

Laughter Yoga puts smiles on stressed-out faces



For stressed-out employees, sometimes laughter is the best medicine.

Something funny is going on in the basement of LuValle Commons — literally. A boom box is softly playing golden oldies, and seven staff and faculty members are padding around the room while serenading one another by meowing “O Sole Mio.”

Laughter Yoga has come to UCLA.

“It sounds like we’re in heat! I like that!” crowed Roni Tagliaferri, who co-leads the class with friend Betsy Metzgar, assistant director of the UCLA Events

Office.

“You know me as a mild-mannered university bureaucrat by day, but in my other life, I’m a certified Laughter Yoga instructor,” Metzgar e-mailed her colleagues, inviting them to attend the first class.

Metzgar brought this unique form of yoga to campus employees this fall with the encouragement of Elisa Terry, director of UCLA Recreation's FITWELL program. At first, Metzgar hesitated about leading the class, pointing to an upcoming work deadline — but she was swayed when Terry insisted, “No, no. The staff needs it now!”

Judging from the smiling faces and the raucous laughter that fill the room, Terry was right.

Laughter Yoga came to be in 1995, when Dr. Madan Kataria of Mumbai, India, formed the first Laughter Club to test his hypothesis that patients who laughed often felt better and healed faster. The club's rapid growth inspired him to found Laughter Yoga, which now has more than 6,000 Laughter Clubs in 60 countries.

Unlike traditional Hatha Yoga, there is no emphasis on complex positions. Kataria's research into the medical benefits of laughter, coupled with contributions from his wife, Madhuri, who is trained in traditional yoga, led to a practice that combines playful laughter exercises with deep, yoga breathing.



Roni Tagliaferri (left) and Betsy Metzgar give their class in Laughter Yoga a thumbs-up.

But the funny thing about Laughter Yoga? It is not terribly amusing — at least not on purpose.

“We don’t want any jokes. ... Jokes are left-brain,” Tagliaferri said after class. Metzgar added, “During the Laughter Yoga session, you’re really in your right brain ... very in-the-moment and very joyful.”

This left-brain/right-brain split is one of the main ideas behind Laughter Yoga, they explained. Jokes force people to analyze and think, which are jobs relegated to the left half of the brain. But the right half of the brain, which is responsible for imagination and creativity, represents the ideal mindset for a Laughter Yoga practitioner.



The good news is that the same physiological and psychological benefits are enjoyed as the result of laughter — whether it is spontaneous or induced. Laughter has been found to increase the release of endorphins — the body’s natural painkillers- — and to decrease levels of cortisol, which induces stress.

Playful exercises give people the chance to to be joyful and "in-

the-moment."

The class participants seem anything like stressed-out employees as they stomped around practicing the “Aloha Breath” (“Aloooo-ha-ha-ha-ha!”), occasionally throwing in a leaping karate chop.

Metzgar was introduced to Laughter Yoga at a free workshop at the Fowler Museum.

“The class was so joyful, and I was amazed at how both relaxed and energized I felt afterwards. I immediately thought of Roni,” she recalled.

Tagliaferri, who has been friends with Metzgar for the last nine years, went on to study with Kataria himself and to found her own Laughter Yoga class in Camarillo, where she lives. When Metzgar decided to “come full circle” and teach the class for FITWELL, she knew that she wanted Tagliaferri to be involved.

The two seem like a perfect match to introduce this to staff and faculty; Metzgar, as an employee, knows exactly what her peers are going through and what can help them.

“During this difficult economic climate ... when staff are asked to do more with less, Laughter Yoga can energize us,” Metzgar said.

Similarly, Tagliaferri might not work here at UCLA, but as an alumna who met her husband in Dykstra Hall, she has her finger on the pulse of the university: “There are a whole lot of people here who are working hard and need a little laughter. ... I think this would be a fantastic thing for them to participate

in.”

As the class winds down, the evidence of its success is plainly seen on the serene faces of the participants. Sitting in a tight circle in the center of the room, they breathe deep and then repeat the three affirmations — that they are the healthiest, happiest and luckiest people “in the world.”

Said Kyrie Bass, marketing manager of UCLA Transportation: “It’s so stressful sometimes at work.

Coming to a place like this is ... a piece of heaven. A mini-vacation. And I want to say that laughter is the best medicine.”



The Laughter Yoga class is free and meets every Thursday in LuValle Commons B01B from noon to 12:45 p.m. Faculty and staff can participate on a drop-in basis, even joining in mid-class. Mats and workout clothes are not necessary — just come as you are. For more information, visit the [FITWELL page](#), [Dr. Kataria's official Laughter Yoga website](#) and [Tagliaferri's personal page](#).

If you want to see the Laughter Yoga class in action, go [here](#).

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