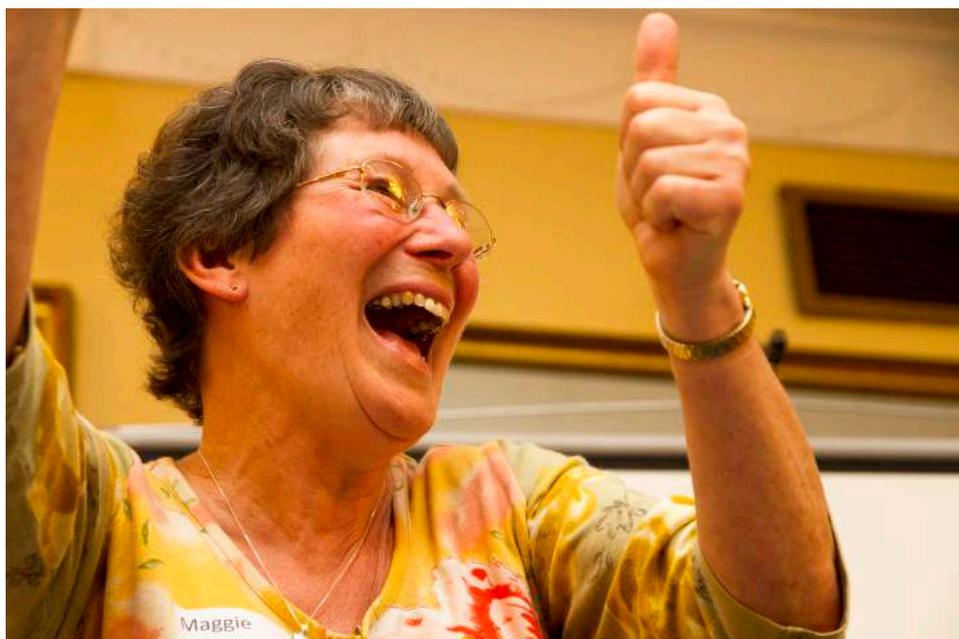
- Laughing pictures. Photos and pictures of genuinely smiling and laughing people can make us laugh and smile (consciously or subconsciously). Laughing babies are a good example if appropriate. Put laughing pictures in rooms and in communal spaces.
- The colours of walls influence our feelings. Consider an appropriate, bright, playful environment and happy themes.
- Consider what you might put on dining tables to bring a smile.
- Reserve a noticeboard only for uplifting notices, postcards and photos.
- Have a collection of happy, uplifting books, arts and crafts and games.
- Have a basket with compliments.
- Show TV programs which may be musical or comedy, but are uplifting. Everyone likes different comedy, so for the most popular shows there could be a weekly slot scheduled for the televisions in communal areas. Maybe a small group of residents could help organise this.
- There could be a 2- or 4-sided A4 handout with photos of older people really laughing, and anecdotes they tell about what they remember that really made them laugh in the past. This might be created in the care home, or with help from an outside organisation.
- And wearing bright colours might uplift us!

In particular, for the older people who stay in their rooms, consider how they communicate, and consider their environment. You might include laughing photos and uplifting images and playful objects with meaning for them. Know what people like. Bring along objects which represents their personal interests. Incorporate appropriate colours. Have laughter photos. And interact and praise appropriately and with a smile.

3. LAUGHTER BASED ACTIVITIES - LAUGHTER IS THE FOCUS

LAUGHTER CLUB

For people who like attending group activities, you might run a one off or regular Laughter Club, or invite in a Laughter Yoga Leader to lead it. The idea came from an Indian GP, Dr Madan Kataria, in 1995. It is based on laughter for no reason: no jokes are needed, just a willingness to be playful.



- **It is a gentle exercise class based on laughter and playfulness:** We lead gentle, appropriate, games and activities where laughter and physical movement are the outcomes. If we're enjoying the class we don't notice we're even doing exercise!
- **Yes, this is exercise.** We might move our arms, shoulders, necks and twist our body to each side, clap and do more, not thinking of it as exercise. But it is!
- **Who attends:** Residents attend along with some staff / volunteers and visitors may also join in.
- **Who leads it:** One of two members of staff can lead, or a Laughter Yoga Leader. We are not entertainers; our role is to facilitate participation. We may wear bright clothes, use props and play music, and we need to be joyful. We might use really big gestures for those hard of hearing and move around a lot.
- **Aims** for the session are exercise, enjoyment, being in the moment, and laughter.
- **Duration:** Usually a session lasts 10 to 50 minutes as an activity on its own. It can also be a short activity as part of something else. If there is social time afterwards then it may take up to 90 minutes.
- **Staff must be present.** The more willing staff are to join in, the more successful a session will be. More staff are required where residents need greater support or for longer sessions; they can help keep residents focussed, help them understand the instructions and add to the group energy.



Face yoga and laughter

- **Room set up:** A circle of chairs close together is best. All activities can be done sitting in chairs, with people reaching out to those on either side. Sometimes some people might like to move around and interact more widely. It is up to each person how they participate.
- **How it works:** For some people it may be challenging at first and they might feel inhibited; but laughter is contagious and little by little we hear and see others laughing joyfully, and that encourages everyone else to join in. The build-up of energy leads to a release through laughter.
- **Encouraging activities:** We encourage participants with sensitivity and respect, involve them, interact with them, greet, make eye contact, shake hands, smile, sing songs with them, share our laughter and our joy with them. We tell people to only join in with things they want to do.
- **Impact of Laughter Club:** It leaves a happy feeling from the physiological changes. The happy feeling can last long after the session is over. For residents with poor short-term memory, emotions stay even when the memory of the activity has gone.
- **Activities:** These will vary but follow similar patterns, depending on:
 - The size of the group, abilities of individuals, and special considerations;
 - The duration of the session, time of day, and the weather. People need energy to laugh, so on a hot day, or just after a meal then the activities will be slower;
 - The personality of the leader. Ideally a leader is natural in the way they lead.

See page 22 in the resources section for an example of activities in a full-length session.

Anita's Laughter Club Experience

Anita attended her first laughter workshop when she was 81. "I think it is a wonderful thing for people to let go of their inhibitions and feel free to laugh. It made me wish that I could let go and free myself from myself. I am an inhibited person. I am not an extrovert. I can talk easily but I can't laugh easily," she says.

People of different generations have different values and beliefs about laughter. "My background was with both parents working six, seven days a week. I was never taken out, never taken to the park with my parents; apart from weddings and funerals I never had any outings. I had to be very self-sufficient and never showed emotion. I was brought up at a time where children should be seen and not heard. I don't remember laughing with my parents. Trying to make me laugh can make me cry."

Of her second workshop, Anita says, "I enjoyed it. During the course of the workshop I started to cope better with it". And what would make it easier for her? "If I did it with people I knew."

Anita now has things around her home which make her smile. She has some silly postcards, family photos with big smiles, books of funny poems and pictures, and a laughing monkey toy that laughs when you squeeze it's hand. And when I visit her, we joke and be silly because now that is what we always do.



Laughter Club activities

FOR STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

Having some time exploring laughter helps us understand both our own laughter and that of the older people, carers and visitors we are in contact with: why we laugh, what it means, and how does it make us feel. Maybe we can find new ways to deal with life's challenges and frustrations using our own laughter and playfulness, and ways to interact with the people with us. Training can also show staff how to run their own Laughter Club, either as a main activity, or as part of something else.

4. OTHER ACTIVITIES TO BRING LAUGHTER AND SMILES

Find things that people like and interests in common: often laughter and smiles are by-products. Encourage hobbies. Make connections. Playfulness is often the key.

“A smile is the shortest distance between two people.” (Victor Borge)

CREATE A LAUGHTER COLLECTION

For those days when we don't feel like laughing or smiling we can have a bag or box or drawer with things that encourage our laughter and happiness. It may include:

- Pictures of family, pets and places;
- Audio and video recordings;
- Books and items that made us smile in our past;
- Toys, games and items that make us laugh now;
- Recent photos of us laughing together.

We could go to our Laughter Box when we want to smile but can't.

KEEP A LAUGHTER DIARY

Things which really made us laugh in the past will bring a smile or a laugh when we remember them in the future. We are not just talking about jokes, but also about life experiences and interactions.

For the times when we have really laughed out loud, record the memory: where we were, who was there, and what happened at the time and maybe afterwards. There may be just a few memories. We can write or use photos and recordings to preserve them.

It is never too late to start a laughter diary. From time to time update the diary with new laughter stories. As we grow older, our laughter diary can provide topics for discussions and shared laughter.

LAUGHTER LEAFLETS

Gather funny and happy anecdotes about people's lives and take photos of people genuinely laughing. These can be printed and put on noticeboards or left appropriately on tables, along with playful, silly pictures. Seeing silliness can bring us into the present moment. These leaflets could be created by people at the care home, visitors, as school projects and by organisations outside the care home.

MOODY MANTRA

Is there a phrase that makes us smile or laugh despite everything? It might be a group phrase, or it may be an individual one. Mine is, “Ha ha ha bloody ha,” and it makes me laugh or smile when I say it out loud. Laughter helps us cope and feel happier.



Joyful pictures might make us smile! (Photo by jamesphotography.co.uk)

CONNECT BY GIVING AND RECEIVING

Giving to others, as appropriate, will bring joy and smiles to both giver and receiver. It might be:

- **A genuine smile.** We usually recognise a fake smile, but a genuine smile arises spontaneously. It's joyful (as long as we're not smiling at everyone and expecting a response!)
- **A hug, holding a hand, putting an arm round a shoulder.**
- **A compliment.** Some people are embarrassed by compliments, but naturally given (perhaps in a matter-of-fact way) and genuine compliments are uplifting!
- **Praise.** We feel reassured, acknowledged and appreciated when we receive genuine praise delivered sincerely. Sometimes just getting up in the morning is an achievement to praise.
- **A small gift.** Small gifts given with sincerity bring smiles. Little gifts can be given often.
- **A treat.** A treat can uplift us, intrigue us, and leave us with a happy feeling. Small treats can be often.
- **A celebration or special occasion.** It is nice to bring people together willingly to celebrate, and almost certainly it will involve laughing.

Giving to ourselves

Each day we might choose to have a treat, a challenge, an adventure. It depends how we look at life: we may notice we are already having them.

By appreciating connections, setting an uplifting goal, acknowledging our daily achievements, observing challenges overcome, and encouraging appropriate playfulness in our lives when they are seemingly getting too serious, we can release some of those happy hormones.

Gratitude.

Being grateful can raise our energy. Perhaps identify three things we are grateful for each day. They may be the same every day. Gratitude works magic.

Competitions and prizes, awards and certificates, and medals.

These can all be for residents, staff and indeed anyone, and can be awarded for all sorts of things.

- **Medals** can be quite playful. They are nice because we can have them on show in our room or office. We can playfully award (ourselves) medals for accepting what has happened, and for being really good at bad habits that we don't want to actually do. If there was no bad intention or negligence, then rather than beating ourselves up for doing something wrong let's be playful and award a medal for a learning opportunity. If we can get over quickly it through smiling we can learn and move on.
- **Awards and certificates** seem a little more serious. They can be uplifting when a person has achieved something.
- **Competitions** with a level of playfulness can be nice (if not taken too seriously or have a disproportionate prize. They could be based on random guesses and events, or be run where the participants choose a winner, or better still everyone who takes part is a winner.



Finding humour in the world around us.

FOR VISITORS

Despite challenges that visitors may face, we want our visit to be as pleasurable as possible. Laughter and playfulness can be uplifting for everyone, including the person driving the car, the children who can't stay at home, and the main visitor who wants to spend time with someone. If the visitors are engrossed then this can help the visit to be uplifting.

- For children, perhaps there can be a box of toys permanently available.
- For adults, there could be a small collection of interesting books, items and games, and things to do outside when the weather is nice.
- Have a workbook for the visitor to write in. They may note down topics of discussion, particularly around good times in the past, remembering laughter; and any notes about what worked well during the visit, and ideas for future visits.

Joe's story

When I visit my mum in her care home, the routine on every visit is to sign in, find her, and sit on the same sofa. It is a routine, like a ritual. The sofa is quite low, and together we wonder how she is going to get low enough to sit down on it, and we laugh together. She is 91, which is a prime number, so I explain and tell her, "Mum, you're in your prime", and we laugh together. And when she gets too sad and says that she wants to jump off the roof, I say, "Mum, you'll never get up all those stairs, and even if you did then you're so light these days, you'll just fly like a kite". And we laugh together. I used to make her laugh by pulling funny faces at her, and now she pulls faces at me, and we laugh together. Before I leave, she tells me she's feeling happy.

Intergenerational activities and children.

Children can unintentionally be so entertaining and often make us laugh. Just watching them play in the care home can be uplifting because of their energy. We may feel emotional connections when they are laughing or even crying. They bring us into contact with our own humanity. Parents accompanying them also often have joyful faces as they play with their child. The energy can help us feel relaxed, calm and happy.

PREPARING FOR OUR OWN OLD AGE.

Including laughter in our plans can improve our quality of life. Very often, the capacity to laugh decreases as we get older. In terms of comedy, we may not understand jokes and the cultural influences behind them. But we can start a laughter diary now to help us remember happy, funny times. Humour is individual, but laughter is universal. With technological advances, we can have online laughter boxes and diaries.

PLAYFUL OBJECTS – LESSONS FROM THE LAUGH PROJECT



LAUGH® is a research project, led by Professor Cathy Treadaway that has been developing playful objects to engage, comfort and soothe people living with dementia and post stroke cognitive impairment. The LAUGH® design team are based in the CARIAD research centre at Cardiff Metropolitan University.

The playful objects that they develop are informed by conversations and interviews with people living with dementia, their families, carers and health professionals.

The work is based on Compassionate Design principles, that place loving kindness for the person at the heart of the design process and focus on ensuring designs are highly personalised, sensory and help people to connect with each other and the world around them.

The playful objects they create are interactive hand-held devices that are designed to provide stimulation, reduce anxiety and give pleasure to people who are bed or chair bound and experience cognitive challenges. They have been found to help stimulate moments of deep sensory reawakening, boost social interaction and provide laughter and fun.



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LAUGH® <https://www.laughproject.info> , [Professor Cathy Treadaway](#) and [Compassionate Design](#)

CLOWNING - LESSONS FROM THE SMILE PROJECT

Whilst some people might see laughter and playfulness to be frivolous activities, a scientific research study in Australia called the Smile Study²⁰ discovered clear evidence that the *Laughter Boss* and *Elder Clown* programs were effective in enhancing the well-being of care home residents. Whilst these programs did not have a significant impact on depression, they had a significant impact on agitation, a common condition in residents, especially those who have dementia.

The Elder Clowns program together with the Laughter Boss program is demonstrated in the following film clips:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOVqO_aavWs
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fpNHafURYU>

5. SUPPORTIVE RESOURCES

TOP 10 TIPS FOR LAUGHTER AND PLAYFULNESS IN CARE HOMES

Here are 10 playful tips primarily for staff and volunteers aimed at improving quality of life: not only does laughter make us happier, but if we as individuals have more laughter in our lives then the people around us can benefit from our happiness, calmness and positive outlook. As we all have a different sense of humour, never force anyone to do something just because it is funny to you; only invite them to join in and laugh.

1. Start each day with a laugh – a fake one is fine! Staff could start a shift this way. Laugh with others or on your own. You can even laugh with yourself in the mirror: if you feel angry, have an angry laugh, because being playful about it will encourage genuine laughter.
2. Give a genuine smile to everyone. If at first it's not genuine, then persevere anyway! A genuine smile can light up someone's day.
3. Give compliments to each other without expecting or needing one back. Giving a compliment can be as good as receiving one. Compliments help everyone to appreciate each other more.
4. Make available a collection of books, DVDs, CDs, pictures, photographs and other things associated with happy memories for residents, visitors and staff. Individuals can also have their own collections. Put photos of genuine hearty laughter on the walls and tables, and perhaps make a newsheet of laughter and funny anecdotes.
5. Have an uplifting notice board (and pictures in corridors) to encourage people to smile and think positively. A notice board may include facts on the benefits of laughter, or reminders about some of the points on this list.
6. Have a silly toy which is so silly it makes you think of laughing. Fill a cupboard with them and let people borrow them.
7. Create rituals which make you laugh. Maybe create them in a group. Staff can have a ritual on arriving at work or when leaving. Join in rituals which bring a smile or laughter.
8. Have a treat, a challenge and an adventure every day! Even small things can be treats, challenges and adventures! Seeing things this way helps instil a positive attitude.
9. Hold gentle exercise sessions based on laughter. This can include singing, stretching and swaying to music, playing simple games, holding hands, and giving yourself permission to laugh.
10. Before going to sleep, remind yourself of three things for which you are grateful. Then end the day with a giggle. Staff may finish a shift this way. The last thoughts you have before sleep are the one you wake up with.

GUIDANCE FOR LAUGHTER YOGA LEADERS

In advance, with the staff, agree setup, requirements, and special considerations. On the day, arrive early, greet the staff, meet the residents, shake hands and greet them and ask them their names.

Contraindications:

- Take care because of high blood pressure, heart disease, chest pain and breathing issues.
- If anyone has headache after a laughter session they should be medically assessed

Arrival and set up:

- Arrive early, make introductions, get to know names of people.
- Get the organisation to sign the liability form.
- Check in advance of special needs in the group.
- Sit on chairs in a circle, and don't exclude people who can't walk around.
- Have members of staff present and participating.
- Wear bright clothes, and maybe use appropriate props, toys, hats and bright colours.

Considerations:

- We must never do anything that an external onlooker might think is humiliating or demeaning.
- Explain to everyone that it is about healthy exercise and that we don't have to really laugh.
- It's often best if laughter games are based on things from everyday life or at least things that people are familiar with and don't have to think about.
- The whole session can be done in chairs, with people interacting with those either side.
- For *greetings laugh*, *mobile phone laugh*, and others where two people are involved, the leader and the staff members and any participant who wants to can move around and interact with everyone in the circle. It takes time, and if it is just the leader doing it then be aware of keeping everyone involved in some way.
- Don't expect to always see an interaction from a person. It is still ok if someone does not appear to be involved; we still include them, and the session can still change an individual's energy.
- We can chant Ho ho ha ha (one less ha), or, "Very good, very good, yay," and keep it all slower.
- Don't get people to raise their arms so far / so much when doing the breathing between activities. People might be encouraged to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. Breathing in is like smelling a rose.
- Applause – it is great exercise and brings joy if done playfully and in celebration.

Things we may include:

- Physical contact, with permission, particularly holding hands and people holding each other's hands, and Laughter Yoga exercises which bring people in to physical contact.
- The *milkshake laugh* and variations of it.
- People to laugh with aches and pains and point to the pain, and maybe apply laughter cream and a laugh.
- Depending on physical ability, and not doing these if a number of people are unable to, we can lead exercise-based games such as *roller coaster* and *bicycle*.

Possible other activities:

- Have music. We can sway or dance to music (from our chairs).
- Sing songs appropriate for the generation and cultural background. Often songs from childhood are good because they are easy and people with dementia may be more likely to remember these. Ask people what songs they like.

EXAMPLE OF A LAUGHTER CLUB SESSION

Introduction – keep speaking to a minimum (5 minutes)

- Welcome people and the leader(s) briefly introduce themselves.
- Briefly say why we are doing these laughter activities and get people thinking about laughter.
- Tell personal anecdotes about laughter and share funny memories (and do so throughout).
- Invite people to choose to join in with what is comfortable for them.
- If you wish, let everyone introduce themselves with a name game. The Laughter Yoga name game has people say their name and then laugh or pretend to laugh, and everyone else laughs with them.

Warm ups and games - (5-10 minutes)

- Gently warm up the body and relax the mind with some playful activity.
- You might include some of:
 - o Breathing exercises: for example, play with the idea of breathing out saying “Ha!”
 - o Smiling exercises: make our face smile, and exchange smiles with other people.
 - o Stretching exercises: playful gentle stretches of our body, and gently shaking out. Select warm up exercises for various parts of the body: face and head, shoulders, arms and hands, waist, legs and feet. Let it be slow, gentle, focus on a nice stretch, and tell people only do what is comfortable for them.
 - o Maybe pretend to do daily tasks such as washing our face, or eating a giant cake.
 - o Laughter sound exercises: we could sing along to The Laughing Policeman or other familiar, funny or uplifting songs. We might sing a song but using our own choice of funny words or sounds.
 - o Play with the main laughter sounds (Ha, Hee, Ho)



International Laughter Club in the park, part of the HaHa project

Laughter Activities - (15-30 minutes)

- Gently ease people into laughing activities. There is guidance in *Laughter Yoga for Seniors: exercises from Dr Kataria of Laughter Yoga International*²¹. Also check out the Feelgood Toolkit at <http://www.feelgoodcommunities.org/toolkit> for a more in-depth description of activities.
- Select some Laughter Yoga games where we laugh together.
 - o Greetings are very good. We greet people around us with eye contact, a handshake and a laugh. We might just greet people either side of us. If staff members go around to everyone then the eye contact and physical contact is often powerful. If any participant walks around doing the activity then leave enough time for them to complete what they are doing.
 - o Appreciations are great, with a High5, a thumbs up, or other interaction.
- Other Laughter Yoga games based on everyday activities and nature are good. We might mix a drink and drink it with a laugh, laugh silently, or smell a beautiful imaginary flower with a laugh. We might have a go hugging ourselves / others and laughing. We might measure out a set of laughs – small, medium and big.
- Keep everything simple and avoid complication, confusion, and having to think what to do.
- Suggest to people that between activities we will say “very good” as you clap once, then another “very good” as you clap again, then cheer “yay” and raise arms or thumbs! You can repeat “Very good very good yay!” two or three times together, and use it throughout the laughter session.



Laughter Club session at a Dementia Café (photo Nick Harrington)

Celebration, meditation – (5-15 minutes)

- It is lovely to celebrate together when everyone is relaxed.
- Depending on ability, its great having conversations including about wonderful things in life.
- We might choose to do the meditative *laugh for no reason*. We sit and chuckle. Set a timer, or let it naturally stop. It might last a few seconds, or go on for a few minutes. Be aware of attention span. At the end ask people to quietly rest for a couple of minutes.

Relaxation and close - (5-10 minutes)

- Maybe lead a relaxation exercise such as Yoga Nidra. It feels really good for some people after the laughter session. It could take 5-10 minutes just for this. It might send some people to sleep.
- At the end, let people briefly talk about their experience of the session if they wish. It might be nice to have refreshments too.

LAUGHTER AND SMILES PLANNER FOR VISITORS:
EACH VISIT CAN BE A SMALL CELEBRATION OR LIKE A PARTY

What can we take with to bring smiles and laughter?

For us:

For our older person:

Stories we enjoy telling, and jokes that get a smile:

Positive news to talk about:

Photos we can share:

Activities we can do that bring laughter and smiles:

LAUGHTER-FRIENDLY TICK LIST

Is there owner / management support?

Has there been staff training which includes the benefits of laughter and playfulness? Include:

- A review of *The Senses*.
- Review of the 10 key principles to see what is relevant for you / your care home.
- See how as much as possible everyone can *be in the moment*.
- Review how to greet and interact with each other.
- Select your own moody mantra to help you smile despite everything.

Have you created the right physical environment in your location for laughter and playfulness (always as appropriate)?

- Lighting of the environment.
- Colours used in the environment.
- Uplifting and silly books and objects put out / available for sharing.
- Genuine joyful laughter pictures on display including in rooms where appropriate.
- Happy noticeboard / happy handout / laughter leaflets.
- Maximising opportunities for interactions (e.g. with layout of chairs and tables).
- Selected a TV schedule for comedy programs enjoyed by the older people.

Can you create / have you created laughter diaries with everyone?

Are you leading short Laughter Club activities or have you invited someone in to lead a full Laughter Club session (if appropriate for people).

Are you connecting with others (as appropriate) through laughter and playfulness?

- Genuine smiles when catching someone's attention.
- Genuine smiles with any other interaction.
- Genuine Compliments.
- Praise.
- Small treats or gifts which cost nothing.

Do you celebrate and have celebrations?

- Medals playfully and positively awarded especially for things that worry us.
- Awards for achievements.
- Non-competitive competitions (where participants all win or choose the winner).
- Celebration events (which can be very small or very short).

Do you give time to appreciate yourselves and to tune in to gratitude?

Have you provided playful things for visitors?

- Toys for children.
- Fun items for adults.
- Suggestions for uplifting things visitors can do during their visit.

6. BOOKS, READING AND REFERENCES

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WEB LINKS AND ARTICLES OF INTEREST

Happiness and physiology:

- The Dalai Lama writes about the purpose of life and happiness:
<https://upliftconnect.com/dalai-lama-what-is-the-purpose-of-life>.
- More insight into happy hormones:
<https://www.happiness.com/en/magazine/science-psychology/happiness-hormones/>
- Even smiling can trick our brain into happiness:
<https://www.nbcnews.com/better/health/smiling-can-trick-your-brain-happiness-boost-your-health-ncna822591>
- The benefit of just even hearing the sound of laughter:
<https://bpsmedicine.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13030-018-0141-0>
- Just the expectation of a mirthful laughter experience boosts endorphins 27 percent:
<https://phys.org/news/2006-04-mirthful-laughter-boosts-endorphins-percent.html>
- The *Fight or Flight* response:
<http://www.nwbh.nhs.uk/healthandwellbeing/Pages/Fight-or-Flight.aspx>
- TED talk on the subject of laughter by Professor Sophie Scott:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxLRv0FEndM>
- Laughter is contagious – just watch:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-iVZvdzeGM>

Support:

- Death Café: speak freely and openly and often positively about death and dying:
<https://deathcafe.com>
- Dementia Café (at the Alzheimer's Society web site):
<https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/get-support/your-support-services/dementia-cafe>

An inspiring film:

- David Sheard's film, **We are Family**:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gcaElkEffe>

A practical book:

- John Killick (2013) *Playfulness and Dementia: A Practice Guide* (University of Bradford Dementia Good Practice Guides). London, Jessical Kinglsey Publishers.

The Laughter Bosses and Elder Clowns programs:

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOVqO_aavWs
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fpNHafURYU>

The Laugh Project:

- <https://www.laughproject.info>

The HaHaEurope project:

- <https://haha-europe.wordpress.com>

Feelgood Firstaid Toolkit:

- <http://www.feelgoodcommunities.org/toolkit>

7. FINAL POINTS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Contraindications notice

Laughter is part of everyday life and we laugh naturally as a release. However sometimes in laughter sessions something happens and we can end up laughing quite vigorously. So we have to look after ourselves and be responsible for what we join in. There are guidelines to check to explain more:

https://laughteryoga.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/contraindications_to_ly.pdf
<https://www.laughteronlineuniversity.com/laughter-contra-indications/>

What next:

Contact us at carehomes@feelgoodcommunities.org

- if you would like staff training, or to train either as a Laughter Yoga Leader or Laughter Facilitator, or a workshop on using this companion guide and our toolkit.
- if you would like us to keep you up-to-date with occasional emails.

Disclaimer

In creating this toolkit, we have made every effort to ensure that the instructions, examples and guidance are safe and accurate. However, it is the responsibility of groups and leaders to ensure that everything is suitable, safe and carried out with due diligence, including having insurance, checking the list of contraindications online, and carrying out a risk assessment. It is always essential to seek medical advice from a trained medical professional in case of any concerns about suitability of activities or if having any of the conditions listed in the contraindications. Laughter can involve some physical strain and an increase in intra-abdominal pressure and involve other physiological changes. This is just a companion guide and toolkit with ideas, and not a training manual: the author and organisation cannot accept liability for any resulting injury or damage to persons or property, however it may arise.

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