

laughter: are you getting enough?

WM EDITOR CLAIRE REES REMINISCES ABOUT CHILDHOOD BELLY LAUGHS THAT HURT AND WONDERS HOW A BUSY GROWN-UP CAN RECREATE THE FEELING



As I walked home the other night, I noticed two women, bent double in laughter.

They weren't drunk, they looked like they had just finished work, and were holding onto each other's arms for steadiness.

I watched them shriek, in peals of near-hysterics, at something that must have been so funny it made it physically impossible for them to carry on walking.

The two women, who looked to be in their 30s, were experiencing that unmistakable, insides-tightening, eye-watering belly laugh.

The male friend I was with found it bemusing: "Look at them stooped over, they look insane," he said.

My female friend added enviously: "It's been ages since I've laughed like that."

The belly laugh is that uncontrollable, rocking roar of hysteria that makes your sides ache. It can instantly transport you to your youth, and if we're honest with ourselves, we may admit it's been too long since we've allowed ourselves to lose control with such trust it left us weak and weeping with joy in the street at 6pm on a weeknight.

When did we get so old that things

stopped being so funny?

Or are we just so busy we don't notice that we're surrounded by potential giggle therapy every day?

For me, belly laughs are steeped in childhood and early adolescence.

They're what happened when I was doing something I wasn't supposed to, the painfully pleasurable fits evoked by indulging in something defiant in the face of some outsider authority.

It's pressing my face into my pillow at school camp in Llangrannog when the swogs (that's prefects to anyone

who didn't go) had caught us with our lights on; it's your funniest friend saying something so absurd you spit out your lemonade, or (and come on, we all did this) laughing so hard that Coca-Cola streams out of your nose.

You'd be red afterwards, doubled up, and crying as your mum tells you to stop showing off or to 'pull yourself together', but you'd be powerless to come back.

But now we're adults, are we getting enough and often enough?

In our pampered society, we're not short of things designed to make us chuckle. Comedians enjoy rock star status, the telly schedule is saturated with panel shows and witty opinions, and the daily 'funnies' come through via email.

It means we know what should make us laugh, but do we give ourselves enough time to enjoy those off-guard, natural moments that used to throw us sideways?

Rachel Kinchin is marketing officer at The Riverfront Theatre and Arts Centre in Newport, which is staging a comedy week in October.

She has access to some of the best comedy acts in the UK but insists her laughs come from closer to home.

Three ways to put laughter into every day

- 1 Ask yourself what makes you laugh. And work out how you can get more of it. It doesn't matter what it is – whether it's watching a slapstick sketch or going to The Glee Club. Take responsibility – it's up to you how many laughs you have.
- 2 Rediscover the child in you. Splash around in the sea, go to a fairground or roll down a grassy slope in Roath Park. If your skirt goes over your head – all the better.
- 3 Find hilarity in stress. Yes, you're busy, yes you're worked up, but take a look at yourself and find the humour in your situation. It might work wonders to view things in a different way.

Teenagers at Cardiff Laughter Club – were things rip-roaringly funnier when we were younger or did we just have more time to laugh?

She says: “I love banter and my friends and family make me laugh out loud every single day. Everyone should laugh every day.”

Life coach Erin Martin thinks it’s down to individuals to make sure they’re not neglecting their funny bone.

“If you’re not getting enough laughs, there’s something wrong,” says Erin, who is based in Cardiff Bay.

“When I have a new client I get them to fill in a profile and one of the questions is, ‘When did you last laugh?’

LAUGHS ARE LIKE MUSHROOMS – WE NEED TO GO LOOKING FOR THEM, THEY DON’T JUST FALL INTO OUR LAPS

“Sadly some struggle, and a woman recently couldn’t remember at all.

“I got her to roll down the grassy slopes near her home and she told me she still laughs when she thinks about it.”

But with laughter being such a natural response, why do some people find it so difficult?

“What happens in our childhood is we have far less restraints on us,” says Erin.

“When we reach school age, usually five, people impose control on us and it becomes our way of life. The problem is that control leads to suppression and we suppress the things that are good for us, like big belly laughs. Laughs from your lungs that let a huge gust of oxygen in and are good for you both physically and mentally.”

Erin continues: “I went to the seaside the other day for the first time in ages, and my friend and I were splashing in the waves and laughing like kids. But it’s like we need an excuse to laugh now, it comes more naturally when we’re young.”

Laughing about laughing is an easy way to unlock those old feelings, says Erin.

The people closest to me give me belly laughs, from the old to the new. In-jokes and remembering the time the history



Actress Nicollette Sheridan (left) might be politely suppressing hers as she attends the Emmys, but *Desperate Housewives*' Teri Hatcher's letting her guard down for a real belly laugh

teacher fell off his chair is childish – but what’s wrong with that?

And wonderfully, belly laughs can be contagious – watch a friend or partner’s sudden chuckles send tears down their face and see if you’re not in vicarious stitches.

There is big, belly laughter to be had out there, no matter how old you are. It doesn’t stop because we have a mortgage, kids or a demanding boss, or at least it shouldn’t.

“We haven’t lost belly laughs forever,” says Erin. “We just need to work harder at getting them. Laughs are like mushrooms – we need to go looking for them, they don’t just fall into our laps.”

So set yourself a challenge today – don’t force the giggles, but next time something tickles you, take the time to stay in the moment.

And laugh, until we recommend, someone has to pick you up off the floor. Contact Erin Martin on 029 2046 3584 or www.ifnotnowwhen.me.uk

WHAT MAKES ME LAUGH

SOPHIE JONES, 39, LLANELLI

“I feel as if I used to have proper take-your-breath-away laughs when I was younger and sadly I have them less now.

Perhaps it’s being ‘in the real world’ and the added stresses that mean it’s harder to relax. But I still get them every now and then.

This won’t sound funny to anyone else, but the last belly laugh I had was in the supermarket two weeks ago.

I was buying custard and my boyfriend was moaning that it wasn’t healthy and I was waving it in his face telling him to pipe down.

As I did, I dropped the tub and it exploded all over him, squishing in his toes as he was wearing flip-flops. I was leaning on the shelves because I couldn’t breathe – while he wandered off and continued to shop, covered in custard.”

SIAN HUNT, 26, CARDIFF

“The last time I had a proper belly laugh was at work. One of the girls was writing about Rick Astley and for inspiration we watched YouTube clips of Never Gonna Give You Up. It brought back memories of patterned scrunchies, unflattering stonewashed jeans and co-ordinating the colour of our T-shirts to our cycling shorts or leggings. We spent our lunch break laughing about it and imagining how terrible we must have looked. A lot of my big laughs come from cringing at something from the past.”

MICHELLE REED-PEREZ, 35, NEWPORT

“Things that make me laugh are my kids, *You’ve Been Framed*, and *Total Wipeout* – which may sound strange. I laugh at silly things; you can’t always put your finger on what it is that’s going to make you laugh, but when you do you’re in fits of giggles. I really laughed the other day at my friend’s Facebook page with a post about her three-year-old daughter, who is quite eccentric. It read: ‘Holly has changed her name to Jessica today and is the mother of a ten-year-old called Emily who she bought from Tesco for ten quid!’ Often it’s the things children say that can really crack me up very easily.”