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Laugh Your Way to Good Health and a Longer Life

By JAMES GORMAN

"Laughing turns to crying."
That's what my grandmother used to say when kids got too excited. I guess the idea was if you had too much fun, something bad would happen. Run around the house and you'll fall down. Get giddy on a trampoline, someone will end up in a cast.

This was in line with her other pronouncements. Go out with wet hair you'll get pneumonia. Don't wear rubbers on your shoes, you'll get rheumatic fever. Have too much fun, and someone will get irritated and say, "Laughing turns to crying."

It just occurred to me in the last day or so that maybe she was wrong. I'm quite late on this because I've had to overcome my distaste for happiness studies.

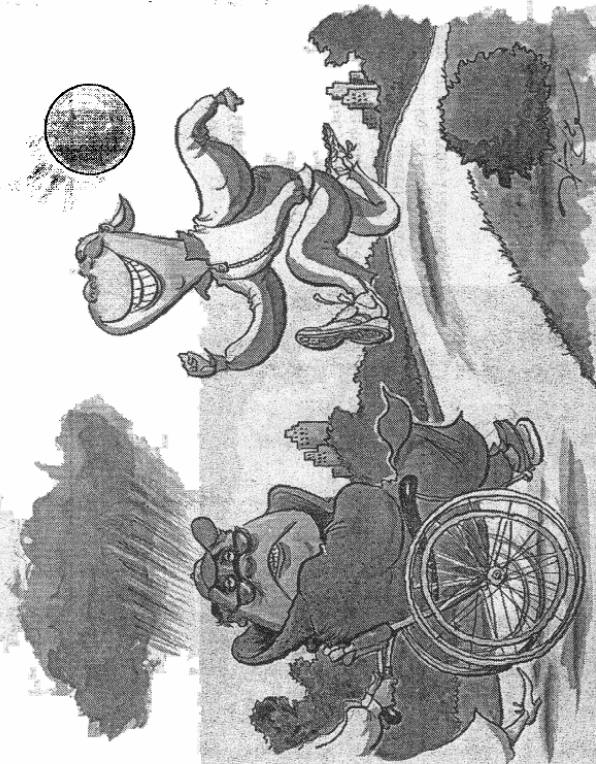
It happened when I was reading a study that's being published today in *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. It's called "Positive affect and health-related neuroendocrine, cardiovascular and inflammatory processes."

As soon as I saw the title I thought, I know what positive affect means, and nothing good can come of this. You already know how these studies are going to turn out. All the happy people will be healthier, live longer and have more sex than the unhappy people. That's why they're happy.

Or the other way round, which means that you, too — you unhappy masses huddled under comforters watching old movies and eating the wrong things instead of exercising with good friends before a vegan dinner and a night at some soul-enriching cultural event — you too, could be healthier and live longer and have more sex. If you would only cheer up.

Dr. Andrew Steptoe, Dr. Jane Wardle and Dr. Michael Marmot, of University College London, review some of the previous affirmations of the value of being affirmative at the beginning of their paper.

To wit: Negative affect is associated with



Michael Witte

quired them to trace a mirror image. Naturally, the happier people were better off. Even setting aside actual depression, positive affect trumped lack of positive affect.

At first I thought more bad news for the unhappy. Then I thought, here's a chance to prove my grandmother wrong. And if she's wrong about one thing maybe I can stop worrying about rheumatic fever.

I'm not thinking of happiness, exactly, but laughing. That's a bit like being happy, but

A new study holds more bad news for the unhappy.

it's not quite as high a bar. People with insufficient positive affect can still laugh. I know a lot of unhappy people with great senses of humor.

There have been claims for a long time that laughter has health benefits. Unfortunately my vision was blurred by the happiness issue.

If we can include laughing though, I think I can get on board, with one small qualification. I need to know what kind of laughter.

If it's gentle, warm laughter just because life is wonderful and babies gurgle, I'm out of luck.

But, how about laughing when somebody slips on the ice or when Triumph, the insult dog, is really nasty to people? Can that be healthy? I certainly hope so.

Then there really may be a way out of the whole negative affect/neuroendocrine complex. Plus, my grandmother would be wrong, at least on one thing.

We'd still have to tackle her theory of immunology. "You have to eat a peck of dirt before you die."

I'm pretty sure that one's true. What I'm hoping is that you don't have to do it all at once.

cause and effect, but they do say that they are looking at ways "psychosocial factors stimulate biological systems."

To investigate these connections, they asked 116 men and 100 women to record how happy they felt at given times during the day. They also tested blood pressure and heart rate, and cortisol levels in saliva. Cortisol is a stress hormone, so the less the better in terms of all sorts of health problems, the researchers say.

And they conducted mental stress tests and took blood samples to determine response to that kind of stress. The tests were not too stressful. There were no beds of snakes like in "Fear Factor." The subjects had to do a test on a computer involving words and color, and another one that re-

a greater risk of heart disease, diabetes and disability. Positive affect, as judged by writings of nuns at age 22, is connected to greater longevity — for the nuns. Happy Finns live longer — than unhappy Finns. Even worse, "A lack of positive affect rather than negative affect predicts mortality, stroke and the development of disability in older adults."

You don't even have to be depressed to fare worse; a lack of happiness will wreck your golden years. Let a smile be your umbrella — or else.

The English researchers continued in this vein. They considered that unhappiness could lead to an unhealthy lifestyle, or that the two could be linked in basic physiological processes. They don't actually pin down