

EVOLUTION OF LAUGHTER

We begin to laugh from a very young age, and for a variety of reasons. But did you know that we are not the only living beings on earth who laugh? The great apes (like gorillas, orangutans, chimpanzees, and bonobos) laugh too, although their laughter can sound very different from ours (the laughter of a chimpanzee sounds like panting!).

Laughter may have emerged as a social phenomenon. For example, laughter in the great apes is mostly seen in the young who use it in play, or when they are tickled. This signals their happiness to their playmates and encourages social bonding. Humans laugh in every possible kind of social interaction. In fact, it's been observed that people are 30 times more likely to laugh in a group than alone. You may have noticed that just the sound of laughter can make us smile (or laugh); knowing the context is not necessary.

Scientists believe that we may have inherited this adaptive trait from an ancestor that is common to humans and great apes, and lived at least 10-16 million years ago. This has led us to ask – does this trait offer any survival advantages? We now know that laughter triggers the release of endorphins. These are a group of hormones in the brain that help in pain tolerance and induce a sensation of pleasure. Laughter can also help reduce anxiety, strengthen our immunity, and increase our longevity. This is especially true when laughter is shared with a group of people. When people laugh in a group, their shared pleasure also helps create, reinforce, and maintain social bonds.

In fact, scientists believe that the prosocial effect of laughter may have helped early human societies expand more than any other primate society on earth. How?

Nonhuman primates use one-on-one interactions (like grooming) in order to bond and form intimate social groups. Since establishing bonds through such interactions takes time, the intimate groups and the larger communities they are part of are automatically small in size. In humans, laughter may have been one of the earliest traits to help many people interact with each other at the same time, without physical contact. These social bonds may have helped create intimate social groups and communities that were much larger than those of nonhuman primates. Later advancements like religion and culture may have helped human societies grow even larger.

Since its emergence, laughter has evolved from a simple playful expression to the variety of meanings it carries today in our society. We might not have fully grasped the importance of laughter in human evolution, but it remains a very essential aspect of our social lives and our well-being. So meet up with your friends (online), and have a good laugh!



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