

LAUGHING IS BEST EXERCISE

In a world increasingly focused on physical fitness, mental well-being, and emotional health, the simple act of laughing often goes unnoticed as a powerful tool for holistic well-being. Though not traditionally seen as "exercise," laughter offers a surprising range of physical, mental, and social benefits that rival and even complement traditional workouts. In many ways, laughing truly is the best exercise - natural, enjoyable, and accessible to all.

From a physical standpoint, laughter stimulates many of the same systems activated during light physical activity. When you laugh heartily, your diaphragm contracts, your abdominal muscles engage, and your heart rate and blood pressure increase temporarily, similar to the effects of aerobic exercise. Laughter improves blood circulation, boosts oxygen intake, and helps release endorphins - the body's natural feel-good chemicals. According to studies, even just 10-15 minutes of laughing a day can burn around 40 calories, which, over time, can contribute to weight loss and improved physical health. It's a fun and effortless way to stay a bit more active, especially for those with limited mobility or recovering from illness.

Beyond its physical effects, laughter is an excellent mental exercise. It reduces the level of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline, while increasing dopamine, which enhances mood and motivation. When we laugh, we feel more relaxed, less anxious, and better equipped to handle challenges. In fact, laughter therapy is used in various settings - including hospitals, schools, and counseling centers - to help people cope with pain, depression, trauma, and chronic illness. Unlike other forms of exercise that can sometimes feel like a chore, laughing is spontaneous, uplifting, and entirely enjoyable.

Moreover, laughter is a deeply social activity, and its impact on social health should not be underestimated. Shared laughter fosters connections, builds trust, and strengthens relationships. Whether it's through a funny movie, a humorous conversation, or playful teasing among friends, laughter helps bridge gaps and unite people. In workplaces, schools, and families, humor can diffuse tension, boost morale, and encourage teamwork. In this way, laughter serves not just as an internal exercise, but as a bonding force that enriches our interactions with others.

Importantly, laughter is universally accessible. Unlike gym memberships or fitness equipment, laughter is free, requires no special skill, and can be practiced anywhere. People of all ages, fitness levels, and backgrounds can benefit from laughing. Even during hard times, finding a reason to laugh - whether through jokes, comedy, or even laughter yoga - can act as a light in the darkness, a reminder of the human capacity for joy.

The rise of laughter yoga and humor therapy programs further underlines the growing recognition of laughter as a legitimate and beneficial exercise. Laughter yoga combines deep breathing techniques with laughter exercises, promoting both mental clarity and physical relaxation. This practice has gained popularity worldwide and is particularly effective for stress relief and building resilience. While traditional forms of exercise are undoubtedly important, we should not overlook the simple, joyful, and profound benefits of laughter. So, the next time you're feeling stressed, tired, or disconnected, try laughing.

Red Cross devoted to Humanity, J&K Branch Ready for Challenge!

■ O P SHARMA

The Red Cross society is now faced numerous challenges in the changed situation by gaining greater dynamism in its humanitarian activities across the globe, especially in the disturbed areas. So it has to gain better momentum and garner active public support for serving the ailing humanity.

Significantly, this year's Red Cross Day theme is "On the Side of Humanity" which is aimed at serving the humanity with zeal and devotion. The Jammu and Kashmir, like other parts of the country is observing the spirit of the theme during this year and the Indian Red Cross Society, J&K branch is fully prepared for the tasks ahead by working with a missionary spirit and size up to the challenges with public co-operation of one and all: students, youth, men and women from all regions, faiths, gender or class.

Already efforts are afoot for creating awareness about f its missionary works by gearing up resource mobilisation in terms of men, money, material and motivation for mitigating multiple hardships of the victims of natural or man-made calamities in UT of Jammu and Kashmir. A sustained campaign has been launched to sensitise the people, particularly the students and youth in actively involving them in the various plans and programmes for help to the helpless victims, especially the disadvantaged women-folk or other sections in the urban as well as rural areas in the sensitive and border areas of Jammu and Kashmir in the Bharat. Needed assistance is extended among the needy without any discriminations of caste ,creed, colour or gender in true principles of the Red Cross Society.

The general secretary, IRCS -J&K branch, Rohit Khajuria has infused a spirit and dynamism to its missionary work among the general public in the entire Jammu and Kashmir UT for prompt humanitarian rescue and relief operation for victims of calamities and also arranging prompt necessary assistance to the needy by various agencies: official and non-official , for implementing the mission of the Red Cross Society.

Noble Mission

It is worth mentioning that this sensitive, border and tough terrain in the prevailing situation is confronted by numerous problems and hardships which always require special initiatives to lend a helping hand to the helpless in the true spirit of this missionary organisation(Red Cross Society) by



playing a pivotal role in mitigating the miseries in event of emergency situations.

Singular Service

It is noteworthy that the Indian Red Cross Society spread its wings in J&K State during 1947 (Partition period) with its first Secretary, Col (retd) Hiranand Dubey ,who played "legendary role to meet the challenging conditions" created due to Pak aggression against India by grabbing one-third area of erst-while Jammu and Kashmir State, which had already linked its fate with India through Instrument of Accession and become part of largest democracy of the world. Subsequently a number of distinguished persons served as in various capacities in this branch which played a crucial role in mitigating the sufferings of the conflict-affected influx of refugees / adversely affected aor disadvantaged people who were provided " balm of relief and rehabilitation and other measures of humanitarian aid". This J&K branch has been rendering yeoman's service over the years with a proud record during all calamities and other harsh conditions by mobilising resources of men, money and material. Of course, the Central Red Cross Society, New Delhi provides all necessary support to the J&K branch which stands out as "a centre of singular service".

New Thrust

According to official record, tangible work has been performed by this noble organisation in Jammu and Kashmir at the two Divisional , districts and other branches with positive outcome. Many stalwarts and

committed persons rendered their valuable service to Red Cross in Jammu and Kashmir as all over our country and the entire humanity.

Presently , In Jammu and Kashmir UT, Lt Governor Manoj Sinha , chief patron, is keeping keen eye on efficient and effective overall functioning of J&K Red Cross branch.

In an exclusive interview with me, Secretary General of IRCS-J&K UT, Rohit Khajuria explained in details the stepped-up functioning of this missionary organisation , in this part of the country , to the -needy sections of the people.

Answering a question, Khajuria disclosed that " Blood Banks are being established both at Jammu and Srinagar by organising blood donation camps to meet the ever-growing demand .of the people. It will certainly be beneficial for the needy patients to save their precious lives and also concerted efforts are already on, in this and other spheres, as per sources.

Touching upon the significant service being rendered by this organisation is modern and decent multi-storey " Attendants Sarai" functioning at Maheshpura Chowk, Jammu which is provided to the attendants of patients admitted in the GMC, Jammu. The attendants are charged "nominal rates" but free lodging and boarding is given to the cancer patients along with one attendant. This facility is benefitting the people belonging to weaker sections and those hailing from far-flung areas of this part of the country .

Dispensaries were operational at

Srinagar and Jammu cities; but now a bold initiative for the wellbeing of the people is setting up of one dispensary in each and every district for providing medical care to the people. Besides, under the Pardhan Mantri Jan Aushadi Kendras, run by the Society, provide medicines at subsidised rates facilitating the treatment of patients.

This branch has taken initiative to activate JRC/YRC at school and colleges to make a strong contingent of volunteers to serve the humanity during peace and disaster. To make the adolescent female awareness of their health and well being regarding menstrual hygiene , this distributed free sanitary napkins and impart awareness. "Free Sanitary Napkins" were distributed among the females for cleanliness and safety. Besides, blankets, kitchen sets, tarpaulin and other essential items are provided to the poor and destitute during the winter season and free tea served to the school students. In additional Pathological laboratory services are provided to the needy.

Selfless Service

IRCCS of J&K organises Blood Donation camps periodically with the collaboration of social organisations, institutions and Belt- forces to save the precious human lives in Jammu and Kashmir. From time to time Medical Camps are organised for medical check-up, treatment, immunisation for the down-trodden people . It is noteworthy that the J&K Society extends financial aid to the poor and needy patients suffering from cancer, kidney failure, heart diseases t

To raise resources various efforts are made and besides collection of voluntary donations, other options like Raffle Draws are arrange and during May, 2023 more than Rs one crore have been collected .

The involvement of the official machinery and support of general public, particularly the students and youth is being ensured for optimal results in rescue and relief measures of victims of natural and man-made calamities, which is a gigantic and challenging task . Needless to add that though much is being performed but evidently still lot more needs to be done; as a famous English poet has well said "we have still miles to go...." And significantly J&K Red Cross i Society is making sustained endeavours on this noble for well being of our people and the entire humanity.

(The writer is Jammu-based freelance veteran journalist who writes on social and cultural matters)

Common plastic food packaging found to contain 9,936 harmful chemicals

■ VIJAY GARG

You grab a pre-made sandwich from the fridge, tear off the clear wrap, and toss the wrapper without a second thought. Yet that throw-away plastic film contains thousands of chemicals that can move into your lunch, enter your gut, and settle into your bloodstream.

Scientists have known for years that additives such as bisphenol A (BPA) and phthalates leach from containers, but recent studies show the list of migrating chemicals is far longer.

The longer food rests against plastic, the more time those molecules have to move, and a microwave zap or a sun-soaked picnic only speeds the process.

Tangled mix of chemicals in plastics
Plastics start as long polymer chains, but manufacturers tweak them with colorants, softeners, heat stabilizers, and other agents so the material bends, flexes, or shines on command.

Impurities, leftovers from production, and by-products that form as the plastic ages or cracks add to the list, creating a

mixture even chemists struggle to map.

None of these extra molecules are firmly locked in place. Heat, grease, ultraviolet light, and mechanical stress let them slip out.

This is why food-contact articles like bags, trays, squeeze bottles, and bottle liners top the list of concern. The warm interior of a delivery truck or the jet of steam from a dishwasher can do the job.

Thousands of chemicals, one sandwich bag

"We found as many as 9936 different chemicals in a single plastic product used as food packaging," noted Martin Wagner, a professor at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU's) Department of Biology.

His team examined 36 everyday items sold in the United States, the United Kingdom, South Korea, Germany, and Norway, running high-resolution mass spectrometry screens to identify additives and breakdown products.

The researchers also exposed cultured human cells to extracts from those items.

"In most of these plastic products, we found chemicals that can affect the secretion of hormones and metabolism," Wagner explained.

Those cellular changes line up with national biomonitoring surveys showing BPA and phthalates in more than 90 percent of Americans, a prevalence mirrored in Europe and Asia.

Hormones and plastic chemicals
Hormones carry instructions between glands and organs. When those instructions are garbled, essential cellular functions such as growth, reproduction, and energy use can falter.

In a second experiment, the NTNU group tested mixtures of plastic chemicals against 82 G-protein-coupled receptors - molecules that handle many of the body's incoming signals.

"We identified 11 chemical combinations from plastic products that affect these signal receptors," said Associate Professor Wagner.

Even small tweaks to those pathways can ripple outward. A lab analysis linked phthalate exposure to about 350,000

cardiovascular-related deaths worldwide in 2018, with middle-aged adults carrying the heaviest burden.

The authors warned that phthalates may increase risks tied to obesity and high blood pressure, suggesting the true health toll could be higher.

Beyond BPA and phthalates
When BPA drew fire, manufacturers shifted to related chemicals such as bisphenol S and bisphenol F.

A 2024 study found these replacements cause the same cellular disruptions linked to obesity and diabetes, challenging the comfort offered by "BPA-free" labels on water bottles and baby cups.

With more than 13,000 known plastic chemicals - and many still unlisted - scientists say a substance-by-substance approach cannot keep up.

"These and previous findings show that plastic exposes us to toxic chemicals. They support the theory that we need to redesign plastic to make it safer,"

Research teams are now testing plant-

based polymers that break down quickly yet still block oxygen and moisture, two qualities valued by food producers.

Global momentum for safer plastics
Negotiators from 175 countries met in Ottawa last year to shape a United Nations treaty aimed at ending plastic pollution "from source to sea."

Talks focused on additive databases and phase-outs for the most hazardous compounds, recognizing that pollution begins long before a bottle reaches the ocean.

Delegates hope to finalize text at a fifth session later this year, setting the stage for formal adoption in 2026.

While the treaty inches ahead, some regulators are moving on their own. The European Chemicals Agency has listed dozens of plasticizers as substances of very high concern, and several U.S. states now ban BPA in food-contact materials.

Industry trade groups, meanwhile, are building open registries of additives to anticipate stricter disclosure rules, signaling that even manufacturers see

change on the horizon.

What happens now?
Researchers are racing to map the many unknown plastic chemicals that standard tests miss.

High-resolution mass spectrometry, machine-learning models that predict biological activity, and expanding open databases are shrinking that blind spot, but laws often trail the lab work by years.

In the meantime, practical steps can trim exposure: choosing fresh or frozen foods over canned, microwaving leftovers in glass, swapping scratched non-stick pans for stainless steel, and airing out that new-car smell before long drives.

Small moves matter, because evidence suggests risk rises with every sip from a soft plastic bottle and every bite that rides down a plastic-lined conveyor. The wrapper may be tossed in seconds, but its chemistry can linger in the body for years.

(The writer is Retired Principal and Educational Columnist)

The Human Edge: hard skills got you hired, soft skills keep you there

■ NANCY SHARMA

In the fast paced world of modern employment having technical expertise is essential but the story doesn't end here. You may get your first job because of hard skills you mentioned in your resume or CV, but staying relevant and growing in your role requires something more human: soft skills.

In current scenario, as artificial intelligence automates more task, the value of interpersonal skills has increased suddenly. The ability to communicate, co-operate, lead and adapt has emerged as a key factor in long term career success. This is what we called the human edge.

Hard Skills: Ticket for getting in

Whenever you try to apply for a job you must fulfill essential qualification and for that everyone is busy in getting degrees and upgrade their CGPA. But is it really helpful for your career growth or it is just a ticket to get yourself enter. Many of us just want a job to settle down in the eyes of society and once we get in, it is rare that we make ourselves more worthy. Also most of us even don't apply for the better opportunity as we become lethargic.

As we know most of the skills like coding for software engineers, accounting principles for CPAs, graphic designer software for digital artist can be taught and usually obtain through formal education, certifications or job training, employers still value them highly. However once you are hired, success becomes less about what you know and more about how you apply it.

Why Soft Skills Become an Essential Part

Soft skills are interpersonal trait that help us to interact with others and solve problems. This include teamwork, growth mindset, work



ethics, leadership and adaptability.

As AI tools and digital transformation reshape the industries, tasks that required technical skills are now being done through AI but soft skills remain helpful in every aspect after getting hired. Those skills cannot be taken over by anyone and make sure that nothing can stop you to reach on the heights.

According to a 2025 report by LinkedIn, the top skills are emotional intelligence, communication and adaptability- none of which are hard skills. Even in the highest paid jobs in IT sectors, teamwork and communicate effectively produced high quality work. Demonstrated Soft Skills

Think about two equally qualified journalists. Both are proficient in writing and reporting, understand the work culture and have competed in similar story. But one of them mediates team conflict, have critical thinking and inter-

personal skills. What do you think who is more likely to be promoted?

Soft skills amplify your hard skills. They improve collaboration, reduce misunderstandings, and foster innovation. They help you build trust and influence, which are critical in leadership roles. In short, they turn good professionals into great ones.

Role of Soft Skills in Leadership

Leadership is a discipline where soft skills really shine. It is not only about taking decisions and control everything. Being an authority is a responsible task, it is about inspiring teams, resolving conflicts, guiding through change and growth. All of that requires empathy, communication, adaptability and patience. Look at leaders like Ratan Naval Tata, was a great industrialist and philanthropist is praised for his business acumen and ethical leadership. His ability to listen, unite teams

and lead with humility has transformed TATA Group into the most innovative company in most of the sectors. His story is less about his educational intelligence but for his visionary leadership.

In today's digital world, even growing number of companies prioritizing emotional intelligence in leadership development programs. Why? Because no matter how much our world get digitalized or AI efficient, one thing that lacks in them is emotions which is the only weapon or ability for human.

Develop your Software Skills:

Some of us get worried- maybe we lack in soft skills, How can we learn them? But here is a good news that unlike hard skills, we don't have to do courses for soft skills. This process is more personal and ongoing.

1. **Strive for Feedback-** Seek feedback from your friends, mentors, guides or family whenever communicate. None other than friends can show you a mirror. So try to ask them about your communication style, teamwork or leadership approach.

2. **Practice Active Listening-** Try to be more focus on listening to others rather than speaking unnecessary in every situation and be less interruptive. This strengthens empathy and understanding.

3. **Join Different Teams-** Make sure to work in diverse culture, most of us prefer to live and work under our comfortable zone which make us 'a frog in the well'. When we interact with people from different backgrounds, it helps in building collaboration and adaptability.

4. **Volunteer for Leadership Roles-** This can be done in schools, colleges or universities. Don't wait for someone's order to do some-

thing, your life is in your hand, take initiative yourself and put your efforts in small to bigger tasks by volunteering. This initiative can teach delegation and problem solving methods.

The most important part is to treat every interaction as an opportunity to learn something new and better. How you handle stressful situations? How to respond to the feedbacks? How to motivate others? These skills are not the inborn talent of anyone, only practice makes the man perfect.

But it doesn't mean that once you acquire these skills, you start show off them. There is a different way to showcase them to make them visible in your job hunt or career growth.

1. In resumes mention team projects, conflict resolution or leadership responsibilities.

2. During interviews share some stories that highlight your soft skills. Explain how to handle challenging team, adapted to change or solved communicate issues. But also make it concise and clear, don't make them bore.

3. In your workplace- make yourself dependable, communicate clearly, offer help to teammates. Let your actions speak louder than words. Don't show off that you are an independent person and you can handle everything yourself. And don't forget to stay open for feedback. Employers notice these behavioral traits more than degrees and certificates.

Hard skills may get you through the door but soft skills are what will keep you growing, connected and indispensable. So while you are working on coding language, financial models and certifications don't forget to work on your skills that makes you human. Because in a world full of machines, soft skills are your greatest strength.