



Laughter yoga takes fake chuckles and turns them into better health for people from India to Ventura

The best medicine

By Kim Lamb Gregory
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The candle-scented, meditative Camarillo Yoga Center bursts into what sounds more like a toddler's birthday party on Saturday mornings as yoga instructor Roni Tagliaferri leads a group of adults practicing a modern twist on an ancient practice.

It's called laughter yoga.

"Laughter yoga is a combination of playful laughter exercises and yoga-style breathing, which, in combination, produces laughter," Tagliaferri explained. "We don't use laughter as an emotion; we use laughter as a motion — a physical exercise. And when we do that, real laughter happens spontaneously."

This month marks a year since the Camarillo Yoga Center began offering the free class. It seems to be going well. Bright and early on Saturday mornings — at 7:15 — anywhere from a dozen to two dozen adults ranging in age from 20 to nearly 90 leave their shoes and their inhibitions at the door, then pad onto the polished wood floor intending to act as goofy as possible for the next hour.

There are no neatly spaced yoga mats. Instead, the participants move around the room clapping, breathing deeply and erupting with rhythmic, purposeful belly laughs.

"Ho ho ha-ha-ha!" Tagliaferri led the class in the first chant, instructing them to breathe from the sheet of muscle below the lungs called the diaphragm.

After some clapping and laughing, Tagliaferri had everybody clap and chant a congratulatory, "Veddy good, veddy good!" followed by a "Yay!" as everybody shot both arms in the air and grinned at the ceiling.

At first, the laughter in the group was simulated, with Tagliaferri leading. After about 10 minutes of watching one another march around the room "ho-ho-ha-ha"-ing, the laughter began to bloom into genuine mirth ranging from cascading giggles to throaty guffaws.

"When you do these laughter exercises and you're looking at each other, we wind up laughing our heads off," Tagliaferri said. "There's something contagiously funny about watching adults shedding their inhibitions."

"I thought it would be a little bit hokey at first, but about halfway through the class I'm realizing, Hey, I'm ready to go now," said laughter yoga student Andy Barton of Camarillo. "I could now go do a 15-mile bike ride or go for a hike. I was pretty amazed."

The benefits of a belly laugh

The beauty of laughter yoga, Tagliaferri said, is that participants reap the physiological and psychological benefits of laughter, regardless of whether it's real or simulated.

"Your body cannot tell the difference; your body reacts as if it's real," confirmed Dr. Madan Kataria, a physician from India who co-founded the practice of laughter yoga in 1995 with his wife, yoga instructor Madhuri Kataria.

Laughter yoga was born out of his own stress, he said. Between editing a magazine and his work as a doctor in Mumbai, India, he wasn't laughing much.

"In my quest for dollars and name fame, I was almost drained out," Kataria said in a telephone interview from San Jose, where he was visiting this month. "In March of 1995, I started writing an article for my magazine about laughter as the best medicine. I thought, Hey, this is what is missing in my life."

Kataria remembers exactly when his epiphany struck. "An idea flashed in my mind at 4 a.m. on March 13, 1995," he said. "I could hardly wait for three hours for 7 a.m."

At 7 every morning, Kataria and hundreds of others walk in local parks, which, like yoga, is a mainstream activity in India, he explained. He thought that social venue would be the perfect place to start a spontaneous "laughter club."

"At first people said: It's not a good idea to laugh in a public park. People will call you mad," Kataria said. "I got all of five people. We started telling jokes and laughing. In one week we were 55 people."

After a while the group ran out of jokes, and some of the humor took a negative and salty turn. The casual group seemed destined to disband until Kataria got a second epiphany after reading a book on emotions and health.

"There I read something profound about laughter," he said. "If you can't make it, fake it. If you can't laugh, pretend laugh."

It was, he realized, very much like yoga. Just as the physical poses in yoga are designed to pave the way to a deeper sense of spiritual connectedness, the physical act of laughing could lead the way to an improved mental and physical state.

"So, with about 50 people we started Hahahahahaha,' and people started cracking up for real," he said.

The behavior of laughing — without the jokes or humor catalyst — still resulted in an attitude change.

Laughter yoga had begun. Today, more than 6,000 laughter clubs have sprung up in 60 countries around the world. There are centers, such as the American School of Laughter Yoga in Pasadena, that certify instructors in laughter yoga.

"(For) people who want to train as certified laughter leaders, there are no requirements except the need

to bring a big smile," said founder Sebastien Gendry, who opened his school three years ago.

Gendry said certified laughter yoga instructors train for a total of about 12 hours over two days. Since he opened three years ago, Gendry has trained about 500 people from all over the world.

A physiological boost?

Among the students in Tagliaferri's Saturday class is Marilyn May, 65, of Ventura, who is fighting metastasized bone cancer.

"I came because I realized that my life was way too serious; I wasn't laughing enough," she said.

She found a listing for the laughter yoga class and decided to try it.

"I'm finding more humor in life. I feel more able to play, like a child. I had forgotten how," she said.

She said she believes that an improved attitude may help her both physically and mentally as she engages in the fight of her life. Heck, she figures, it can't hurt.

Tagliaferri had breast cancer 12 years ago and is convinced laughter yoga has helped keep her healthy.

"Cancer survivors need it more than anybody," she said.

There are studies to support the concept that laughter is indeed good medicine.

A 2007 study by cardiologists at the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore showed that people with heart disease were 40 percent less likely to laugh in a variety of situations compared to people of the same age without heart disease.

Kataria is in the process of publishing the results of a study he conducted in Bangalore, India, last year among 50 professionals in high-stress jobs.

After they participated in seven 20-minute laughter yoga sessions over 18 days, Kataria saw the participants' average blood pressure drop by 6 percent and the cortisol level in their saliva reduce by about 8 percent. Cortisol, he explained, is a hormone released when the body is under stress.

Perhaps the most well-known documentation of the healing benefits of laughter came from Dr. Norman Cousins, who served as adjunct professor of medical humanities for the School of Medicine at the University of California, where he did research on the biochemistry of human emotions.

Told he had little chance of surviving his degenerative heart disease and a destructive form of arthritis, Cousins developed a recovery program based, in part, on a steady diet of Marx Brothers movies. He documented his journey in a book and movie both called "Anatomy of an Illness."

"I made the joyous discovery that 10 minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep," he reported. "When the pain-killing effect of the laughter wore off, we would switch on the motion picture projector again and, not infrequently, it would lead to another pain-free interval."

Cousins died of heart failure Nov. 30, 1990, in Los Angeles years after his doctors predicted. It had been

26 years since his heart disease diagnosis and 16 years since his arthritis diagnosis.

From left to right

The childlike behavior at the root of laughter yoga, Tagliaferri explained, is designed to get responsibility-laden adults in touch with the right hemisphere of the brain, which houses creativity, imagination and a sense of invention. Paying the bills, getting to work on time and other adult tasks tend to fall to the left hemisphere of the brain, which is where functions such as mathematics, reasoning, problem-solving and language are rooted.

One way laughter yoga ignites the right hemisphere of the brain is by speaking gibberish, she said. At one point in the session, Tagliaferri encourages everyone to walk around the room yakking away as loudly and expressively as they can, using any phonetic jumble that drops onto their tongues.

"Ge-DEE-be-duh-dum-doo-bee-blah?" One participant cocks her head at another, obviously expecting an answer.

The other smiles in mock understanding and nods, gushing: "FLAY-boo, wishee kadoom gadohdohdoh!"

"We don't talk real language, because if we talk real language, we're right back in the left brain," Tagliaferri said.

Psychological benefits

English teacher Anne Frankl drives from her Simi Valley home to Camarillo on Saturdays because laughter yoga has changed the way she does her job.

"I had been known probably due to stress as the angry teacher," she said. "Now the kids were killing each other to try to get into my classes."

Camarillo clinical psychologist Barbara Morris-Jensen, who also is a regular at laughter yoga classes, says laughter is not a cure for psychological ailments such as depression, but it can certainly help discharge festering emotions which can worsen depression.

"Laughter is the opposite side of anger. If you're someone who yells a lot, laughing can help you release those same emotions and you can find yourself moving out of anger and into happiness."

Laughter yoga enthusiast Raye Gabriel of Camarillo will celebrate her 90th birthday in November. She doesn't know why laughter yoga works, she said; it just does.

"It just opens up my heart really. It makes me feel good," she said. "Brings in the day in a beautiful way."



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