

SPECIAL MIND & BODY ISSUE

TIME



THE SCIENCE OF HAPPINESS

- Why OPTIMISTS live longer ■ Is JOY in your genes?
 - Does GOD want us to be happy?
 - Why we need to LAUGH
- PLUS: Dave Chappelle on what's funny**



happiness laughter

While laughing adds a level of communication to conversation, it can also create a wordless bond across a room. As much as we might dread an attack of the giggles in the middle of a poetry reading or a eulogy, it can also be a lot of subversive fun—particularly when the bug spreads to the person sitting next to you.

The infectious nature of laughter is behind the idea of the laugh track—humor's Muzak—and while canned yuks ought to have all the freshness and appeal of canned peas, they work. "Early television planted people in live audiences and they'd laugh on cue," says Lee Berk, professor of pathology and anatomy at Loma Linda University in California. "Now we have the laugh track instead."

A far easier way to get a laugh—if harder to pull off at parties—is tickling. Nearly all of us are at least a little ticklish, but far and away, the best tickle targets

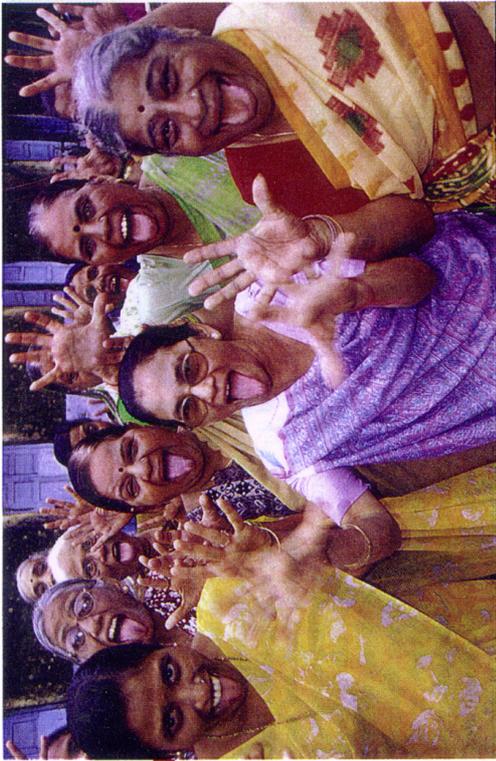
are babies. Behaviorally speaking, that makes sense. If ever there was a two-way pleasure street, it's the delight a baby takes in being tickled and the joy the parent experiences in the tumble of laughter it elicits. In a relationship in which verbal conversation is necessarily at a minimum, that is a great way to make a connection.

But there's more than bonding going on when we tickle. There's learning, too. It's no coincidence that the parts of the body that are most ticklish are also the most vulnerable—the stomach, the throat and the groin region where the femoral artery lies. Best to learn early that when those areas get touched, you pull away or tuck in your chin.

And best to make it a joy for parents to provide that lesson, if only to make sure that they teach it often and you learn it well.

"This may explain why we lose our taste for being tickled as we get older," says human ethnologist Glenn Weisfeld of Wayne State University in Detroit. "By adulthood we've learned how to counter unwanted thrusts."

Laughter may protect us from not only predators but also disease. One of the reasons doctors prescribe exercise for their patients is that even light exertion can increase heart and respiration rate, oxygenate the system and reduce levels of stress hormones. As long ago as the 1980s,



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NOW THAT'S FUNNY Bombay women let loose with the "lion laugh," a typical laughter-club routine

stretches, he tried encouraging people to laugh for no reason. His formula for laughing yoga clubs proved infectious. There are 1,800 such clubs in India alone, and an additional 700 around the world from Finland to the Philippines. Every year on a Kataria-inspired holiday called World Laughter Day, in May, 10,000 Danes gather in Copenhagen for the world's biggest mass chorle. One of the world's funniest men, British actor John Cleese, was so overwhelmed by the good humor he felt for his fellow club members that he ran out of funny stories in a week. "force for democracy."

The physical and psychological benefits of laughter are the subject of serious scientific study, but Dr. Kataria, who practiced general medicine before taking up his laughter mission, prefers intuitive explanations: "We don't need doctors to tell us it's good for us. We know it is."

One of Kataria's students, Alka Bhatia, who volunteers her time to teach at his clubs, says laughter pulled her out of depression. "There's a lot of pressure in my job," says Bhatia, 35, a middle manager at an import-export firm. "But now if I get stressed, I just have a little laugh at my desk and forget everything."

What if you just don't feel like laughing? Kataria says there's no problem with faking it: "Your body doesn't know the difference." At his clubs, which charge no fees, instructors get the yuks rolling with a "Ho, ho, ha-ha-ha" chant or perhaps the "lion laugh," which involves sticking out your tongue and flapping your hands by your ears. "Laughter can't solve your problems," says the laughing yogi. "But it can dissolve them." It's not that great a pun. But Kataria, like a man without a care in the world, nearly laughs his big, smiley head off. —By Alex Perry/New Delhi