

Worldwide Laughter Medicine

By Ngam Su May

Laughter is the best medicine and has a worldwide following.

Around the world, 250,000 people meet regularly in Laughter

Clubs to practise exercises based on yoga to simulate laughter. This laughter therapy requires no jokes or comedians.

'If you can't laugh, fake it, pretend. Our body does not know the difference.' – this statement in a book struck Dr. Madan Kataria like lightning and set him thinking about making laughter a form of exercise. His idea was met with laughter and ridicule 10 years ago. But today, various laughing techniques based on yoga called laughter yoga (*hasya yoga*), are practiced by over 5,000 Laughter Clubs around the world.

Dr. Kataria's innovative concept has been widely accepted in both East and West, getting coverage in prestigious publications and television networks like BBC, CNN, NHK (Japan) and ABC News (US). Only five people started the first Laughter Club in a park in Mumbai, India in 1995. Today, 250,000 people from all walks of life

are members of Laughter Clubs in India, Australia, Europe, US and Canada.

Laughter Clubs are social clubs with no membership fees. The phenomenal growth of these clubs worldwide has exceeded Dr. Kataria's own expectations. Dr. Kataria, a medical doctor by training, says the growth has become an international movement. The latest development is that members of Laughter Clubs have started exchange programmes where they exchange visits and stay with one another's families in different countries. Dr. Kataria thus sees Laughter Clubs as a platform to change people's attitudes to live in peace and harmony with one another. 'World peace through laughter' is in his future vision.

World Laughter Day celebration in Copenhagen, Denmark, year 2001



Creative Laughter Techniques

Greeting laughter

Shake hands and look into the eyes while laughing gently (Western way). Asians may want to use the joining of both hands as their greeting.

Milk-shake laughter

Hold two imaginary glasses of milk and pour the milk from one glass to another while chanting AeeeeeeÖ



Milk-shake laughter in Mumbai, India



Lion laughter in Copenhagen, Denmark

Lion laughter

Stick out tongue fully while keeping mouth side open and hands stretched out like the paws of a lion. Roar, followed by laughter from the belly.

Cell phone laughter Hold imaginary handphones, make different gesture, meet different people in a group and laugh

Argument laughter Two groups look at each other and start laughing by pointing their index fingers at members of the other group. Usually men are on one side and women on the other.

PRECAUTIONS

Laughter yoga involves physical strain and a rise in intra-abdominal pressure. Some people may over-strain themselves with this type of forceful laughter. Therefore patients with the following ailments are advised to be cautious and seek medical advice prior to joining a Laughter Club session:-

- Hernia
- Advanced piles
- Heart disease with chest pain
- Epilepsy
- Severe backache
- Recent surgery
- Uterovaginal prolapse
- Pregnancy

People with attacks of cold should stay away for about a week as these viral infections are highly contagious.

Feel good

Laughter yoga has also caught the attention of the corporate world as a tool for stress reduction and productivity improvement. Dr. Kataria has conducted workshops for companies in US, UK, Australia, Singapore and European countries. He notes that there has been initial resistance as senior managers and bosses felt embarrassed to laugh with their employees. However, more enterprising managers have been won over as they believe that healthy

and happy employees equate to increased productivity and profitability.

Preparing to extend laughter yoga to the business world, Dr. Kataria reveals that he is expanding his team of 1,000 odd Laughter Leaders. These leaders will be trained by Dr. Kataria School of Laughter Yoga. Dr. Kataria plans to set up 5 schools in Switzerland,

India, Canada, Australia and Africa.

iSmile met the founder of the Laughter Club movement, Dr. Kataria in Kuala Lumpur and finds out that Malaysians are now able to join a Laughter Club based in Klang.

He thinks that the time is right now for Malaysians to join the movement as the country is fast developing and facing the challenges of competition and globalisation.



Dr. Kataria & his wife, Madhuri

Laughter Yoga

The concept of laughter yoga as a form of therapy is quite simple. One, we do not need an exceptional sense of humour as no jokes are used to spark laughter. Two, we do not need a reason to laugh. Three, we do not need to be happy. Laughter yoga is actually a group exercise, guided by a 'Laughter Leader', where several people loose their inhibitions, make eye contact and break into various forms of simulated laughter. The session lasts for 10-15 minutes.

'Laughing without a reason is not madness. Children do it all the time,' explains Dr. Kataria. Who says we can only laugh when we are happy?, he adds. Laughter yoga is thus a workout that releases 'feel good' hormones. 'The chemicals (endorphins) released inside affects our behaviour outside. It kick starts the good feeling and equips us to deal with our problems and stress better,' he elaborates.

Motion creates emotion

Dr. Kataria reveals that scientific research has now started on the effects of laughter on health. Dr. Lee S Berk at Loma Linda University, California, US is currently conducting tests on physiological and biological changes on those who practise

laughter yoga. The research results have not been finalised and released yet.

Dr. Kataria, however, explains the health benefits based on breathing and the link between body and mind. 'Motion creates emotion' he summarises. Breath is life. If you are stressed, your breathing will be shallow and your body will be tensed. If you voluntarily change your breathing, you change your state of mind and your body will relax. It is easier to work on the body than on the mind.

Dr. Kataria created laughter exercises based on yoga as he had been a student of yoga and had help from his wife Madhuri who is a yoga teacher. One day while doing breathing exercises from yoga, he found similarities between fast-breathing exercises and laughter. In both, there is rhythmic movement of the diaphragm and abdominal muscles. A typical Laughter Club session starts with deep breathing which is structured after *pranayama* in yoga. A warm-up exercise called *Ho-Ho Ha-Ha* exercise has similarities with *kapalbhait* and *bhastarika* in yoga which promotes respiratory passage cleaning, with jerky movements of the abdominal muscles.



Laughter session in Hamburg, Germany

Laughter exercises

New laughter exercises have been introduced, modified and changed based on feedback from members and new ideas from Dr. Kataria. The aim is to create exercises that increases oxygen level in the body and releases feel good hormones from the brain cells, Deep breathing and neck-and-shoulder stretching exercises help to remove stiffness resulting from stress and a sedentary lifestyle. Dr. Kataria also likens laughter yoga to a form of meditation that disconnects our mind from the physical world. "When you're laughing, you cannot think of anything else," he clarifies.

Sceptics may ask whether simulated laughter is too mechanical and boring. Dr. Kataria responds that it can really turn into genuine giggles. Eye contact is the key as looking and

giggling into another person's eyes can trigger infectious

laughter. Another ingredient is child-like playfulness. If you observe people playing games without stakes and gambling, you will always observe smiles and some laughter.

Children laugh a lot while playing any game. Laughter

Clubs have incorporated child-like activities like talking gibberish, swiveling tongues inside the mouth and tapping air-filled cheeks. 🗨️

Laughter Club in Malaysia

If you are interested to join a Laughter Club, please contact Mr. Kannan Malik at 012-2739466.

Laughter Clubs

Most Laughter Clubs in India meet early in the morning in public parks between 6.30a.m. and 7.00a.m. on weekdays. The majority of members are women (60%) in the 40 plus age group. Clubs in Europe normally meet once a week and members are younger.

Laughter Clubs are non political, non religious and non profit organisations. There are no membership charges. However, members can share expenses towards hiring of venue, refreshments or planned outings.

Registration for laughter club is free and registration forms can be obtained online at www.laughteryoga.org. The clubs are individual entities and are free function units, not under the control of any institution. Although there are no specific rules and regulations, Laughter Club International has guidelines for functioning. There are no hierarchy, positions and titles. Those who want to start a club must be trained as a Laughter Club Leader.

For more info, please visit www.laughteryoga.org