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Laughter Is Food for the Soul

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[Patch Adams](#) is a doctor as well as a professional clown, who puts on funny hats and a big nose when visiting children with terminal cancer to make them laugh. He believes laughter, joy, and creativity are part of the healing process. [Susan Sparks](#) is a Baptist minister as well as a standup comic who believes laughter is the GPS system for the soul, which she describes in her [book](#), "Laugh Your Way to Grace: Reclaiming the Spiritual Power of Humor." Rabbi Noah Weinberg [reminds us](#) that "laughter is a deeply spiritual emotion," not to mention Purim, the official "Jewish day of laughter, when we dress up in funny clothes and act silly."

The connection between laughter and physical and spiritual health is gaining credence in the mainstream health care system. The Cancer Treatment Centers of America, upon a patient's request, introduced a [laughter therapy program](#) in their midwestern regional medical center that uses the natural physiological process of laughter to help relieve physical or emotional stress and discomfort. These laughter clubs or humor groups give cancer patients and their families a tool for healing.

Many breast cancer survivors believe that humor is a part of their spirituality, and it helps them to find meaning and purpose in their lives, according to a [2002 study by Paige Johnson](#), a nurse practitioner at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. Johnson [writes](#), "Humor is a component of the human experience. It enables some patients with cancer to adapt to difficult or stressful experiences regarding their disease. So often, nurses hear patients [say](#), 'If I don't laugh, I'll cry.'"

A serious look at laughter as healer was prompted more than 30 years ago by Norman Cousins' groundbreaking book, "[Anatomy of an Illness.](#)" When he was diagnosed with an incurable disease and given only months to live, Cousins, an author and professor, watched Marx Brothers movies and Candid Camera TV shows and laughed himself back to health.

He claimed that 10 minutes of belly laughing gave him two hours of pain-free sleep. He claims to have cured himself and lived for many more years. Twenty years ago Mandan Kataria, a physician from Mumbai, India, created [Laughter Yoga](#), a unique exercise routine that combines group laughter exercise with yoga breathing. Kataria launched the first laughter club in a park with a handful of people. Today it is a worldwide phenomenon with more than 6,000 social laughter clubs in about 60 countries.

Jeanette Watson Sanger, a certified laughter leader who studied with Vishwa Prakash, began giving her laughing yoga classes to veterans at the Volunteers of America-Greater-New York residence in Manhattan. She told a ["Daily News" reporter](#) that "yoga and laughter may not be the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of services for veterans," but they are one of the most engaged groups she has ever worked with.

Patch Adams' world famous Gesundheit Institute is devoted to restoring people and the planet to wholeness and health through laughter and loving care, by training health care clowns. As Adams [notes](#), we define clowning as "spontaneous improvisational play." I know of a health care chaplain, Anthony Silano of Pacific Health Ministry in Honolulu, who found that taking improv comedy classes was not only a way to unwind after a stressful day, it was helping him in his practice, too. He became a better listener and now looks for [opportunities](#) "to bring humor to tough situations."

Canyon Ranch Spa in Tucson, Arizona, has a program called Laughter and Spirituality. "Fun and laughter are not words most of us associate with spirituality," [says spiritual service provider](#), Sarah Vulgamore. "But if spirituality conjures only visions of a quiet place of worship, solemn congregants and silent meditation, you may be missing out on a vital element to add joy to your life and feed your spirit," [Vulgamore adds](#). Indeed, Rev. Susan Sparks, who is also part of the Laugh in Peace tour with a Rabbi and a Muslim comedian, [noted](#) that she grew up in a church where you "checked your sense of humor at the door." James Martin, a Jesuit priest tries to change that attitude with his [book](#) "Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor and Laughter Are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life." And more than a century earlier another clergyman, Henry Ward Beecher, [said](#) "Mirth is God's medicine. Everybody ought to bathe in it."

Good idea!

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