

Laughter as Therapy

A Serious LOOK at Laughter!

Janni Goss

Have you noticed how often the benefits of Laughter and Laughter Yoga are given media coverage? Perhaps we should be taking notice!

Articles on Laughter Clubs, the health benefits of laughter and the therapeutic antics of clown Doctors appear regularly.

The Perth Laughter Club has featured on both Channel 7's Today Tonight Program and on George Negus Tonight on ABC-TV.

Even *Time* magazine in February 2005 had some good news on the front cover for a change –The Science of Happiness, which included laughter, optimism and joy.

It seems that we are designed to benefit from these positive emotions. Unfortunately, stress, our life styles, work styles, responsibilities and conflicts result in negative emotions which harm our health and well-being.

The Cortisol Challenge

One of the indications of on-going stress and the effect of negative emotions is a raised cortisol level. Easily identified in saliva, cortisol production is part of our survival mechanism when we perceive threat. However the activation of our fight or flight response by chronic stress results in high levels of cortisol. This increased cortisol can impair brain function and reduce the efficiency of our immune system.

The good news is that laughter effectively reduces cortisol levels thereby reversing its effects and enhancing immune function.

Laughter and Cardiac Function

Laughter is cardio-vascular aerobic exercise which oxygenates the blood, improves general circulation and stimulates the internal organs. The positive cardio-vascular benefits of laughter continue to be identified. Recent research has demonstrated that blood flow is decreased by 35% in subjects experiencing stress whereas it is improved by 22% in subjects during laughter.

The question still to be answered is whether this effect is due to the movement of the diaphragm muscles or the release of endorphins. It is possible

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that laughter may be important in reducing cardiovascular disease, as these benefits were similar to those seen with aerobic activity but without the aches, pains and muscle tension of exercise.

Laughter in Medical Settings

Doctors and nurses have published numerous enthusiastic articles about the value of using gentle humour and laughter with their patients.

Perceived benefits include:

- Establishing rapport with patients
- Reducing patient anxiety
- Improving compliance with treatment
- Enhancing relationships
- Reducing the stress of hospitalization, procedures and treatments for both adults and children.

Dr Patch Adams is well known for promoting a holistic approach to patient care. Such care does not just treat the disease, but involves the patient totally in a caring relationship in which trust, compassion, fun, humour and laughter provide a healing milieu for the patient.

A recent research project was undertaken by nurses in the USA. It identified which complementary and alternative therapies were being accessed by

Cottesloe Laughter Club

At CSA

Laughter Yoga consists of breathing exercises, gentle movements to reduce muscular tension based on yoga, as well as numerous Laughter exercises. Apparently the brain can't tell the difference between false and real laughter - so the motto is "Fake it till you make it"

At the CSA Wellness for Life Learning Centre
every Monday morning - 11.45am – 12.45pm

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women who were receiving orthodox treatment for breast cancer. As you might expect, nutrition, supplements, meditation, support groups and prayer were utilized. The surprising fact was that 21% of the women were using Humour and Laughter Therapy as part of their treatment regime.

Another article described a woman with breast cancer having chemotherapy while watching her favorite "I Love Lucy" video and laughing heartily. What a wonderful way to prime her much needed immune system and switch on the positive physiology of healing!

Your Sense of Humour

Twin studies have demonstrated that your sense of humour has more to do with your family environment than with your genes. Humour and laughter can be either encouraged or repressed. The joyful spontaneity and playfulness of early childhood can be gradually transformed into seriousness as we get older. Increasing responsibilities, knowledge of world events and constant bad news influence us. Life events and work, financial, health and relationship challenges transform us into serious adults. The older we become, the more reasons we have to be serious. The baby-boomer generation is at the peak of work responsibility and still has adult offspring at home continuously or at regular intervals. They may also have increasing concerns and care for their elderly parents, as well as their grandchildren. Is this anything to laugh about?

Older people themselves experience a decline in the quality of their lives due to many losses and changes. They may lose their life partner and contemporaries. Changes in vision, hearing, stability, independence and life style may occur. Significant health crises and chronic disease may require hospitalization and eventually loss of autonomy and home life. Isolation, loneliness, anxiety and depression can be part of life for a person endeavoring to "age in place". Many organizations make extraordinary efforts to put quality back into people's lives, but perhaps laughter is a scarce commodity.

Laughter and Laughter Yoga

Dr Madan Kataria (the founder of Laughter Clubs International) points out that Laughter Yoga does not rely on humour (i.e. telling jokes) and is therefore a more accessible way to stimulate laughter. Sense of humour varies from culture to culture and is unique to the individual. But laughter is a universal human activity and communication mode which expresses mirth, amusement, joy and happiness. Laughter transcends race, gender and political or

religious affiliations. Laughter Yoga is the means to unite individuals and communities in a common quest for individual and universal peace.

For older people or those with serious health challenges Laughter Yoga provides access to health giving laughter. We can indeed all benefit!

Laughter Clubs

Dr Madan Kataria visited Perth in November 2001 and trained several laughter leaders who set up Laughter Clubs and later established Laugh WA Inc. Dr Kataria regularly travels around the world conducting leader and teacher training and spiritual retreats – Byron Bay in Australia is regularly on his itinerary! Please check www.laughteryoga.org for more information.

Current Laughter Clubs include Perth at Leederville, Bayswater/Maylands, Joondalup, Cottesloe at CSA, Midland, Gosnells, Geraldton and recently Mundaring and Mandurah.

We celebrate World Laughter Day with over 5000 other Laughter Clubs around the planet on the first Sunday in May each year. This day is dedicated to World Peace. Check out www.laughwa.org.au for further details of clubs, training and World Laughter Day in WA.

Our mission is to spread the good news about the health benefits of laughter and to make Laughter Yoga widely available in the community.

Cottesloe Laughter Club at CSA

Cottesloe Laughter Club has been running for 3 years every Monday morning (except public holidays) from 11.45am to 12.45pm.

Laughter Yoga consists of breathing exercises from yoga as well as gentle movements to reduce tension in the neck and shoulder muscles. We then do a series of laughter exercises (which encourage playfulness) interspersed with a mantra (hand clapping Ho!Ho!Ha!Ha!Ha!). As the brain cannot tell the difference between fake laughter and real laughter, we get the benefits anyway. We find that fake laughter turns into real laughter and is contagious. The end result is genuine laughter which leaves us feeling warm, relaxed and with mood and well-being enhanced.

It is a great way to start the week!

We invite you to step out of your comfort zone and to re-discover your playfulness and ability to laugh. Be part of a community, contributing to inner peace, sustainable wellbeing and eventually World Peace! We who laugh...last!