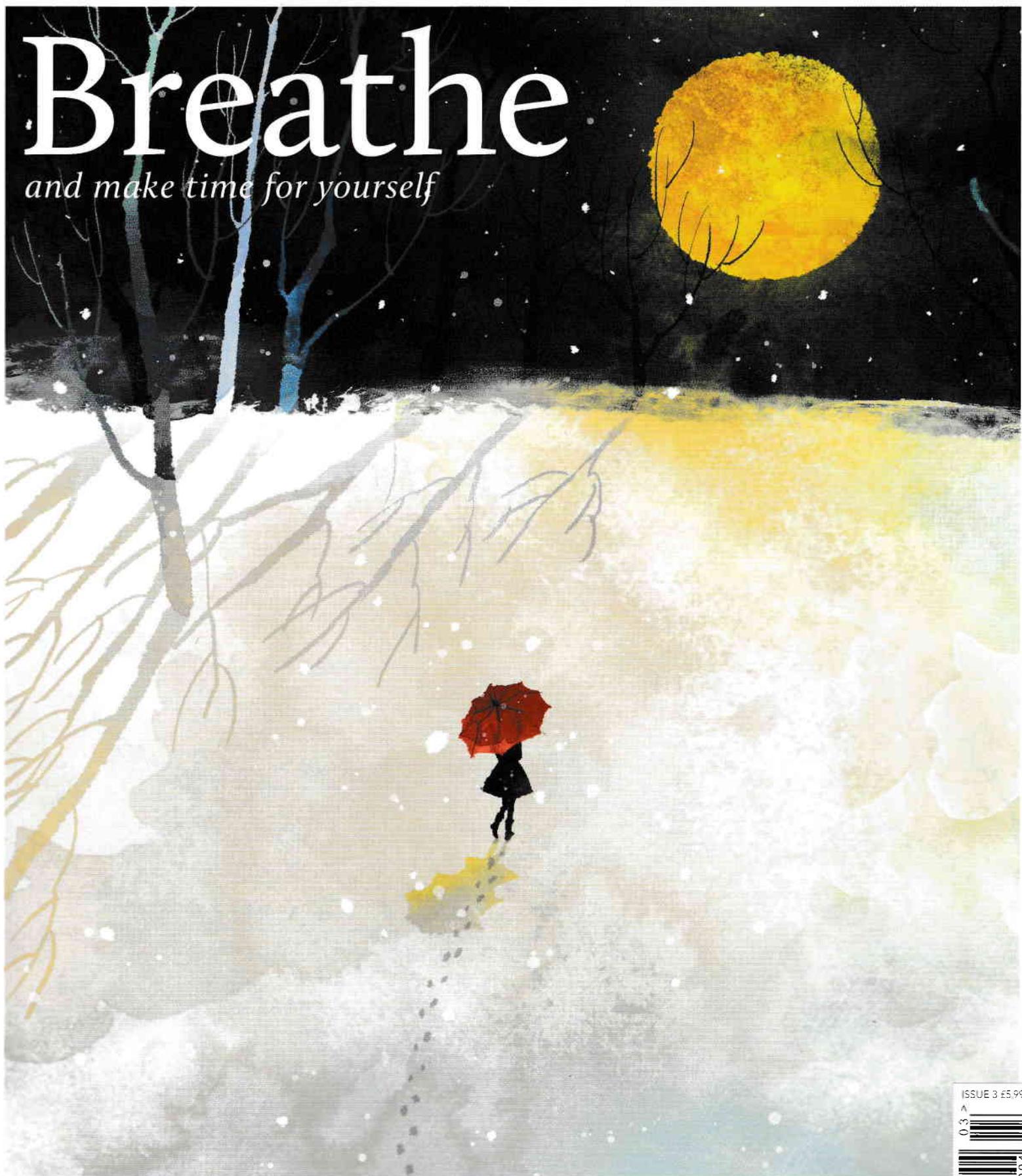


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HAVE YOU HEARD THE ONE ABOUT...

The world can sometimes seem sadly lacking in joy – all the more reason to have a jolly good laugh now and then. It won't just make you feel better, it really does you the power of good, says Lorna Easterbrook

Every August in Edinburgh the television channel Dave awards its annual Funniest Joke of the Fringe award. In 2016 this went to the West Bromwich-based comedian Masai Graham for the following gem:

'My dad suggested I register for a donor card. He's a man after my own heart.'

Did that make you laugh, or only smile – or maybe groan? Whatever makes us laugh, research keeps confirming there is some truth in the old saying that 'laughter is the best medicine'.

Giggling is good

Laughing releases endorphins, which help create the buzz that comes after exercise such as yoga, or dance, or running. Have you ever felt exhausted after an evening when you have really laughed so much you nearly cried? That's because laughing uses muscles and it's that exertion that releases the endorphins, reducing physical and physiological stress. You breathe deeper to laugh, too, which means your lungs get a good workout as well.

- Laughter can aid pain management and tolerance. In 2011, Oxford University researchers found increased resistance to mild pain among volunteers who watched comedy clips from TV shows, compared with those who watched something factual (such as golf). In another test, volunteers who watched a stand-up comedy show at the Edinburgh Fringe tolerated mild pain for longer than those who saw a play. Fifteen minutes of relaxed, unforced laughter increased levels of pain tolerance by around 10 per cent.
- Research reported by the American College of Sports Medicine in 2009 showed those who laughed at a comedy film had a better flow of blood through their arteries and increased blood vessel dilation compared with people who watched something serious.



But – you may not want to overdo it. Some researchers also found that it's possible to laugh so hard you do yourself some damage, whether that's in the form of incontinence, or – in extreme cases – rupturing a hernia, or even the heart. This is particularly true for people who already have a chronic health condition. As with all things that are good for us, a little moderation may not be a bad idea.

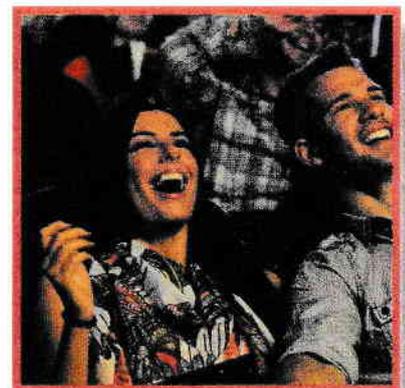
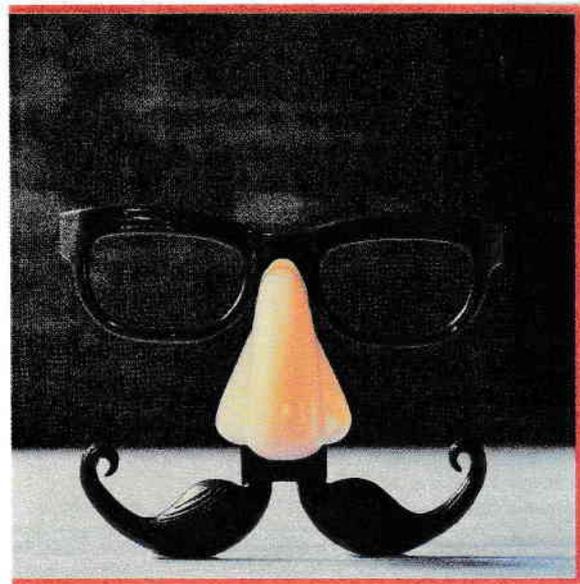
Laughter connects us

'Laughter,' the actor and comedian Victor Borge once said, 'is the shortest distance between two people'. Laughter crosses language barriers – we can share a laugh regardless of our mother tongue partly because other people's laughter is so contagious. Laughter gives us a way of communicating together, and helps people to connect, groups to form and bonds to be made.

Find what makes you laugh

Laughing at ordinary words, phrases or events is a common experience. We've probably all giggled inappropriately at the back (sometimes at the front) of the class, or the staff meeting, or (if we're being honest) at a wedding, even a funeral. There's nothing more likely to keep you laughing than trying to stifle a fit of the giggles. Laughter is controlled by a part of our brains that evolved very early in our development as a species, alongside breathing and the control of basic reflexes. It's one of the reasons it's hard not to laugh even when we know we shouldn't. The laughter response is so deep in our brains that the more sophisticated parts of the brain, responsible for reasoning, logic and speech, have difficulty intervening.

Even so, uncontrollable laughter eventually stops. But in Tanganyika (now Tanzania) in 1962, contagious laughter that started among a very small group of 12 to 18 year old female students rapidly spread to neighbouring communities. It reached such high levels that entire schools were closed. This bizarre epidemic lasted for six months. This is now considered an example of mass hysteria. Symptoms also included crying and flatulence.



It's a challenge not to at least smile at that last word. Some words, hysterically funny to children, remain so in adult life. Then there's the double entendre. Twenty-five years ago, live on national radio, cricket commentators Brian Johnson and Jonathan Agnew were rendered speechless with laughter for more than two minutes after Agnew described the England player Ian Botham losing his balance while batting and stumbling on his cricket stumps because he 'just couldn't quite get his leg over'.

Maybe that's not what makes you laugh. Perhaps you're more inclined towards *Mrs Brown's Boys*, or the late Victoria Wood's classic song *The Ballad of Barry and Freda* with its final instruction to 'Beat me on the bottom with a *Woman's Weekly*', or it could be the stand-up comedy of Jack Whitehall or Josie Long that really makes you LOL.

But even though these things may be funny, researchers have found that most laughter occurs during ordinary conversations rather than when we're listening to or telling a story or joke. In 1996, the researcher Robert Provine found that most of the naturally occurring laughter took place in settings and at times where there was mutual playfulness, a feeling of being part of a group, and a positive emotional tone, rather than comedy. The misheard quote, the unfortunate phrase, the 'trigger' words are some of the things that spark most laughter. You probably know someone (it may even be you) for whom the words 'squirrel' say, or 'custard cream' are, in any context, hilarious – for reasons everyone may now have forgotten but which always sets you off laughing as well.

If you can't find anything that's funny, there's always Laughter Yoga. This uses laughter games and exercises – 'laugh like a horse' or 'laugh as if you're having a cold shower' – and deep breathing to create laughter. Inevitably, at Laughter Yoga sessions, everyone ends up laughing at each other's laughter.

HOW TO GET MORE LAUGHTER IN YOUR LIFE

- When we're on our own, we're more likely to laugh if we watch, listen to or read something that's funny. So on those occasions, find your favourite DVD, online moment, or book – make yourself comfortable, and settle in to laugh.
- Enjoy something funny with other people. You don't have to know the other people – go on your own to see a humorous film or to a comedy club performance. Laughing along with other audience members can be great fun.
- Spend time, face to face or online, with the people who always seem to end up making you laugh.
- Go to a Laughter Yoga club – or, if you'd rather, join in with one of the many Laughter Yoga videos on YouTube.

Researching this article has been a joy – and a source of much laughter. How fantastic to have to watch yet another YouTube video of cats falling off tables, or feel obliged to look up the funniest jokes. A waste of time? Not at all, not if it means you're laughing. It's just what the doctor ordered.

Lorna Easterbrook is a writer, researcher and storyteller. She's also a qualified Laughter Yoga leader and runs laughter workshops for corporate organisations and charities – lornaeasterbrook.com

