

The Psychotherapeutic Value of Laughter: A Qualitative Investigation into Emotional, Cognitive, and Social Outcomes

Vivek Kotekar*

(Counselling Psychology), M.A. (Industrial Psychology), SET, NET, GATE, Ph.D. in Psychology, India.

***Corresponding Author:** Vivek Kotekar, (Counselling Psychology), M.A. (Industrial Psychology), SET, NET, GATE, Ph.D. in Psychology, India.

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the impact of laughter therapy on mental health, with specific objectives to examine emotional, cognitive, and social changes, and to reflect on its role in stress management. The research adopted a reflexive thematic analysis framework within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing co-constructed meaning and subjective experience. A purposive sample of 10 adults (aged 30–55) was recruited from a wellness center in Kolhapur, Maharashtra. Participants reported mild to moderate psychological distress but were not receiving psychiatric treatment. They participated in a structured laughter therapy program comprising eight sessions over four weeks, facilitated by a certified therapist. Data collection included semi-structured interviews, demographic surveys, and field observations. Interviews were conducted pre- and post-intervention in Hindi or Marathi, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed following Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis approach. Six core themes emerged: Emotional Catharsis, Mood Elevation, Enhanced Coping Skills, Social Bonding, Cognitive Reframing, and Physical Relaxation. These themes reflected the multidimensional benefits of laughter therapy on participants' emotional expression, resilience, relationships, and stress relief. Findings highlight laughter therapy as a promising, low-cost intervention for enhancing mental health. It holds potential as a complementary therapeutic tool in both clinical and community-based mental health settings.

Key words: laughter therapy; mental health; thematic analysis; emotional regulation; stress; qualitative research

Introduction:

Stress and related mental diseases are on the rise in quantity. Mental health problems have been on the rise for many years. These issues have led to numerous scientific investigations on mental health issues (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2007). The primary objective of these investigations was to find a way to relieve stress and solve these problems. There have been numerous techniques and solutions developed to address mental health issues. Laughter therapy is one of the most effective alternative therapies for promoting mental wellness (Yim, 2016).

Laughter therapy, often known as humor therapy, is becoming more widely recognized as an alternative technique to treating mental health (Meyer, 2014; Franz, 2005). Laughter has been associated with good physiological and psychological effects such as endorphin release, stress reduction, and mood elevation (Martin, 2007, 2001; Grosse, 2003; Provine, 2000). The increased interest in laughter therapy originates from its ability to alleviate mental health issues such as anxiety, stress, and depression without relying on medicine.

This research aims to explore how individuals who have participated in laughter therapy perceive its impact on their mental health. Specifically, this study delves into the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of mental health as affected by

laughter therapy, using qualitative reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexivity here ensures that both the participants' experiences and the researcher's interpretations shape the final themes. Through semi-structured interviews with 10 participants, the study reveals the rich, multifaceted benefits of laughter therapy for mental health.

Objectives of This Study:

- To explore how laughter therapy affects emotional well-being.
- To identify the cognitive changes participants, experience as a result of laughter therapy.
- To examine how social interactions and relationships are impacted through laughter therapy.
- To reflect on the broader implications of laughter therapy in stress management and mental health care.

Methodology:

Research Design: This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in reflexive thematic analysis, as conceptualized by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). Situated within a constructivist-interpretivist epistemology, the research was predicated on the assumption that meaning is co-constructed through the interaction between researcher and participant, rather than discovered as an objective truth. Reflexive thematic analysis was deemed appropriate for this investigation due to its flexibility and its capacity to explore complex, subjective experiences, particularly in the domain of emotional and psychological health. The research was not oriented toward quantification or prediction but instead sought to uncover the nuanced, context-bound ways in which laughter therapy influenced participants' mental health across emotional, cognitive, social, and somatic domains.

Participants: The study population comprised ten adult individuals (N = 10), recruited purposively from a wellness center located in an urban area of Kolhapur, Maharashtra, India. Given the exploratory and idiographic nature of qualitative research, purposive sampling was adopted to ensure that participants possessed direct and relevant experience of the phenomenon under investigation—namely, participation in a structured laughter therapy program. Eligibility criteria were rigorously defined to ensure the internal validity of the sample. Inclusion criteria required participants to be between the ages of 30 and 55 years, to self-report mild to moderate psychological distress (e.g., persistent low mood, anxiety symptoms, emotional fatigue), and to demonstrate the capacity and willingness to participate in all sessions and interviews. Individuals currently undergoing psychiatric treatment, receiving concurrent psychotherapy, or with diagnoses of severe psychiatric conditions (e.g., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder) were excluded from participation. Cognitive impairment, active substance abuse, or any condition impairing informed consent were also exclusionary. The final sample included six women and four men, with a mean age of 42.6 years. Participants were socio-demographically diverse: four were office workers, three were schoolteachers, two were homemakers, and one was a healthcare professional. Sixty percent of the sample held graduate-level qualifications, while forty percent held postgraduate degrees. Seven participants were married, and five had children. Health histories revealed that three participants had chronic physical conditions such as hypertension or type 2 diabetes, and two were on antidepressant medications. All participants resided in semi-urban neighbourhoods, and none were living alone. These socio-medical factors were considered significant in interpreting the psycho-emotional context of each participant. Although the sample size is limited, such a design is consistent with the principles of qualitative depth over breadth, enabling rich and detailed insights into lived experience, which larger samples may dilute.

Data Collection: Data collection was multi-modal and took place over five weeks. Primary data were derived from semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted individually with each participant. An interview schedule was designed based on a review of existing literature and clinical guidelines on laughter therapy, focusing on perceived emotional, psychological, behavioural, and physical changes. Open-ended questions allowed participants to describe their internal experiences, perceptions of change, and reflections on the intervention's relevance to their lives. Each interview was conducted in a quiet, private room, lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, and was audio-recorded with informed consent. All interviews were conducted either in Hindi or Marathi, depending on participant preference, and were later transcribed verbatim. To enhance trustworthiness, transcripts were returned to participants for member validation, wherein they confirmed the accuracy of the recorded content. In addition to the interviews, participants completed a detailed demographic and health status questionnaire, capturing data on age, gender, education, occupation, marital status, chronic illness, medication use, and psychosocial context. Observational field notes were also maintained throughout the intervention period to record non-verbal cues, interpersonal dynamics, and post-session reflections.

Data Analysis: Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and ability to incorporate the researcher's interpretation while staying grounded in participants' experiences. The six phases of analysis (familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and writing) were followed, ensuring that themes emerged inductively from the data.

Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

- **Familiarization:** Reading and re-reading the interview transcripts helped immerse the researcher in the data. Initial notes highlighted recurring ideas related to emotional release, coping mechanisms, and social dynamics.
- **Generating Initial Codes:** Coding was done inductively, with codes like "stress relief," "mood enhancement," "social bonding," "cognitive reframing," and "emotional release" emerging from the raw data. This process ensured that key

aspects of participants' experiences were captured.

- **Searching for Themes:** The initial codes were grouped into broader, meaningful themes. For example, the codes related to emotional states were merged under "Emotional Catharsis," while those related to stress management became part of the theme "Enhanced Coping Skills."
- **Reviewing Themes:** Themes were refined and re-examined for coherence and consistency. Data extracts were revisited to ensure that the themes accurately reflected participants' narratives.
- **Defining and Naming Themes:** The final themes were defined and named to represent core experiences of laughter therapy: Emotional Catharsis, Enhanced Coping Skills, Mood Elevation, Social Bonding, Cognitive Reframing, and Physical Relaxation.
- **Writing the Report:** The themes were written up in the report with supporting data extracts and interpretations, linking back to the research question of how laughter therapy affects mental health.

Procedure: The intervention comprised a structured laughter therapy program conducted over four consecutive weeks, involving eight sessions held bi-weekly. Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes and was facilitated by a certified laughter therapy practitioner trained in both traditional and contemporary techniques. The structure of each session was standardized and comprised the following components:

- **Physiological Warm-Up (10 minutes):** The session began with guided breathing exercises, rhythmic clapping, and gentle physical stretches to prepare the participants physiologically and psychologically.
- **Spontaneous Laughter Induction (15 minutes):** Participants engaged in group-based mirthful exercises designed to simulate contagious laughter. This included eye contact-based laughter circles, role-play interactions, and movement-based laughter games, which triggered spontaneous laughter through social mirroring and playful engagement.
- **Humor-Based Interaction (10 minutes):** Participants were encouraged to share humorous personal anecdotes, jokes, or light-hearted observations. This segment aimed to foster interpersonal bonding and cognitive reframing through humor.
- **Comedy Video Screening (10 minutes):** Pre-selected humorous video clips (e.g., situational comedies, family-friendly stand-up routines) were screened to elicit genuine, stimulus-driven laughter. This element introduced an audiovisual modality to laughter stimulation.
- **Laughter Meditation (10 minutes):** Participants sat or lay in a relaxed position and allowed laughter to emerge naturally in a non-verbal, free-flowing format. This phase facilitated emotional catharsis and psychosomatic relaxation.
- **Group Reflection and Closure (5 minutes):** Each session concluded with brief verbal sharing, allowing participants to articulate emotional, physical, or cognitive sensations experienced during the session.

Throughout the intervention, participants' responses were monitored and documented using observational logs. Participants reported feeling progressively more open, connected, and relaxed as the sessions advanced, with laughter becoming more spontaneous and less self-conscious over time.

Post-intervention, participants underwent a second round of semi-structured interviews to capture immediate reflections on perceived changes. No adverse effects were reported by any participant.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical clearance was obtained from an independent institutional review board, and the study complied with the ethical standards. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants after a comprehensive briefing about the nature, objectives, potential risks, and benefits of the study. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their data and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Anonymized coding was used during transcription and analysis to protect participant identities.

Identified Themes

Emotional Catharsis:

Laughter therapy acted as a powerful form of emotional release for participants. Many individuals described laughter as a way to free themselves from the emotional burdens of stress, anxiety, and tension. The therapy offered a non-verbal mechanism to process and release pent-up emotions.

"I was surprised by how laughter helped me let go of feelings I didn't even know I was carrying. It's like I had been holding onto so much, and with each laugh, it felt like the weight was coming off." (Participant no. 5)

"After the session, I felt so emotionally lighter. I wasn't just laughing for fun; I was laughing to release all the anxiety and worry that had built up over the week." (Participant no. 8)

This theme illustrates that laughter therapy provides an outlet for emotional catharsis. The act of laughing enabled participants to express emotions in a way that verbal communication often couldn't, offering a therapeutic release that left them feeling emotionally unburdened (Fry, 1994).

Enhanced Coping Skills:

Several participants indicated that laughter therapy enhanced their ability to cope with stressful situations. Laughter provided them with a positive, alternative way to handle challenges, making them feel more resilient and less overwhelmed by stressors.

"I used to get so stressed about little things, but now I find myself laughing at situations I would have otherwise gotten angry about. It's not that the problems have gone away, but I can handle them better."(Participant no. 3)

"Laughter gave me a new perspective on things. It's almost like it taught me not to take life too seriously and to find humor even when things get tough."(Participant no. 7)

Enhanced coping skills through laughter therapy reflect a shift in participants' stress management strategies. They began to use laughter as a tool for reframing problems and maintaining emotional stability, reducing the severity of their reactions to stressful events (Mora-Ripoll, 2011).

Mood Elevation and Positivity:

One of the most immediate effects of laughter therapy was the noticeable improvement in participants' moods. Sessions were described as mood-lifting experiences that left participants feeling happier and more optimistic.

"I came in feeling down, but by the end of the session, I couldn't stop smiling. It's like the laughter turned my mood around completely."(Participant no. 6)

"After each session, I noticed that my mood stayed elevated for hours, sometimes even days. The happiness lingered, and I felt more positive about everything."(Participant no. 10)

Laughter therapy had a direct and sustained impact on mood elevation. Participants consistently reported that their moods improved significantly after sessions, highlighting the potential of laughter as a mood-enhancing intervention, especially for individuals struggling with low mood or mild depression (Fox, 1999).

Social Bonding and Support:

Laughter therapy was also reported to foster social connections among participants. The shared experience of laughter created a sense of community and support, helping participants feel more connected to others.

"Laughing together with others made me feel like I belonged. There was this sense of connection that came from sharing the joy."(Participant no. 1)

"I didn't expect to bond with strangers through laughter, but by the end of the session, it felt like we were all friends. The laughter broke down barriers and made me feel supported."(Participant no. 4)

This theme highlights how laughter therapy enhances social well-being. The shared experience of laughter not only improved mental health but also fostered social bonding, reducing participants' sense of loneliness and isolation (Rime, 2009; Yalom, 2005).

Cognitive Reframing:

Laughter therapy encouraged participants to reframe their thoughts and approach life's challenges from a different perspective. Many participants described how laughter allowed them to see their problems with more humor and less negativity, changing the way they processed stressors.

"I started seeing my problems in a different light. Instead of getting frustrated, I tried to find something funny in the situation, and that made everything seem less serious."(Participant no. 2)

"Laughter therapy gave me a new way to think. I realized that not everything needs to be taken so seriously, and sometimes laughing about it is the best way to move forward."(Participant no. 9)

Cognitive reframing through laughter therapy helped participants shift their mindset from one of stress and negativity to one of humor and acceptance. This cognitive shift enabled them to approach challenges with a lighter, more flexible attitude, enhancing emotional resilience (Bennett, 2006).

Physical Relaxation:

Participants often noted the physical relaxation they felt after laughter therapy sessions. Laughter, as a physical activity, helped release tension in their bodies, contributing to a greater sense of overall relaxation and well-being.

"My body felt relaxed, almost like I had done a workout. It was like all the tension I was holding in my muscles just melted away."(Participant no. 5)

"I didn't realize how tense I was until after the session when my body felt completely loose and relaxed. The laughter really helped me let go of all the physical stress I was carrying." (Participant no. 7)

Physical relaxation is a significant benefit of laughter therapy, as laughter acts as a form of gentle exercise that releases muscular tension. This theme suggests that laughter therapy not only improves mental health but also contributes to physical well-being (Akimbekov & Razzaque 2021).

Discussion:

The reflexive thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with ten adult participants revealed six interrelated themes that demonstrate the multifaceted impact of laughter therapy on mental health: Emotional Catharsis, Enhanced Coping Skills, Mood Elevation and Positivity, Social Bonding and Support, Cognitive Reframing, and Physical Relaxation. These themes illuminate the emotional, cognitive, social, and somatic pathways through which laughter therapy exerts its influence.

Emotional Catharsis is one of the most prominent themes. Emotional Catharsis, reflects the role of laughter as a conduit for emotional expression and release. Participants described laughter as a "safe emotional valve" that allowed the emergence of long-suppressed feelings, including grief, fear, and anger. For instance, a 42-year-old female schoolteacher with a history of hypertension and mild depression stated:

"During the sessions, I laughed so hard that I started crying. It felt like I released something heavy I didn't know I was carrying."

This experience resonates with emotion regulation theories (Gross, 2007), where controlled expression of affect is linked to psychological relief. According to Yim (2016), laughter-induced catharsis may play a therapeutic role by activating brain regions associated with affect modulation, such as the amygdala and prefrontal cortex. The structured laughter sessions served as a non-threatening context in which these emotions could be accessed without stigma.

Enhanced Coping Skills, the second theme, Enhanced Coping Skills, captures how laughter therapy fostered psychological resilience. Participants reported a notable shift in their approach to daily stressors. Through the humor-based segments of the therapy—such as role-play, joke-telling, and humorous video clips—they learned to reappraise stressful situations less catastrophically. One 38-year-old male IT professional with prehypertension and work-related anxiety described:

"Earlier, even small mistakes at work would ruin my day. Now I catch myself laughing at them."

This aligns with findings by Bennett et al. (2006), who documented that humor-based interventions can enhance coping efficacy by interrupting ruminative thought cycles. In laughter therapy, humor becomes a cognitive tool, not merely a distraction that enables participants to reinterpret adversities with reduced emotional burden.

Mood Elevation and Positivity, the theme of Mood Elevation and Positivity was consistently reflected across interviews. Most participants, including those on low-dose antidepressants or experiencing subclinical depressive symptoms, reported a perceptible lift in mood within minutes of beginning each session. The role of neurobiological mechanisms is evident here: laughter has been shown to stimulate the release of endorphins and dopamine while suppressing cortisol and adrenaline levels (Berk et al., 1989; Mora-Ripoll, 2009). This biochemical cascade facilitates a state of mental calm and positivity.

Moreover, the dynamic group-based environment and real-time feedback through laughter may activate the brain's reward circuitry, reinforcing feelings of well-being. A 50-year-old homemaker shared:

"Even after the sessions ended, I felt light for hours. The heaviness in my chest was gone."

Such changes, although subjective, may represent enduring mood alterations that support the use of laughter therapy as an adjunct to conventional mental health interventions.

Social Bonding and Support emerged as a pivotal theme, especially for participants with limited family or peer interactions. The group format of the sessions facilitated spontaneous connections among individuals from diverse backgrounds, including office workers, homemakers, and a healthcare professional. Shared laughter generated a sense of trust, belonging, and psychological safety. According to Dunbar et al. (2012), laughter increases social bonding by enhancing the release of endogenous opioids during synchronized behavior. One participant—a 44-year-old male divorced accountant—emphasized:

"I haven't laughed like that with people in years. It made me feel less alone."

These findings affirm the hypothesis that social laughter plays a key role in promoting community and buffering emotional distress (Keltner & Bonanno, 1997; Liberman, 2013).

Cognitive Reframing, another emergent theme, Cognitive Reframing, was especially evident in participants who reported persistent worry or catastrophic thinking. The sessions' structure—particularly the humor-generation exercises and post-session reflections—helped them recognize irrational beliefs and reformulate their appraisals. As seen in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), humor can act as a reframing mechanism, disarming intrusive thoughts and reducing cognitive rigidity (Martin, 2001; Lyubomirsky, 2005). For example, a 35-year-old participant with obsessive-compulsive tendencies noted:

"When I start to panic now, I remind myself of how we laughed at worse situations. It gives me a new angle."

This illustrates the internalization of humor as a psychological tool beyond the session setting, suggesting transference of therapy effects into everyday life (Ko & Youn, 2011).

Physical Relaxation, the final theme, Physical Relaxation, points to the somatic benefits of laughter. Many participants described feeling physically lighter, looser, and more energized after each session. This sense of relaxation was most pronounced after the laughter meditation segment, during which participants engaged in unforced, diaphragmatic laughter in a reclining position. Physiological studies have demonstrated that laughter improves oxygen intake, enhances circulation, and reduces muscle tension (Dolgooff-Kaspar et al., 2012). Several participants with chronic somatic symptoms such as migraines, hypertension, or musculoskeletal pain reported short-term relief. One 47-year-old teacher with type 2 diabetes remarked:

“The stiffness in my back would go away after these sessions.”

Such feedback aligns with the proposition that laughter therapy may act as a complementary intervention not just for mental health but for broader somatic well-being (Martin, 2001; Berk et al., 1989).

Limitations and Future Research Directions:

Although the findings suggest robust psychosocial benefits, it is critical to acknowledge the limitations. The sample size (N=10) restricts generalizability, and the findings should be viewed as thematic insights, not statistical generalizations. The duration of therapy's effects remains unmeasured; further research using longitudinal follow-ups and mixed-methods designs would help ascertain the sustainability of benefits. Moreover, individual differences in temperament, cultural attitudes toward humor, and psychological readiness may influence outcomes.

From a preventive health perspective, the literature suggests laughter therapy may support cancer recovery, cardiovascular resilience, pain management, and even dermatological health via the enhancement of immune function and reduction of inflammatory markers (Cousins, 1979; Hasan & Hasan, 2009). These domains, however, were beyond the scope of the current study and should be prioritized in future interdisciplinary research.

Conclusion:

This thematic analysis reveals laughter therapy as a promising intervention for enhancing mental health. The identified themes highlight its emotional, cognitive, and social benefits, suggesting that laughter therapy can facilitate emotional release, improve coping strategies, elevate mood, foster social connections, encourage cognitive reframing, and promote physical relaxation. The findings underscore the need for mental health practitioners to consider incorporating laughter therapy into their practices as a complementary approach to traditional therapeutic methods. While the results are exploratory, they highlight the integrative potential of laughter therapy in mental health promotion and offer a foundation for future clinical applications and controlled trials.

In conclusion, laughter therapy represents a valuable, accessible resource for individuals seeking to enhance their mental well-being. Its ability to foster emotional release, promote resilience, and cultivate social bonds positions laughter as not merely a spontaneous reaction but a significant therapeutic tool for mental health enhancement.

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