

MUSTERING

Mirth

AND WHY
IT'S WORTH IT

How to chuckle, chortle, giggle,
and guffaw your way to health

By Cheryl Russell



A tiny postcard ad displayed at the local health food store prompted me to head for the beach early one August morning. I found a picture-perfect day with warm sunshine and sparkling water. I also found a group of people who showed up to laugh just for the fun of it! This was my first Laughter Yoga class, where I discovered that laughing for no particular reason is more than merely entertaining, it's actually *great* for your health. You don't even need a sense of humor to reap the physical, emotional, and spiritual benefits of this practice, which has now become a worldwide movement. For me, it's been life-changing.

“Laughter changes frustration to fascination, frees us from inhibitions, and wakes up the child in us.”

—Madan Kataria, M.D.

According to Laughter Yoga founder Madan Kataria, M.D., the premise is simple: “Laughter changes frustration to fascination, frees us from inhibitions, and wakes up the child in us.” In the mid-'90s, Kataria, who lives in Mumbai, India, made a breakthrough while writing an article for his health magazine, *Your Own Doctor*, about how laughter is the best medicine. Kataria was intrigued by the story of Norman Cousins, who in 1964 used laughter (and massive doses of vitamin C) to beat 1-in-500 odds of surviving a connective tissue disease. Cousins binge-watched Marx Brothers movies, discovering that 10 minutes of hearty laughter gave him two hours of pain-free sleep.

Kataria convinced a handful of people at a local park to laugh with him, initially by telling jokes while they walked. When they quickly tired of that practice, his wife suggested he incorporate laughter with some yoga postures, such as the Lion and the Mountain. Believing the breath to be important, Kataria developed a powerful technique that syncs rhythmic hand-clapping with the words *Ho-Ho-Ha-Ha-Ha!* Today, hundreds of thousands of people in more than a hundred countries practice Laughter Yoga.

The benefits are impressive. Research confirms that deep belly laughter increases the feel-good hormones known as endorphins. Physically, laughter can strengthen immune functions, tone the cardiovascular system, exercise the lungs and diaphragm, decrease pain, diffuse stress, and release muscle tension. Emotionally, choosing to laugh promotes a shift in perspective, breaks negativity cycles, and improves mood. This results in



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greater mindfulness, while also reducing stress, anxiety, and depression. Spiritually, laughter enhances compassion, altruism, joy, and fulfillment, which leads to more trust, self-confidence, and peace of mind.

Laughter Yoga Defined

The word *yoga* describes a philosophical path toward an individual's union with their own divine spiritual nature. Many styles or paths of yoga exist, including Karma Yoga (selfless service), Bhakti Yoga (devotional acts), and Hatha Yoga (stretching postures). Kataria named this new type of yoga Hasya Yoga—*hasya* being the Sanskrit word for *laughter*—seeing laughter as another pathway to physical, emotional, and spiritual wholeness.

In 2006, I completed Kataria's two-day training program to become a certified laughter leader. For the past eight years, I've had the privilege of igniting the laughter spirit for hundreds of people during my weekly drop-in class for seniors at the community clubhouse in Laguna Woods, California, where I live. Folks from every walk of life come to share the joy of laughter. The love we feel for each other without necessarily knowing names or much else about each other creates a huge sense of family and community. Newcomers repeatedly comment on how they instantly feel part of our family spirit. And because Laughter Yoga can be practiced standing or sitting, people of all physical capabilities can participate.

While every leader puts a unique spin on the basic format, Laughter Yoga typically has three parts—warm-up, laughter, and relaxation. During the simple exercises to loosen up a bit, I review the easy guidelines—to honor the body by modifying an exercise or choosing to skip

the exercise if it doesn't work for the participant. Before starting the laughter portion, I remind the class that it's all about eye contact and there's no talking—only laughter—to keep us in our right brain. I explain that even if the laughter feels false at first, the brain doesn't know the difference and secretes endorphins just the same. The closing relaxation portion of the class is a guided meditation where we give gratitude for each part of the body.

Sequence of Silliness

After the initial warm-up stretching exercises, the laughter begins. To the observer, the antics might look a little unusual or maybe even silly. But for us, it's sheer fun. We start by greeting each other with uproarious laughter that includes wildly waving our arms. Favorite routines include making giggle juice, tossing the laughter, doing smile push-ups, and watering imaginary grass with sprinkler laughter followed by revving up some lawn mower laughter, since our sprinkler laughter made the grass grow (see sidebar for descriptions). We act like children on an imaginary playground and laugh to our hearts' content.

Children of all ages love jack-in-the-box laughter (pretending to be in a box and jumping out laughing). When it's not appropriate to laugh out loud, there's the ever-popular silent laughter. (Remember stuffing down a laugh in school?) We practice responding to life's challenges in general with “boo-hoo, ha-ha” laughter, alternating between saying “boo-hoo” (with a sad face) and “ha-ha” (making a happy face). I signal the end of a routine with the “Ho-Ho-Ha-Ha-Ha” hand-clapping to move on to the next one.

I finish every class with two favorites: “I Am Amazing” laughter and our laughter shower. For the first, each of us

A Glossary of Giggles

points to ourselves as we say, “I am amazing,” and then we point to another person and say, “You are amazing,” and then we open up our arms to all and say, “We are amazing! Ho-Ho-Ho!” The energy generated is ... *so amazing!* The same is true with our laughter shower, where we form two lines facing each other. One person from each line goes “into the shower,” walking through the middle as we bathe them in light, love, and laughter. Then they take their places back in line and the next two people go, and so on until everyone gets showered.

When we conclude with our gratitude circle, it's evident that people have tapped into their inner gladness, their inner joy that is innate within all of us. Each person shares a word or a few sentences about what they're grateful for. It's a perfect prelude to the relaxation meditation.

The meditation segment gives the body time to both relax and to energize the immune system, leading to Laughter Yoga's long-term benefits. As we lie on a mat or sit in a chair, we start with free-form laughter for a few minutes before quieting down. As everyone rests with eyes closed, my words focus their attention on gratitude for specific parts of their bodies from head to toe. The meditation concludes with guidance to visualize sharing the laughter energy with people in our community, across our state and country, and all the way around the world. In those moments, we are joined in oneness with people everywhere in a spirit of peace, love, and harmony.

The class ends with an inspiring quote and three reminders: to give themselves a hug, to give each other a hug, and to share their “miles of smiles” with everyone. People leave beaming, eager to share the love with others. What a way to start a Monday morning! 🌍

Look for laughter classes at city recreation programs, yoga studios, and fitness centers. If you can't find a class in your area, consider becoming a certified laughter leader yourself and start your own group. Leaders can also provide modified classes in therapeutic settings as well as assisted living and even skilled-nursing facilities.

For more information, including an online directory of laughter groups worldwide and a listing of leader trainings, visit laughteryoga.org, the website of Laughter Yoga founder Madan Kataria, M.D. Another good reference is Kataria's book, *Laugh for No Reason* (Madhuri International, 1999).

You can access the gift of laughter anytime, anywhere—even when you are alone. Here are a few simple routines to get you started:

Smile Push-ups: Start with a straight face. Then smile big time. Then relax your face. Repeat 10 times.

Find the Laughter: Pretend to hunt around (the top of your head, the tip of your nose, your knee, and so on), as you giggle with glee.

Toss the Laughter: Act as though you are throwing a ball of laughter to someone else, or as though you are catching it from them.

Cell Phone Laughter: Imagine that you are holding a phone to your ear as someone tells you something funny or you are calling someone to simply share the laughter.

Making Giggle Juice: Pretend you are holding a container of ingredients. Shake it and then drink the resulting giggle juice as you demonstrate its immediate effect.

Sprinkler and Lawn Mower Laughter: Stretch one arm out and make the ticking sound of a sprinkler as you move your arm from right to left, and then back from left to right, as you imagine you're spraying water infused with laughter. Do this several times. Then crank up an imaginary lawn mower and laugh while pretending to mow the lawn you just watered.

Aloha-ha-ha Laughter: Take a deep breath in and raise your arms up over your head while slowly saying, “A-Lo,” and then drop them down with “Ha-Ha-Ha!”

Forgiveness Laughter: Laugh lovingly with arms outstretched toward another in a compassionate state of forgiveness. This can also be gratitude laughter.

Very Good, Very Good, Yay! (the official Laughter Yoga cheer): Say, “very good” (and then clap once), “very good” (clap again), “yay!” (while raising your hands in the air).