

Laughter's the best medicine

Just laugh - it's the key to joy, contentment and ha-ha-happiness

Lynn Roberts, 11 July, 2011

Laughter Yoga – a wellbeing exercise craze – claims to lower blood pressure and boost energy levels. New Idea went along to a session to try it out. Devotees say it makes you feel better mentally and physically – and all that is required is a willingness to laugh. It almost sounds too good to be true, but Laughing Yoga does require you to leave your inhibitions behind to skip around a hall with 25 strangers, make funny faces and force yourself to laugh.

I went without preconceived ideas. However, I enlisted my 11-year-old son to provide me with clean, child-friendly jokes in case I had to do a stand-up comedian routine.

Instructor Gay Harvey welcomes everyone as they arrive for the Saturday 45-minute morning class in Ponsonby, Auckland. Some arrivals are smiling regulars but most are newbies like me, and are aged from their 20s to 70s. There's an equal number of men and women.

Naively, I arrive with a yoga mat and a blanket, thinking that there will be some asanas (yoga postures) involved. There are none. But there's plenty of pranayama (yogic breathing) as we gallop around the room pretending to be horses.

Gay instructs us to maintain eye contact with the other laughter yogis, which helps maintain the hysteria. You can't keep a straight face when the stranger next to you is pulling faces or tickling you. After several sessions, the laughter is supposed to change from simulated to real as regular participants train themselves to laugh spontaneously for no reason.

Is it yoga?

Apparently the mission is to spread world peace, but I'm just grateful that I don't know anyone in the class and may never see them again. Some yoga devotees have been known to flee, believing it's not actually yoga – and others can't cope with letting their guard down. But I find it refreshing. The enthusiasm of Gay and the class is infectious and you can't help go with the flow.

After 30 minutes of silliness, clapping and chanting the mantra, 'Ho, ho, ha, ha,' we are encouraged to let the last of the chuckles go and settle down to a meditation. Maggie, lying on the floor next to me, has a seemingly, never-ending bellyful of laughs, which sets off the rest of the class. Eventually it's quiet, and Gay leads us through reflection.

Many in the class head off for a coffee afterwards – a regular part of sustaining the sense of community the session brings. A lot of devotees come for a fix of human kindness.

Gay's husband Bob, who runs the sessions, trained to be a Laughter Yoga instructor in Sydney, after reaching a difficult place in his life as he approached retirement. 'I was getting old and had nothing to look forward to,' he says. However, the laughter has empowered Bob, giving him inner contentment and a new drive as well as setting him on an evangelical mission to spread the word.

Other class members have a similar experience. Jimmy, 72, suffers from depression and loneliness but, after three Laughter Yoga sessions a week, feels he's on the road to coming off his medication. But the majority are here for the companionship and camaraderie. Pretty soon, the laughter filters into all aspects of their lives and gives them a new carefree spirit.

- Names of participants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

LAUGHTER YOGA: THE BENEFITS

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| - Reduces stress | - Enhances confidence |
| - Gives natural pain relief | - Provides low impact aerobic exercise |
| - Oxygenates and cleanses the body | - Increases 'feel-good' chemicals |
| - Boosts immune system | - Improves sleep |

Fact file:

Started by GP Dr Madan Kataria in Mumbai, India, in 1995. There are 6000 Social Laughter Clubs in around 60 countries. Sessions cost a koha, gold coin donation. There are clubs nationwide including Auckland, Tauranga, Wellington, Nelson, Christchurch and Dunedin. Visit laughteryoga.org.nz for info.