

## Comic relief

*It's no joke: Laughter boosts immunity, lowers stress and may even reverse serious disease*

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# The laugh that heals

BY CAROL FORGET

Help with stress, weight loss and physical and emotional pain may be as close as the comedy section of your neighborhood Blockbuster. A growing stack of medical evidence, as well as common wisdom, suggest that laughter is as important to general well-being as

frequent exercise, good nutrition and lots of rest.

Just ask Saranne Rothberg. At age 35, when she was diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer, she remembered reading about Norman Cousins' use of laughter therapy in his 1979 book, "Anatomy of an Illness." Cousins had recovered from ankylosing spondylitis, a serious illness of the connective tissue that was thought to be irreversible, by watching humorous movies to bring on pain-free sleep and boost his body's natural recuperative powers. "Just that little ounce of hope propelled me to run to a video store and get every stand-up comedy tape I could," Rothberg said.

Crying hysterically and worried about how she would deal with her illness while rearing a 5-year-old daughter alone, Rothberg had to force herself to listen to the jokes and punch lines. But during that comedy marathon she came up with a strategy for living joyfully: She and her daughter, Lauriel, agreed to laugh together 100 times a day. That was five years ago. Today, Rothberg is disease-free.

A growing number of doctors and psychologists are verifying scientifically what Rothberg discovered in her living room—that laughter supports healing. Dr. Paul E. McGhee researched humor and laughter for 22 years after receiving his Ph.D. in developmental psychology. This led him to establish The Laughter Remedy, which has offered programs on humor and health/stress management to corporations and hospitals since 1989.

"Laughter has been shown to lower the level of stress hormones (epinephrine, cortisol, dopac and growth hormone) in the blood, (temporarily) lower blood pressure and reduce pain," wrote McGhee in "The Physical Health Benefits," one of a series of articles excerpted from his book "Health, Healing and the Amuse System," published in 1999.

The article also explains that humor and laughter have been shown to strengthen the immune system by increasing the number and activity of natural killer cells—the ones that seek and destroy tumor cells.

Rothberg didn't have time to do a research study to prove what she was doing worked. "I had early stage 4 cancer, so if you follow protocols, I had less than a five-year life expectancy," she said. But her doctors, family and fellow patients knew they were witnessing a phenomenon. "I could only teach them the strategy of living with a comedic perspective and show them the

research to date," Rothberg said.

During her first treatment, Rothberg threw a "chemo comedy party" for family and friends. "It was so successful, delivering comedy and laughter right in the trenches, that hospitals, doctors, patients, family members and organizations started to ring my phone off the hook." This unconventional get-together led her to start The Comedy Cures Foundation in 1999.

**HAVE YOU HEARD THE ONE ABOUT...**

Rick Younger—whose résumé includes "Last Comic Standing" (NBC), "It's Showtime at the Apollo" and television and theater roles in addition to stand-up comedy—has been a Comedy Cures Foundation Ambassador for two years. People touched by serious illness have thanked him for making them laugh after long periods of sadness. "I grew up in church," said Younger. "I feel that I've been blessed with the talent I have and that it's important to give back with it."

Rothberg's programs include Laugh-Out-Loud (support groups), Laugh-A-Thon (comedy performances) and Laugh-About (room-to-room hospital visits). Her newest venture is a Comedy & Cocktails Happy Hour at the Original NY Improv. It's part of The NYC Underground Comedy Festival and will feature Younger, Dan Naturman and others.

Lisa T. Wessan, CSW, credits Norman Cousins with revitalizing interest in laughter therapy, but says the roots go even farther back. "It comes from Hasya yoga, from the Vedic tradition, over 2,000 years old," she said. Because it was hard to come up with funny jokes and stories, the yogis developed a series of absurd yoga positions, many based on animals, to elicit the healing chuckles.

In 2000, when Wessan was in graduate school at Hunter College, studying stress management for depressives, she was "Googling around" and happened upon Steve Wilson and laughter therapy. Wilson was expanding on work by Dr. Madan Kataria in Bombay, which used laughter clubs and laughter yoga. After graduation, Wessan became a certified laughter leader through Wilson's organization, World Laughter Tour. Now she incorporates that knowledge into monthly workshops at the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan, dealing with laughter and stress management as it relates to a variety of topics, including healthy eating and staying serene through the holidays.

At a recent laughter circle at the JCC, Wessan read a list of the physical, psycho-

**JOKESTER:** Lisa Wessan, a "certified laugh leader," teaches a class called "Healing with Laughter."



DAVID HANDSCHUM DAILY NEWS

**WHERE TO FIND A HOOT AND A HOLLER**

**For upcoming events...**

- The Comedy Cures Foundation Saranne Rothberg, Founder [www.comedycures.org](http://www.comedycures.org)
- The Laughter Remedy Paul E. McGhee, Ph.D. [www.laughterremedy.com](http://www.laughterremedy.com)
- Lisa T. Wessan, CSW, CLL [www.mirthmaven.com](http://www.mirthmaven.com)
- World Laughter Tour, Inc. Steve Wilson, MA, CSP [www.worldlaughter.com](http://www.worldlaughter.com)
- Laughter Club International Dr. Madan Kataria [www.laughteryoga.org](http://www.laughteryoga.org)

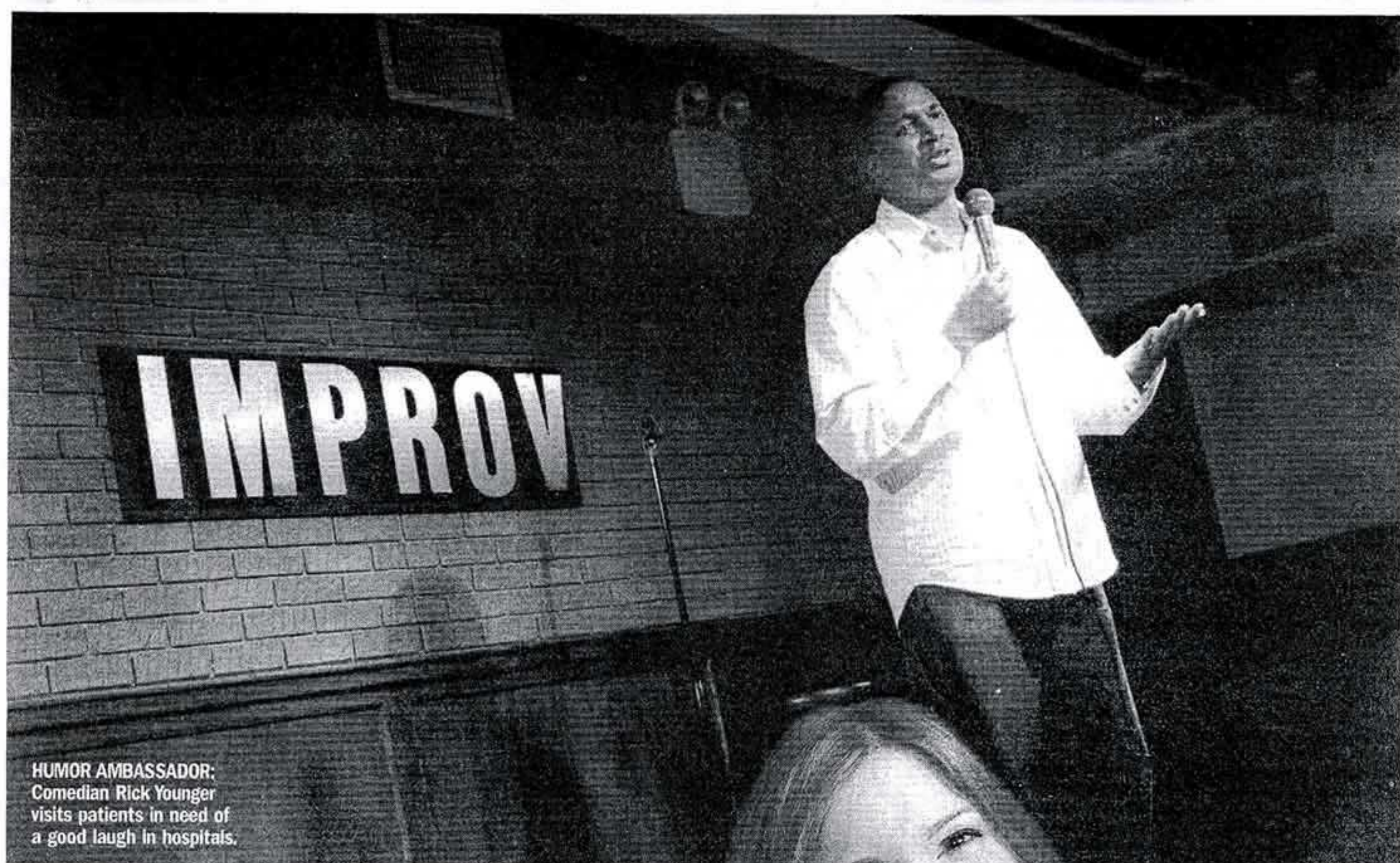
**Suggested reading**

- "Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient" by Norman Cousins, 1979, W.W. Norton & Co., New York
- "Health, Healing, and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training" by Paul E. McGhee, Ph.D. To order, call: (302) 478-7500
- "Laugh for No Reason" by Dr. Madan Kataria. To order, go to: [www.laughteryoga.org](http://www.laughteryoga.org)
- "The Physiologic Effects of Humor, Mirth and Laughter" by William F. Fry, Jr., M.D.

C.F.

**COVER STORY 3**

BODY & SOUL



STEPHANIE KEITH

**HUMOR AMBASSADOR:** Comedian Rick Younger visits patients in need of a good laugh in hospitals.

logical and healing benefits of laughter. It oxygenates the brain, he said, improves memory and cognition, relaxes muscles, releases toxins, releases stress, and helps with coping. Her hope was that upon hearing this, those who were stoic and never laughed would give themselves permission to, because it was good for them.

**A NEED TO THAW OUT**

At this point, 15 men and women, ranging in age from early 20s to late 70s, stood and rotated their shoulders. After a few deep breaths, Wessan directed participants to walk around, make eye contact with at least three other people, while clapping and chanting, "Ha, ha, ha, ho, ho, ho." Next she demonstrated the lion laugh, sticking her tongue out, bending forward slightly, flexing her hands in front of her body and laughing loudly. The group imitated her.

"It's very childlike," admitted Wessan, "but the point is you start out stimulating the laughter, and then it becomes real because you hook into the absurdity of life and the incongruity. Here we are, a group of adults, acting totally insane."

Other exercises on the schedule were a cell-phone laugh (whereby the group held imaginary phones to their ears and giggled wildly into them) and the subway laugh (where they mimicked straphangers jammed like sardines into a car, and guffawed away the frustrations of transit delays).

But the real hysteria came with the "I told you so" laugh that entailed wagging your finger at others in the group, snidely saying, "I told you so," and laughing maniacally. It seemed designed to heal the humiliation everyone has felt at the hands of a know-it-all.

Ed Goldberg, 67, an interfaith minister, and his wife, June Goldberg, a 59-year-old mortgage loan officer, both said they en-

joyed the laughter, and would do it again. Mr. Goldberg thought more laughter was needed while reading the newspaper, on the trains, and waiting at rainy bus stops and could "help people thaw."

Laughter can also provide cardiovascular benefits. Professor Fry Jr., M.D., a psychiatrist and professor emeritus from the Stanford University School of Medicine, found that 15 minutes of laughter equaled 10 minutes on a rowing machine and 15 minutes on a stationary bike. "What I did was determine how many minutes of moderately paced exercise on a rowing machine and on a stationary bike it would take to reach the same heart activity-pulse rate, that you can develop with the same period of laughter," he said.

Fry explained that during an intense laugh experience, resulting from an unexpected joke or a quick punch line, your heart rate doubles for the first few seconds, and then bounces up and down as the laughter continues, depending on the respiratory/cardiac reflex, which is linked to the amount of oxygen in the body. He is on the board of directors of Laughter Club International, founded by Dr. Kataria, which is spreading the yogic form of laughter therapy throughout the world. "I think from a standpoint of physical exercise it's a very good experience," said Fry.

Wessan said it all comes down to a quotation from William James, the spiritual psychologist, who said, "We don't laugh because we're happy, we're happy because we laugh."

**COMEDY CURES:** Diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer, Saranne Rothberg laughed her way to recovery.

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