



Bronwen Williams in action at a laughter club in Leederville. PICTURE: MICHAEL O'BRIEN

# Healthy dose of infectious humour

Laughter is the best medicine. It is an old saying but West Australians are increasingly using a good old-fashioned belly laugh to help them enjoy life, feel healthier and be happier.

Up to 50 people a session regularly attend Laughter Clubs at seven sites across Perth to help lift their spirits. Schools, hospitals, businesses, women's groups and church groups are also turning to Laughter Club facilitators to encourage students, patients, workers and members to forget their troubles and just have a good laugh.

According to Laughter Club WA co-ordinator Bronwen Williams, you don't have to see, hear or do something funny to laugh. "You just laugh at nothing, just let out a big belly laugh and let it take over," Ms Williams said. "Most of us do not laugh anywhere near as much as we should."

International research has found that

laughter not only has psychological benefits by relieving stress but it can also have physical benefits.

The Humour Foundation, a charity group in which clown doctors visit sick children and make them laugh, says laughing helps boost the immune system because it reduces T-cells and serum cortisol levels. It also relaxes muscles, helping the cardiovascular and respiratory systems, and there is evidence to suggest that endorphins released when laughing can help to reduce pain.

Professor Rob Donovan of Curtin University's division of health sciences and an expert in health behaviour, said there was an epidemic of depression and people even mildly depressed were less likely to get out and exercise.

"They are more likely to reach for drugs or a Big Mac or chocolate," Professor Donovan said. "Unhappiness

and depression trigger other bad habits."

So laughter is a great way to beat depression and encourage people to get out and about and be healthy.

Ms Williams said laughter also helped break down barriers.

"If you see an angry person, you don't want to go near them," Ms Williams said. "If you see someone smiling, you are more likely to smile back and think they are a nice person."

Laughter was also an international language. "If you see someone on the street in Mexico laughing, you laugh with them. It doesn't matter that you have no idea what they are laughing about."

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For more information about Laughter Clubs, contact Bronwen Williams on 0404 236 378.

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