

## COVER STORY

# Comic relief

Two Camarillo-based groups prove laughter truly is the best medicine

~ By MOLLIE VANDOR ~



# F

or many people, the Thanksgiving holiday signals the start of a celebratory season. But for some, it means the onset of a form of depression commonly known as Seasonal Affective Disorder. Fortunately for Ventura County residents looking for alternative solutions to the annual problem, there are two local groups testing the theory that laughter may indeed be the best medicine.

According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, as many as a half-million Americans could suffer from the type of depression known as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). The National Institute of Health (NIH) defines the disorder as a form of depression that often sets in around the Thanksgiving holiday.

According to the NIH Web site, “Some people experience a serious mood change when the seasons change. They may sleep too much, have little energy, and crave sweets and starchy foods. They may also feel depressed. Though symptoms can be severe, they usually clear up. ... It usually happens during the winter.”

Stress management is one of the most popular ways to control the symptoms of SAD. Ventura County residents Roni Tagliaferri and Jackie Decker agree. Tagliaferri and Decker are the founders of Laughter Club at the Camarillo Yoga Center and the Good Grief Group at the Camarillo Methodist Church, respectively.

Although the two women conduct clubs with very different structures and settings, their philosophies are surprisingly similar. Both Tagliaferri and Decker host free weekly groups dedicated to the idea that laughter really is the best way to combat a variety of ailments, including stress, depression and grief.

“The reason why we laugh is that if we go through the motions, then the emotions will follow,” Tagliaferri said. “There’s no place to do this ordinarily. ... You need to be able to go back to a kind of an innocent laughter. It relieves depression, it relieves anxiety, it relieves stress.”

Decker said the Good Grief Group also operates according to the theory that laughter can help ease pain — particularly the pain of losing a loved one. She said the club started off in 2000 as a way for a group of widows from the same church to support each other in a more religious setting than the secular Good Grief Club offered at the Camarillo Hospice where they met.

“We meet once a week on Monday mornings to get together and talk and tell jokes and laugh, because several of us, years ago after our husbands died, had gone through bereavement at hospice,” Decker said. “So we meet every Monday morning regardless of whatever. But sometimes there may be five or six of us, sometimes there are 23 or 25. And we just discuss, and everyone tells jokes. It helped us to laugh. ... We meet to laugh.”

Tagliaferri’s Camarillo Laughter Club is much younger than the Good Grief Group, having started just a year ago. But Tagliaferri said the club already attracts up to 25 people from all over Ventura County to the club’s 7:30 a.m. meetings every Saturday morning.

“The only limit is that I try to not have children coming in, because they can be distracting,” Tagliaferri said. “I’ve had some high school students all the way through my oldest one, which is 90 years old. She’s a regular. There is no age limit, so the kinds of things we do are not excessively vigorous or straining. It’s simple stuff, like clapping your hands and going ‘hip hip hooray’ and lifting your arms in the air, interspersed with breathing exercises.”

Tagliaferri became certified to teach Laughter Yoga — also known as Hayasa Yoga — after attending a class taught by School of Laughter Yoga founder Dr. Madhan Kataria.

According to Kataria’s Web site, Hayasa Yoga was born 11 years ago when the doctor was writing a paper about the use of laughter as medicine and became inspired to combine yogic breathing exercises with the practice of learning to laugh more spontaneously.

Tagliaferri said her club combines the two in order to promote oxygenation, which she said has helped its members deal with depression, anger and stress, among other things.

“The yoga part is the breathing techniques that yoga uses, which makes your oxygenation happen more deeply,” she said, “and then we combine that with exercises that are laugh exercises. The point of the process is to laugh without reason, without jokes. The reason we laugh without jokes is because we’re laughing with our body. It’s a body exercise, not a mental exercise. Anger is a very common reason people say they come into the class, and depression, and then they begin to release their pent-up anger into a laughing place and they start to see things as funny that they didn’t even see before. And those people who have serious problems — physically, they’re fighting bone cancer or they’re clinically depressed — these people come back and continue to grow in their sense of levity and they really lighten up. And it feels so good to just let it out in a really positive way, and that’s something that I love to see.”

The Good Grief Group also provides laughter-driven support for a wide variety of Ventura County residents, Decker said. The group is made up mostly of women between the ages of 60 and 90, but she said the 10:30 a.m. meetings attract a diverse group within that demographic.

“You do not have to be a member of the Methodist Church to join us, and we’ve had several other people come from different churches,” Decker said. “We just laugh, and then if we have any

problems, we let them out and maybe we can help solve them. We also meet for coffee two times a week, and then we celebrate birthdays with a luncheon once a month. It's been a Good Grief Group for all of us. We've just formed a bond. We've all had a terrible loss, whether it was a spouse, a child, a parent or just a loved one."

Decker said the group decided laughter was the best method for dealing with their grief after researching a variety of methods to combat stress and depression.

"We read that laughter is very helpful," Decker said. "And, when you're sad, if you can make yourself laugh, it helps you recuperate, and it's uplifting."

Even though many people are aware of the physiological [benefits](#) of laughter, Tagliaferri said, it is often difficult for people to embrace the philosophy during their first few classes of Laughter Yoga.

"People sometimes will come in and they'll be in their left hemisphere of their brain, because that's their serious side, and they're just so left-brained it's hard to really let go of their reasoning, judgment and logic," Tagliaferri said. "They're really in tune with that, and to let go of all that and let their imagination come into play is hard. The right side of the brain is where they're not living, and people who are too left-brained come in and they have a little bit of a hard time with it. But let go of your inhibitions for about 20 minutes, and it'll be OK."

Decker said her group is also focused on finding the funny side of things, rather than centering on the serious, although she said people tend to have a pretty easy time accepting the Good Grief Group's approach to assuaging anxiety.

"If you need to cry or just unload, you need to go to the hospice, because they're very good at that," Decker said. "But most of us have been through that, so we meet to laugh."

Tagliaferri, who will be conducting a class at the Camarillo Yoga Center for people interested in learning how to teach Laughter Yoga on Jan. 26-27, said laughter is one of the body's best natural ways to deal with distress, even if it is difficult for some people to accept it as an alternative answer to more traditional forms of therapy. She said she hopes people will make time to laugh during this stressful holiday season.

"We have a laughter muscle, and we need to exercise that muscle just like we exercise our other muscles," Tagliaferri said. "If you don't, it atrophies. That's all. It's like getting on a treadmill. Come over and get on your laughter treadmill."

Laughter Club meets at the Camarillo Yoga Center every Saturday from 7:30-8:15 a.m. 5800 Santa Rosa Rd. Ste. 127, 484-8810. For more information, visit [www.camarilloyoga.com](http://www.camarilloyoga.com). ★

*The Good Grief Group meets at Camarillo Methodist Church every Monday at 10:30 a.m. 291 Anacapa Dr., 482-4312. For more information, visit [www.cam-umc.org](http://www.cam-umc.org).*