"Laughter is the best medicine," we are always being told. In fact the Readers’ Digest so firmly believed it that they made it a regular feature of their publication and continue to sprinkle humor throughout their pages.

The ability to see the funny side of life is either an asset or an irritant depending on your own point of view and natural disposition. Laughing is reckoned to be a great tension-breaker and stress-reliever. London psychiatrist, Dr Joan Gomez, says, "Stress is just part of everyday living for most of us. But there are ways of coping with it successfully. One of the best medicines is laughter. Laughter melts away stress like ice under a blow lamp."

Humor may be related to the things that happen as part of our general experience with its ironies and idiosyncrasies, and our reaction to them. It may also be contrived by the evocation of a fictitious event or experience where we anticipate a particular climax to a story only to find the unexpected taking its place. Even Sigmund Freud, not noted for his own sense of humor, believed that it is not possible to be mentally happy without possessing a sense of humor.

One writer says your daily laugh total should equal at least 15 chuckles a day or you are underlaughed. Whether or not a correlation exists between chuckle-rate and good health it is known that laughing regularly is good for heart health ("a merry heart doeth good as a medicine," springs to mind) and is therefore to be encouraged.

So what about Witzelsucht? No, it is not an exclamation like "Gesonheid," pronounced over someone who sneezes! It is the name of one of the conditions where humor is pathologically misplaced (F O Witzel, 1856-1925). There are some people who feel uncontrollable laughter coming on in the most inappropriate places such as funerals or other serious situations, and have a tendency to make poor jokes and puns.

Witzelsucht sufferers have small lesions in the tissue of the frontal lobes of their brain which causes the out-of-place response. People with larger frontal lobe damage perform poorly on both verbal jokes and nonverbal cartoons in tests of
humor and hardly laugh or smile in response. In some rare cases bursts of laughter may be associated with the electrical storms released in the temporal lobes of epileptics.

It is always dangerous to self-diagnose, but readers of these HealthWise articles may consider the writer as having a mild form of Witzelsucht! I must be careful what I say, "there is many a true word spoken in jest" – that's Witzelsucht for you!

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