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Laughter yoga helps participants decrease stress levels, stay healthy

By Jennifer Chyu

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Pretending to be bumper cars, the faculty smash into each other and burst into laughter.

Road rage?

No, laughter rage.

There's only room for laughter, and it's making the walls of LuValle Commons shake.

Inside is a group of faculty and staff who show up every Thursday at noon for laughter yoga class complete with dancing, chanting and laughing.

The members of the class greet each other with smiles and hugs, belt out "Frère Jacques" with laughter instead of words, and point out their aches and pains then laugh them away.

"It's better than aspirin," Betsy Metzgar, the assistant director for the UCLA events office, said to the class.

She and Roni Tagliaferri, a yoga instructor in Camarillo, are certified laughter yoga leaders and teach the class.

Directed at faculty and staff and funded by FITWELL, laughter yoga aims to help employees feel less stress, be more productive and prevent injury and illness, according to Elisa Terry, the director of FITWELL who brought the class to UCLA.

"It's really important to emphasize that these classes are a cost-saving measure. We're on the right end of things trying to prevent lost time from work," she said.

While the laughter portion of the class consists of games, the yoga component comprises mostly of deep-breathing exercises that release old oxygen and bring in fresh oxygen, helping to rejuvenate the

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respiratory system.

The effects and benefits of the class are seen immediately, Terry said, referencing accounts of how students feel the laughter and happiness carry them throughout the day.

Indeed, the physiological effects of laughter yoga are real.

The brain-child of physician Dr. Madan Kataria of Mumbai, India, laughter yoga decreases the body's levels of cortisol, a stress hormone.

It also lowers blood pressure and increases the release of endorphins, which are the body's natural painkillers, said Tagliaferri, who studied laughter yoga with Kataria.

Laughter yoga, now taught at 6,000 clubs internationally since its creation in 1995, tries to exercise the right brain, the half of the brain that emphasizes creativity and imagination, while shutting down the left, the half that puts stress on logic and reasoning.

"Check out of the left brain. ... Let the right brain come out to play," Tagliaferri said, urging the class to relax, loosen up and laugh.

The philosophy behind the laughter is that you do not have to be in the mood to laugh nor does the laughter have to be real.

The mere motion of laughter makes the body believe it is happy, triggering the beneficial physiological effects of laughter.

Regardless, the laughter is contagious anyway and becomes real, Metzgar said.

"Every smile is another endorphin and we want that happiness chemistry," Tagliaferri said.

Some students come in hesitant to let loose, smile and laugh.

"The first time I came I was kind of skeptical. I felt kind of dorky, ... but after (the class), I was hooked," said Larissa Deckert, an avid laughter yoga student and program assistant at the UCLA International Institute.

A former actress, Deckert was reminded of her days doing improvisational activities – a laughter yoga exercise where she serenaded a co-worker as a dog howling "Home on the Range" stuck out as her favorite memory of the class thus far.

Tagliaferri and Metzgar both agreed, it doesn't matter what language is being spoken: laughter is universal.

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