

"It's Not Funny!" – Laugh Anyway

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Abstract:

Laughter Yoga was developed by Dr. Madan Kataria and uses simple laughter exercises along with gentle breathing and stretching activities. Laughter Yoga is one more tool to reduce excessive tension and bring balance and fun into our lives.

We all know life's joys and sorrows, up and downs. When "it's not funny!" or when we "don't feel like it", - laugh anyway and reduce stress, increase respiratory capacity, lower blood pressure, improve immune function, and end up feeling better. Laughter Yoga, a group of people gathering together to practice laughter as a form of exercise, provides a great tool to "laugh for no reason" and improve health.

Laughter Yoga as a modality, program, tool, or technology (however you want to classify it), began as the brainchild of Dr. Kataria in Mumbai, India. In 1995, while working on an article, "Laughter - the Best Medicine", a flash of inspiration struck Dr. Kataria. With the assistance of his wife Madhuri, a yoga instructor, the fledging idea of Laughter Yoga first graced the world.

Articles abound on humor and healing. An internet search on laughter research yielded 638,000 results, laughter and health 751,000 and laughter therapy 268,000.

Contemporary laughter research generally is credited to beginning with Norman Cousins and his fascinating personal journey published in 1979 as *Anatomy of an Illness*. Cousins, suffering from a chronic, degenerative pain condition, abandoned the medical regime of 26 aspirin a day, sleeping pills and codeine and treated himself with high doses of laughter and nutritional therapy.¹

Roundly condemned by the medical community of the time, Cousins, upon his recovery, sought to legitimize his claims by funding research. Dr. Lee Berk, a researcher in psychoneuroimmunology at Loma Linda University, California, although funded by Cousins, initially doubted his claims. In a 2003 interview, Dr. Berk stated, "If you'd told me 10 years ago that medical organizations would today be accepting papers on this, I would've said you were crazy...but the reality is that now there's a real science to the health benefits of laughter."²

Many other researchers work in the field of humor and healing as well. The movie *Patch Adams*, starring Robin Williams as Dr. Hunter (Patch) Adams, popularized the idea of therapeutic humor.

How laughter works

Laughter is a combination phenomenon – production of sound blended with various facial and physical movements. Of all the articles that I found when I looked for the actual physiology of laughter, the only information I could come up with was this: a second-hand quote from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “rhythmic, vocalized, expiratory and involuntary actions.”³ According to Marshall Brian in his article, “How Laughter Works,” “Fifteen facial muscles contract and stimulation of the zygomatic major muscle occurs. Meanwhile, the respiratory system is upset by the epiglottis half-closing the larynx, so that air intake occurs irregularly, making you gasp. In extreme circumstances, the tear ducts are activated, so that while the mouth is opening and closing and the struggle for oxygen intake continues, the face becomes moist and often red. The noises that usually accompany this bizarre behavior range from sedate giggles to boisterous guffaws.”⁴

According to a variety of published sources, the specific physiological health benefits of laughter include: reduces stress hormones, lowers blood pressure, elevates mood, supports the immune system, improves brain function, protects the heart, increases respiratory capacity and reduces the perception of pain. In addition, laughter works your diaphragm, abdominal, facial and back muscles, even your legs! The torso workout, in turn, massages your abdominal

organs, potentially benefiting digestion and absorption. Mental, emotional, and social benefits include: increases creativity, decreases isolation, reduces aggression, relieves anxiety, enhances relaxation, and just makes you feel good.

Why aren't we all laughing more?

What matters – the humor, the mental aspect; or the laughter, the physical aspect? How do we separate laughter and humor? Can the two be separated?

According to Dr. Kataria laughter alone – no jokes needed, no sense of humor needed, laughter for no reason-- produces all the health benefits previously attributed to humor.

Why Laughter Yoga?

In our high stress world it seems laughter doesn't flow easily. Many people think they need to “have a sense of humor” to laugh freely. Much research has been done on humor and healing. Are the two mutually inclusive? According to Dr. Kataria, humor is a “phenomena of the intellect...unique to the individual, their culture, and it varies from person to person.” In daily living do we have more reasons to laugh or more reasons not to laugh?

After conducting research for an article about laughter as the best medicine, Dr. Kataria thought about how to use laughter in the world today. Dr. Kataria tried a few different ways of getting people together and laughing. After a short period of time, the jokes were stale, things weren't really that funny, and he decided that there must be a way to get people to laugh without the need for humor.

He understood that humor requires intellect; we have to “think” that something is funny in order to see the humor. Humor requires use of the analytical brain.

Humor was ineffective in creating sustained laughter. Sustained laughter “gives us the goods” – provides the increased respiratory capacity, the increase in endorphin levels, and other benefits of Laughter Yoga.

Dr. Kataria started getting together with other people in the park in the morning and they began experimenting with this program. Of course it started very small, 4 people, but people on their morning walk would hang around and look, thinking “What are these crazy people doing?” Eventually, more and more people joined in. Now, in India, Laughter Yoga is really huge. And the concept is spreading through the world. There are now over 6000 laughter clubs in the world today. So, it’s a growing movement and it’s more frequent in some places, less often in other places. Certified Laughter Yoga Leader training keeps things working in what has been a proven way to help people have a better life.

Historically people used to laugh more. Today if we look around our world and even our own lives we often think we don’t have that much to laugh about and so we don’t laugh or we laugh briefly, or we laugh sarcastically, or we laugh as a nervous tic. The idea behind Laughter Yoga or the goal of Laughter Yoga is to “laugh for no reason” in a sustained manner to receive the health benefits. It is thought that adults laugh less than 20 times each day, while children laugh 200-400 times per day. Childlike, mirthful, laughter, laughter for no reason – that’s Laughter Yoga.

It is important to distinguish between Laughter Yoga and Laughter Therapy. Annette Goodheart, PhD explains the function of Laughter Therapy as “Cathartic therapy...(it) involves four basic steps...get in touch with your feelings,...release them through catharsis,...rethink the situation or experience,...take appropriate action.” Laughter Therapy uses laughter with a specific therapeutic intention, as a catharsis to release specific emotions around a therapeutic issue under the guidance of a trained therapist. Laughter Yoga is about “laughing for no reason.” Just laughing. Whatever happens, happens.

Not to say there are not benefits to Laughter Yoga. Whatever benefits come, come from the changes in physiology created by the action of laughter, the sense of community formed by laughing with a group, and the childlike playfulness of the exercises.

In addition to clarifying Laughter Therapy and Laughter Yoga, the fuzzy lines between humor and laughter need to be examined.

Most published articles on laughter and healing address humor and laughter as the same thing. With Laughter Yoga there are no jokes, no need for a sense of humor, no “feeling like it,” just a willingness to participate in the exercises.

When life isn’t living up to our expectations, stress happens. How do you feel when you’re stressed and someone else is laughing? Usually it doesn’t help the situation. We feel we are being laughed “at”, not supported. Group laughter, when laughing together for no reason, changes that. Everyone laughs with each other, not at anyone or anything. Laughter Yoga removes the isolation

and creates community. This very sense of inclusion reduces stress, creating an opportunity for healing.

People constantly search for happiness. Often feelings of happiness have become conditional, require something outside of ourselves – a beautiful day, things “going our way”, helping someone out, many different things can “make” us happy. If I get the new car/job/boyfriend/house, I’ll be happy. After the new car/job/boyfriend/house the happiness fades. There is still the wanting of something more. Perhaps rather than conditional happiness, we search for joy – a special feeling welling up from within rather than from without. Dr. Kataria developed Laughter Yoga to help us bring forth the joy that resides in all of us – no matter what life throws at us.

With over 6000 Laughter Yoga clubs in existence, this simple program improves people’s lives in a multitude of ways and easily integrates with any other personal process or life journey.

Once laughing for 15-20 minutes a day becomes part of our daily life, a possibility is created for transformation of any situation. The LaughterYoga.org website provides testimonials of how Laughter Yoga impacts lives. Here are two powerful stories.

In Innisfail, Australia, cyclone Larry destroyed much of the town. Fortunately no lives were lost. Susan Brown took Laughter Yoga to help. She and others gathered people to laugh, helped clean up, and provided food. Politicians, police, fire, and hospital personnel opened their meeting with 10 minutes of laughter and without bickering came to great outcome and declared it the

best meeting ever. A Whole Town Laugh created powerful healing opportunities for residents.

Dr. Kirchner of Brazil fell four meters from a ladder resulting in an open tib/fib fracture of the right leg and a radial fracture of the right arm. His gardener help stabilize him, and then the ambulance took him the 50 minute drive to the hospital. During transport he quietly laughed to himself and continued to do so during the four-hour wait for surgery. As President and Founder of the Brazilian Laughter Club, Dr. Kirchner tested the healing benefits of Laughter Yoga, declining pain medication. During his recovery he lead laughter sessions tied to his wheelchair, inspiring others to discover their own self-healing capabilities. Seven weeks after the accident Dr. Kirchner completed a yoga teacher training and was able to walk short distances by himself.

The boundaries of the Healing Power of Laughter are still unknown.

It may feel weird at first; in fact it does feel weird at first. Many of us are very caught up in the image that we present to the world – who we are, who we want to be, who we’re supposed to be. Even those who are pretty self-actualized in a lot of ways can be bound by restraints of family, culture, convention, etc. It can be hard to really let go for no good reason. Because we are so restrained, many people turn to drugs and alcohol or other ways to reduce their inhibitions.

My ex-husband told me once that my sense of humor was “as dry as the Sahara Desert.” I didn’t know how to take that, and so, in kind of a sardonic, maybe a sarcastic attitude, I took that as a badge of honor. Well, I’m

not going to lower myself to childish Jim Carey humor, or, I don't appreciate the value of slapstick – the Three Stooges never really entertained me very well.

I was not a good laugh-er. When I first heard about Laughter Yoga, I thought it was utterly ridiculous. My initial reaction was – How incredibly stupid! One more person slapping the word “yoga” onto something else to try to make something up! It was some months later, that I just took a look, and I realized that I was one of those people that I didn't like as much because I was more sarcastic than I wanted to be, I didn't laugh easily, I rarely saw humor, and I just wanted more fun in my life and I didn't know how to get it! I just didn't seem to have fun in the same way as other people. I wasn't unhappy. I just wanted to be more lighthearted.

For those of you who are familiar with Garrison Kellior and “A Prairie Home Companion,” I was one of those people who worships at the alter of “Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility.” I was so sick and tired of being utterly responsible for everything! It was driving me crazy. I really needed to get a grip. I've done a lot of work. Seriously. I just need a different way. Trying to have more fun was one more thing to do; it was one thing to add to the schedule. Having fun was one more responsibility. Give me a break!

So, Laughter Yoga popped back into my head. This time I thought – “You know what? Maybe this isn't so ridiculous after all! Maybe, this is just what I need.” So I got on line, looked up the Laughter Yoga website and started reading; it really piqued my interest. I signed up for the training, ordered the book and the DVD and opened my life to Laughter Yoga.

It's been a joy. It really has been a joy. Instead of counting on “something” to make me happy – oh, I'm happy because I had a really good day, or I'm happy because all my clients really wanted to work with me today, or It's such a beautiful day - la, la, la – “things” made my life work. With Laughter Yoga I can have joy in my heart for no reason at all. It's a great tool, it's an easy tool, and it's fun.

So that's kind of my personal experience with Laughter Yoga. Now will have a little experience of it and see how it works for you.

A Laughter Yoga Session

A quick overview of a Laughter Yoga session and then – experience it!

Laughter Yoga consists of laughter exercises - laughing in a group for no reason, without jokes, while moving around and making eye contact. The leader illustrates the exercise, the group begins together, and the leader indicates when to end the exercise. Usually a laughter yoga session includes laughter exercises, deep breathing, and light stretching. Three types of exercises include those based on yoga, playful exercises, and value-based exercises. During the exercises, gentle laughter, not loud and forceful, leads to genuine laughter. Laughter Yoga meditation (spontaneous laughter) follows the exercises and sessions end with brief affirmations and sending out peace for the world.

Contraindications include hernia, angina not controlled by medication, pregnancy with a history of spontaneous abortion, or any other medical condition that prohibits any normal activities of daily living. If at any time during a laughter session you

feel pain, dizziness, or nausea, discontinue participation.

For a little bit, just be silly, shed your inhibitions, stop worshipping at the alter of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility and just laugh!

^{1,2} Murphy, Alex, "Science Adds Weight To Proposition That Life's A Laugh", April 5, 2003, The Sydney Morning Herald <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/04/04/1048962923806.html>

^{3,4} Brian, Marshall, "How Laughter Works", 01 April 2000, How Stuff Works.com <http://people.howstuffworks.com/laughter.htm>

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Holly Stuber, LMT, Certified Laughter Yoga Leader

A licensed massage therapist since 1999, Holly Stuber studied many forms of bodywork and mind-body healing modalities including Touch for Health and other ways of aiding people to reduce stress and bring balance to their lives.

After reading about Laughter Yoga in Yoga Journal Magazine in the late summer of 2007, Holly began her quest to add laughter to her overly serious life. As a Certified Laughter Yoga Leader, introducing the joy of laughter to people creates community and reduces stress for all who participate.