

The benefits of having a chuckle are no laughing matter. With research showing that people who laugh are healthier and happier, could laughter really be the best medicine?

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Are you having a laugh?

It's scientifically proven that laughter is good for us. From hearing a funny joke to sharing a giggle with a friend, having a laugh helps us to relax, reduces stress, and activates the hormones that make us feel happy. And, depending on how much laughing we do, it can even be a full-scale workout.

Unlike children – who are believed to laugh around 300 times a day – adults typically manage a miserable 15. As a result, we're missing out on the physical and mental health benefits that can come from having a good laugh.

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

Like many behaviours, laughter has its roots in survival. Research shows that as long as 10 million years ago, it was used as a form of bonding. As communities grew in size, it became harder to bond through activities like grooming, making laughter increasingly important in building strong relationships and securing the safety of the tribe.

Even today scientists say that most laughter is used as a survival technique. While our fight to survive is nothing like it was for our ancestors, studies show that strong social ties are linked to living a longer life. Laughing helps us to

connect and communicate with each other. It's important in romantic relationships, too, with research showing that couples who laugh together, stay together.

Research into the therapeutic effects of laughter has found it has numerous other benefits, including lower stress levels, increased pain tolerance, muscle relaxation, plus decreased heart rate, respiratory rate and blood pressure. In addition, laughter has been found to boost the production of natural killer cells, meaning that people who laugh more respond better to diseases.

LAUGHTER AS A MEDICINE

The American journalist Norman Cousins was influential in promoting the health benefits of laughter after being diagnosed with a crippling connective tissue disease in 1964. When doctors gave him a one in 500 chance of recovering from the condition, which left him with severe pain, high fever and near-paralysis of the legs, neck and back, he developed his own recovery programme. It included self-induced bouts of laughter brought on by television shows and films, and extremely high doses of vitamin C.

He managed to nurse himself back to health, writing in his 1979 book, *Anatomy of an Illness*: "Ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anaesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep."

Cousins' remarkable recovery interested scientists and inspired a number of research projects into the healing powers of laughter. Later, he became a university professor, taught holistic approaches to medicine, and conducted his own research into laughter and health. Today, the Norman Cousins Center for Psychoneuroimmunology at the University of California, Los Angeles continues to investigate the role of psychological wellbeing for health, and recovery from illness.

FAKING IT

One of the most significant findings of research into laughter is that our brains can't tell the difference between spontaneous "genuine" and self-induced "forced" laughter. Which means that the health benefits of each are exactly the same. And, more often than not, self-induced laughter will turn into spontaneous laughter when in a group setting.

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The results were amazing: the self-induced laughter was contagious and soon the whole group was laughing – even harder than they had done before.

This was the experience of Madan Kataria, a doctor from India, who is credited with bringing laughter therapy into the mainstream. In 1995, Dr Kataria set up the first-ever laughter club in a park in Mumbai, which initially had just five participants.

To begin with, the group used jokes and funny stories to make each other laugh but they soon ran out of good material. As Dr Kataria looked for a solution that would keep the group running, he reviewed the research into laughter therapy and discovered that forced laughter had the same benefits as genuine.

The next time the group met, he persuaded them to try “acting out” laughter with him for one minute. The results were amazing: the self-induced laughter was contagious and soon the whole group was laughing – even harder than they had done before.

INTO THE MAINSTREAM

This success led Dr Kataria and his wife Madhuri – who had experience as a teacher of Pranayama (breathing) yoga – to develop *Hasya yoga* (laughter yoga), a combination of simulated laughter exercises and yoga breathing. Since then, laughter yoga has evolved into a global movement, with clubs in



Cheryl Green

more than 60 countries – and 6,000 of these in India alone. The couple also run the Laughter Yoga University, based in Mumbai, with branches around the world dedicated to training laughter yoga teachers.

Cheryl Green became one of the programme’s alumni when she trained in the UK in 2011. Therapeutic laughter was something that came into her life after she took early retirement from her career in communications and change management. Having always had an interest in meditation and Buddhism, Cheryl saw an opportunity to “take stock” of her life. “I had the freedom to pursue other things and I took it,” she says.

She admits she hadn’t heard of laughter as a therapy until a friend suggested it to her, but after joining some sessions and thoroughly enjoying them, she was hooked. “I was amazed how easy it was and how it made me feel so relaxed and invigorated,” Cheryl says.

Now a founding member of Laughter Association UK, Cheryl runs two regular laughter clubs in Bedfordshire and practices laughter yoga with a range of community groups, including people with dementia and Parkinson’s disease.

LAUGHTER IN PRACTICE

Laughter yoga sessions typically last for an hour and start with yogic breathing and clapping, followed by laughter exercises, eye contact, and lots of self-induced belly laughter. Classes vary in size from 10 to 40 participants, as do people’s ages and what they’re looking to get out of it.

“Everyone’s there for a reason, but these can be very different,” says Cheryl.

“Some just want to see what it’s about and try something new. Others find it difficult to laugh, but want to learn how to. There are also people who have had a very tough time of it and they use laughter to build resilience.”

Cheryl admits that laughing with strangers can be challenging for some people, but it’s not long before they get into it. “It can seem strange at first, and some people say they feel a bit stupid. But they soon join in as it’s impossible not to laugh along,” she says. →

WAYS TO BRING MORE LAUGHTER INTO YOUR LIFE

Smile at yourself

in the mirror, or at someone you see. You never know, you might make their day!

Make a commitment

to yourself and try doing some laughter every day. Take a few deep breaths and do some deep belly laughs. See how long you can just laugh for.

Find laughter

in the things around you – from comedy on TV, funny films, to people’s behaviour and even cat videos on YouTube!

Make an effort

to laugh when you’re around people. It’s proven to help you make better relationships.

Join a laughter club

in your local area – go to www.laughterassociation.co.uk



Dr Madan Kataria in Finland

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Laughter is a form of bonding

“It’s about finding our childlike playfulness,” Cheryl continues, “and it’s a place where anything goes. I’ve got some props I use, like smiley face balloons, which we bat around to each other. Sometimes we dance to a song called ‘Happy Day’. We do lots of silly things like pretending to fly to the song or jumping around like a kangaroo.”

Laughter benefits us as it makes us physically move. “As we breathe in, our diaphragm and chest tightens, and as we exhale we push air out through our lungs,” Cheryl explains. “We also

produce health-enhancing hormones and reduce the stress hormones. The levels of our ‘happy hormones’ serotonin, dopamine and endorphins – which are associated with motivation – rise and, at the same time, the stress hormone cortisol reduces. Studies show that laughing increases the production of infection-fighting antibodies and activation of protective cells, including T cells and natural killer cells.”

A laughter yoga session closes with meditation and relaxation, which involves either lying down or sitting in chairs, back to back. “What we try to do during the relaxation is stop the eye contact between people because laughter is so contagious,” Cheryl says. “A laughter session can make people a bit hyper, so it’s important to ground them.”

LAUGHTER FOR EVERYONE

The amount of movement involved in laughter yoga depends entirely on the abilities of people in the class. A session for people with dementia and their carers will be very different to a laughter club made up of active regulars, for example. ➔

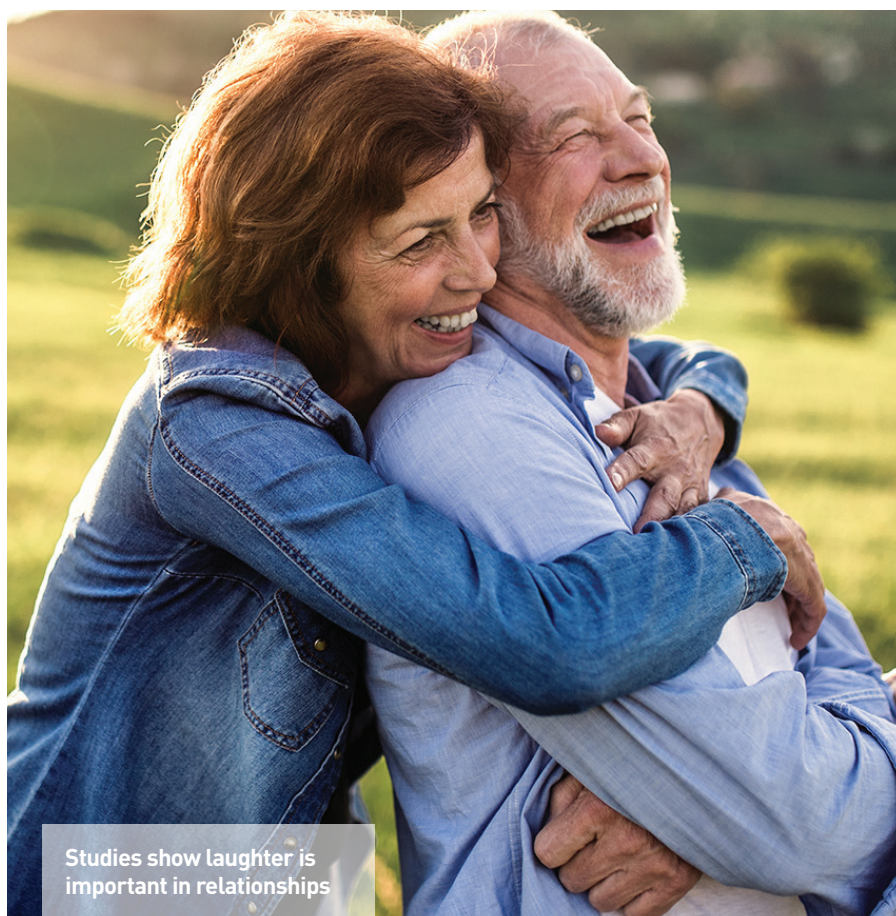


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Studies show laughter is important in relationships

“I APPRECIATE DAILY MOMENTS OF JOY”

PERSONAL STORY

Jane shares her experience of laughter therapy

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After having radiotherapy and chemotherapy to treat cancer, I returned to the pool for my regular aqua aerobics classes as soon as I could. My strength returned, however I seemed to lose my inner spirit. This led me to try meditation, followed by laughter therapy with Cheryl Green.

I attended my first group session of laughter therapy with an open mind and had no expectations. Six years on, I still regularly go, travelling to other local venues in order to be part of this life-enhancing practice.

I cannot put into words the benefits of laughter therapy... it’s given me a new way to deal with everyday stress and appreciate daily moments of joy. I walk my dog daily in the park and sometimes find myself looking at the trees and the weather, then out of nowhere I’ll throw my arms into the air and shout: “Very good, very good, yay!”

Being able to express pleasure, appreciation and delight is all thanks to laughter therapy. I am so happy and, as a group, we genuinely care for, and feel comfortable around, each other.

I’m still amazed at the results I’ve achieved by practising laughter therapy and I proudly share my experiences with family and friends. I cannot thank Cheryl enough for sharing her knowledge.

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Even today scientists say that most laughter is used as a survival technique.

As well as being an activity that's suitable for everyone, laughter yoga is believed to be especially helpful in improving the wellbeing of vulnerable groups prone to isolation – for example, the elderly and people with mental health problems.

Studies have shown that as well as helping to improve sleep and relieving the symptoms of depression and anxiety, the nature of therapeutic laughter as a group activity helps to build and strengthen interpersonal relationships. This was supported by a review of 10 studies involving 814 participants, published in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* earlier this year.

It's therefore not surprising that laughter is increasingly being prescribed by NHS

trusts, with some councils supporting laughter clubs in local areas. Having practised laughter yoga for almost a decade, Cheryl has seen the benefits it can have on people: “Recently, a 93-year-old man in one of my classes said: ‘Every person has a right to be happy and to know what this feels like.’ And he's right. The feedback I get is very positive; people say it improves their wellbeing. Testament to that is that I have several people who have been with me since I started my first laughter club in 2012.”

She credits laughter yoga with improving her own life, too. “I've always tried to be a cheerful person,” she says, “but I've found it so much easier to laugh at things since laughter came into my life. I do 10 minutes of telephone laughter a day, Monday to Friday, and if I don't do it I miss it. It's part of my life now – just like meditating, or having a cup of tea.” www.laughterandlife.co.uk

DID YOU KNOW?

1 Humans are not the only species to enjoy a good laugh – it's been seen in many animals too, including rats and apes.

2 Just 10–15 minutes of laughing can burn off up to 40 calories, according to a study.

3 A typical 10-minute conversation between friends will have on average 5.8 bouts of laughter.

4 We're 30 times more likely to laugh when we're with someone than when we're on our own.

5 Children are believed to laugh 400 times a day, compared with adults who manage just 15.



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A laughter yoga club in India

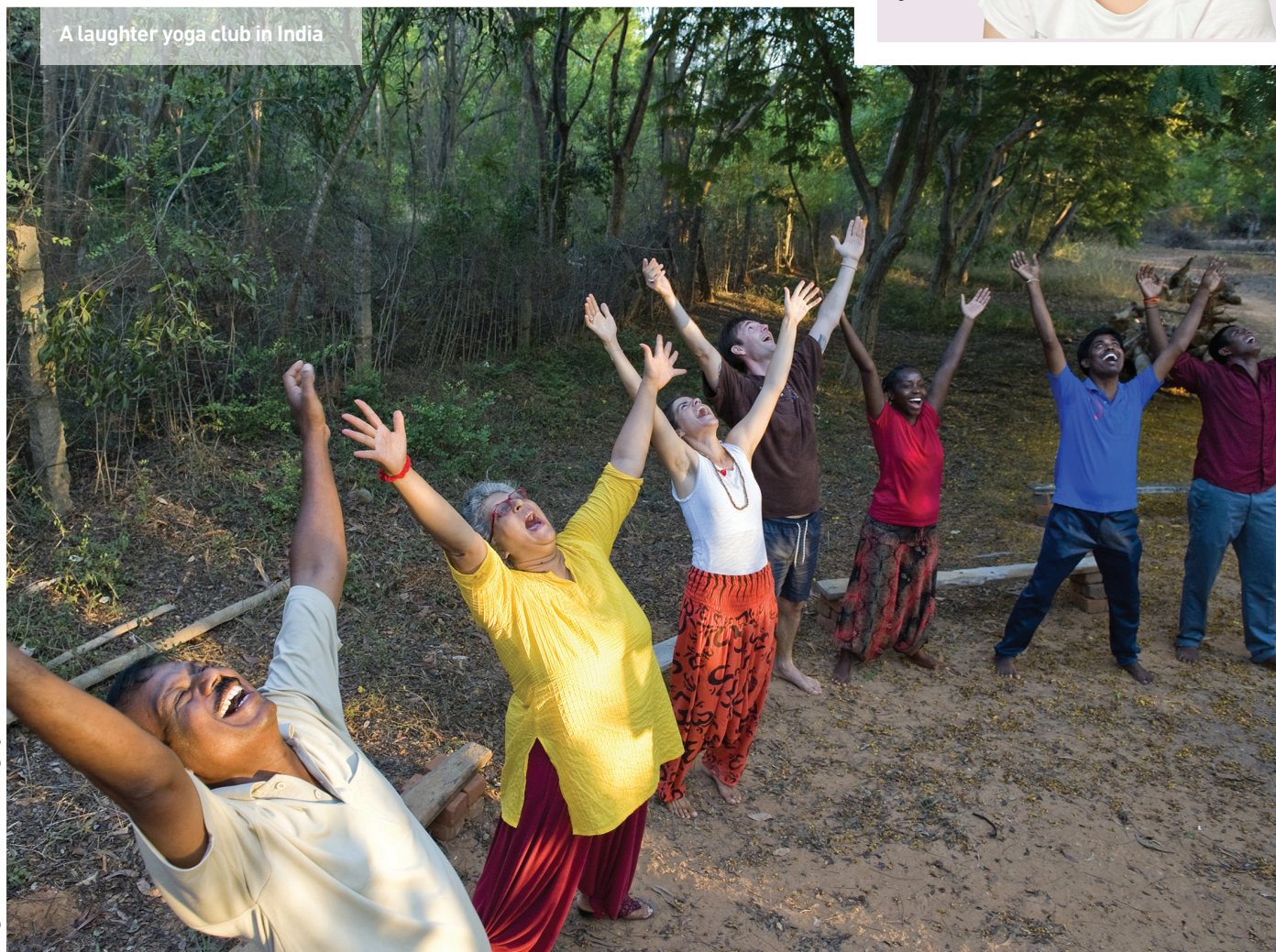


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