

Don't take laughter lightly; it has the power to reduce stress, encourage joy and strengthen the mind, says **Karen Sivan**

No laughing matter

Try to remember the last time you had a great laugh with family or friends. You were left breathless, weren't you? If you didn't know it, laughing is as aerobically beneficial as jogging. Yet, while children may laugh up to 300 times a day, as adults we laugh maybe 10 times a day and many of us don't laugh at all.

Many adults are conditioned to believe that laughing is unbecoming of them and that it doesn't fit their idea of how a serious, grown-up person should behave. These 'serious' people are most often the most tense and vulnerable to stress-related health problems.





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The best medicine?

It was when I was training to teach the practice 'Laughter Yoga' that I discovered laughter is truly not just for fun. Laughing actually does have great health benefits. Health benefits that are proven, such as the lowering of blood pressure, anxiety, depression, insomnia, allergies, asthma and stress. Laughter is the easiest and the safest way to alleviate all of these and prevent further sickness.

Also, when we laugh, extra oxygen is brought into the body. The advantage of this is that it strengthens the immune system and releases endorphins, which are natural pain-killers your body makes and the combination makes us energised and happy. Laughter that comes from the belly also dispels stagnant air from the lungs and replaces it with fresh vital energy the same way *pranayama* [yogic breathing] exercises do.

Amazingly, scientific proof shows that the body does not know the difference between fake or real laughter and so the body will receive the same physical and psychological benefits whether you were

really laughing or faking it.

All of us catch it eventually

As a practice, laughter yoga is unique as it teaches you how to laugh spontaneously. It incorporates yoga breathing techniques and laughing exercises. During a laughter yoga session, you will be able to experience how even forced laughter in a group setting quickly becomes true laughter; infectiously spreading like a virus.

Laughter has a healing effect. It has the power to reduce stress, encourage joy and strengthen the mind by clearing it of unwanted, negative thoughts. It is also a spiritual practice, helping us to develop love, kindness and compassion. Laughing brings us together and unites us—it is a common language we all speak.

By making laughter a bodily exercise simple for anyone to follow, it can be practised by anyone regardless of their cultural background or language. Zen meditation encourages us to 'forget the self' and in laughter too, we can put aside our self-made identities for a while.

Be a kid again

In a way similar to children, we can laugh purely for the fun of it, without there being any reason as long as we are willing to become child-like and playful. Playfulness helps us to develop a sense of humour and brings more laughter into our lives.

Once you learn how to play, laughter is a natural outcome. When you learn to encourage laughter by using your body, the mind just follows as motion creates emotion. Notice how depressed people sit hunched up, moving slowly with downcast eyes—these postures are not possible when you laugh. Raising your arms and laughing to the sky will dispel depressed thoughts.

Laughter Yoga is about finding the child within who allows us to play. Once you learn to be playful, laughter is a natural outcome of that play.

Practice makes perfect

Our bodies and mind can be trained to laugh. In the same way as learning to ride a bicycle, once you learn it, you never forget. Practice and repetition is the key. We can condition ourselves to laugh more as long as we give ourselves permission to laugh.

If we are able to laugh more, we will increase our sense of wellbeing and have the ability to deal with our problems easily. It will also help us develop empathy for others, allowing us to be more generous and forgiving. Personal worries become less overwhelming when we are willing to laugh. Life today, with its fast pace and demands, is tough. What we want to learn to do is not allow these stresses to consume us.

Sign me up

Joining a laughter club is the perfect way to learn how to laugh instinctively, as a group helps us to be less inhibited about laughing. Group sessions also enable us to laugh for longer, 15 – 20 minutes of laughter has the best effects.

Laughter clubs began in 1995 and are the brain child of Dr Madan Kataria, a medical

Make laughter a part of your day

-  Laugh in the shower! Pretend your soap has magical laughing properties and as you apply it to your body you laugh in response.
-  Laugh doing boring household chores like washing the dishes and hanging the laundry.
-  If you drive to work, try laughing when you have to stop at red lights—the journey becomes like a game and you reach the office smiling.
-  Greet your co-workers with a "ha ha ha" instead of a good morning – get them to join in and respond in the same manner. The atmosphere will instantly become more cheerful.

doctor from Mumbai. He began a laughing club in a local park with five people and today, the thousands of yoga laughter clubs in over 72 countries around the world are a testimony to the benefits of laughter. If you are unable to find or attend a club, it is quite easy to practise alone or with your family and/or colleagues.

Laughter becomes more meaningful when it is intended not only to make oneself happy, but others too. In laughter clubs, this intention is called "The Inner Spirit of Laughter". According to Dr Kataria, "when you laugh you change, and when you change the whole world changes". This sentiment is true in every spiritual discipline. We cannot change others—it is our own attitude that must change first.

Consistent laughter promoted a positive mental attitude, and when one is able to change a negative mood then the whole perspective towards life and people in general changes. No one is ever too old to play, and the spirit of play lives forever.

Laughing at your credit card bill is an exercise incorporated in a laughter yoga session along with a show of empty pockets and laughing. Repeating exercises like these in a group setting help us to really laugh about these things in private. If our circumstances cannot change, then the least we can do is change our attitude towards them!



No one's immune to the allure of laughter yoga

