

Why do we laugh at people when they fall over? It's not a nice thing to do, but we are all guilty of it. Comedians from Charlie Chaplin to Rowan Atkinson recognised this and littered their films with people falling off chairs and bumping into inanimate objects. Apparently you find it funny simply because it is not you that has fallen, and your laughter is just some sort of defence mechanism.

Similarly, people often laugh when they are nervous or scared. Remember all the jokes that were sent round by text or email after the murder of Jill Dando or the twin towers tragedy. For some reason our natural reaction seems to be to defuse our horror with laughter.

Not that my life is filled with horror at the moment but I have signed up for some laughter workshops in our village hall. No – I have no idea what they will consist of, but we have been told to wear something silly. That shouldn't be too hard, then.

I was once at one of those management training sessions so beloved by the public sector and we had a short session on laughter. Everyone stood in a circle and one at a time we each had to laugh uproariously. Then we all laughed together until our teacher told us to stop. There were no funny outfits and no jokes; just forced fake laughter.

The theory is that the act of laughing in itself fools your body into thinking you are actually feeling what you are acting out and everyone feel better as a result. I'm not entirely convinced, but in these credit crunch times I am willing to give it a go.

One thing that makes me think it may work is that, in my glass half-empty mind, I am convinced of the opposite; that hanging around miserable people can make you feel that way too. You know when you meet someone you don't know well

and ask them how they are? You want them to just say ‘fine, thanks’ but occasionally someone will actually tell you how they are and it’s not usually good. Inwardly I can feel my heart sinking and wish that I had never asked.

Something else that makes my heart sink is when people start to tell jokes. I confess that there are times when I don’t get the punch line, but I smile anyway knowing that having it explained will make it even less funny that it was supposed to be. Even the ones I get rarely do more than raise a smile. Very few jokes have actually raised a full belly laugh in me. I think jokes are a man-thing in any case. Generally, men tell jokes better and seem to enjoy them a lot more than women do. My few attempts at joke-telling gave such poor results that I have become less and less inclined to try any more. Like singing, joke-telling requires practice, confidence and a natural ability. I possess none of these.

Research says that laughter reduces the level of stress hormones and increases the level of health-enhancing hormones like endorphins. It increases the number of antibody-producing cells and even increases your pain threshold. A stronger immune system and reduced levels of stress are all excellent reasons to laugh some more. I might even write less grumpy columns for the paper – who knows?

I promise to report back on how the workshops go, but in the meantime will make do with the things that make me laugh just now. That includes something that at least once every day one of my family say or do, children giggling uncontrollably, TV out-takes when the actors start to laugh, kittens playing, Peter Kaye and of course people falling over.