

Laughing Lessons

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A Good Guffaw Just Might Be The Best Medicine

[WRITTEN BY AMY MEADOWS]



*Top: Bobbi Martin
Middle: Priscilla Moss
Bottom: Craig Whitley,
leader of Blue Skies
Laughter Yoga Club*

I wasn't surprised when I saw a couple of people peering in through the glass doors of the Pilates studio at GA Fitness in Woodstock, observing us with curious and amused expressions. I'm sure our behavior appeared to be rather bizarre, as our little group stood in a circle, making pointed eye contact with each other and bursting out in various forms of laughter, from small snickers to great big guffaws. It must have been quite a sight. But no one in the room — behind those glass doors — seemed to care. That's because we knew that, while we weren't running on a treadmill or lifting weights, we were actually getting a pretty good workout.

I have to admit that I was a bit cynical about taking a Laughter Yoga class at first. I didn't see how laughing for 45 minutes could compare to a rigorous exercise session. But I must concede that about halfway through my first foray into Laughter Yoga, I had broken a sweat and felt like I was working out. My heart rate was up and my abdominal muscles were taut. It was a strange sensation because I hadn't spent an hour doing cardio or strength training. All I had done was follow the Certified Laughter Yoga Leaders who were teaching the class and make myself laugh. And that's the whole point of Laughter Yoga.

Offering a very low impact way to get an aerobic workout, the concept of Laughter Yoga is sweeping the nation. In fact, the movement has prompted Laughter Clubs and Laughter Yoga classes to start popping up all over Metro Atlanta, allowing local residents of all ages, body types and



The Blue Skies Laughter Yoga Club laugh it up, and at the same time reap great health benefits.

fitness levels to give it a try and experience the results for themselves. And what they're walking away with is often a pleasant surprise.

"There's something very healing about laughing in a group with no agenda other than to have fun. And that's the thing about it. Laughter Yoga crosses all populations. It's non-political. It's non-religious. We simply come together with the intention that we're going to have fun," noted Craig Whitley, a certified hypnotherapist and personal coach, who, along with his wife Helen, a licensed clinical social worker, leads the Blue Skies Laughter Yoga Club in Woodstock and hosts weekly classes at GA Fitness and the Hobgood Park Amphitheater. "And oh, by the way, we get all kinds of great health benefits. That's what makes it so cool."

A Chuckle a Day

The long list of health benefits associated with laughter is very impressive. Scientific research conducted over the years has shown that the act of laughing oxygenates the blood, helps lower blood pressure, alleviates pain through the release of endorphins, improves immune function, ensures better sleep, reduces the release of stress-related hormones, boosts the digestive tract, burns up to 50 calories in approximately 15 minutes and much more.

According to Jean Woodall, a Certified Laughter Yoga Instructor who offers classes at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta and the Decatur YMCA, author Norman Cousins, who detailed his struggle with the painful arthritic disease Ankylosing Spondylitis in the book "Anatomy of an Illness," provided an unprecedented glimpse of how valuable laughter can be when it comes to physical well-being. "He watched old Marx Brothers movies every afternoon and found that 10 minutes of laughter gave him two hours of pain-free sleep. This was news to the scientific community."

And doctors and researchers around the world have delved into researching the benefits of laughter. Even before the publication of Cousins' book, Dr. William Fry, Jr., a Stanford University School of Medicine professor who is known as the "granddaddy of laughter research," released the findings that most of the major physiological systems of the body are stimulated by laughter. Woodall continued, "[Fry] found that 20 seconds of intense laughter can double the heart rate for three to five minutes. It would take three minutes of a strenuous rowing exercise to duplicate that."



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Dr. Kataria School of Laughter Yoga

(includes a list of Laughter Clubs in Georgia)

www.laughteryoga.org

Blue Skies Laughter Yoga Club

(free Laughter Yoga classes open to the public)

www.addlaughter.com

**Unitarian Universalist
Congregation of Atlanta**

(free Laughter Yoga classes open to the public)

www.uuca.org



Top: Helen Whitley, leader of
Blue Skies Laughter Yoga Club

Bottom: J.L. Williamson

The effects from this “internal jogging,” as Craig and Helen Whitley refer to it, are as long lasting as they are extensive. Woodall explained, “Laughter conditions your stress hormones. It’s the same as if you run or walk to get an aerobic effect — your lungs and heart are more conditioned even when you’re not walking or running. When you laugh more often or more vigorously and for a longer amount of time, it conditions your stress hormones to not flare up in the same dynamic way that they usually do.”

The Dawn of a Movement


It’s this type of indisputable data that encouraged Dr. Madan Kataria, a family physician in Mumbai, India, to try to find a way to harness the power of laughter and give the masses an opportunity to tap into it on a daily basis. One day in March 1995, the doctor went to a park at 7 a.m. and gathered a small group of people. Together, they told jokes and laughed. Thus, the first Laughter Club was born. However, the strategy of telling jokes to induce laughter grew old quickly, and Madan began searching for a method of producing laughter that wasn’t necessarily connected to humor. He conceived the “laughing for no reason” approach and consulted with his wife Madhuri, a yoga instructor, about adding yoga exercises — namely yoga breathing — to the mix. Soon, they developed what is now known as Laughter Yoga, which is practiced by more than 5,000 Laughter Clubs around the world.

While the location may be different for each Laughter Club, the Laughter Yoga classes are essentially the same. At the beginning of each class, there is usually a brief introduction about the movement and its history, then the participants go straight into laughing. Yet, they don’t simply burst into fits of giggles. “It’s very structured,” asserted Craig Whitley. “We demonstrate what we’re going to do, and then we do it.” Typically, this involves a series of “triggers,” as Woodall has started calling them. For instance, during her “cold winter morning car start,” class participants pretend that they’re trying to start a car on a chilly morning, with their laughter serving as the sound effects for the motor turning over. They start slow and low, and their laughter grows louder and more boisterous as “the ignition” finally takes hold and “starts the car.”

There are literally hundreds of creative triggers Laughter Leaders can use, from the “milkshake” to “finger pointing” exercises. The key to doing them correctly, Helen Whitley contended, is in the breathing, both during and in between the exercises. “You have to laugh from the belly,” she observed. “When your belly goes up and down — moving like Santa Claus’ bowl full of jelly — that’s how you know you’re doing it right and it’s working.” And at the end of each session, the Laughter Leaders take class members through a 5- or 10-minute guided meditation, which is tantamount to a cooling down period and allows everyone to reflect on the experience and leave with a happy feeling.

Laughter is Contagious

But what if you’re just not in the mood to laugh? Fortunately, Woodall, who actually studied with Kataria during one of his visits to the United States, revealed, “The body doesn’t know the difference between fake laughter and real laughter.” In fact, research conducted by Dr. Lee Berk at Loma Linda University and Medical Center in California showed that, whether the body is experiencing simulated or genuine laughter, the same part of the brain lights up and the body is flooded with the same beneficial hormones. And many times, as people get into the Laughter Yoga class and see others enjoying themselves, the laughter becomes contagious and their simulated laughter becomes



real laughter. So, as Helen Whitley said, “Fake it till you make it.”

Of course, walking into a room full of strangers and acting silly for 45 minutes can make one feel a bit awkward. In this case, since everybody in the room is laughing together, the Whitleys advised, it’s a good time to let go and just concentrate on the reason for being there. That’s exactly what Jackie Awtry did when she discovered Laughter Yoga in 2006. “I am a person who is ‘in my head’ a lot,” she noted. “But I was OK with laughing for no reason because there were health benefits. It didn’t matter to me that it was pretend. And in our class, we were in a circle, so there were definitely more chances to feel self-conscious. But I decided it was for my health and well-being, so I just did it.” And after she participated in a World Laughter Day gathering in Decatur on May 6, during which more than 100 people participated in a Laughter Yoga session in the Square, she figured out why she enjoys the practice so much. “I laughed with a lot of people I had never met, and I went home happier,” she added. “I even realized during the next few days that when I would laugh, I could feel the soreness in the muscles in my stomach. I like knowing that I accomplished something.”

A Universal Practice

While laughing is something everyone can do, Laughter Yoga isn’t recommended for some, including hernia patients, people who have uncontrolled blood pressure and women who are either in the last stages of pregnancy or having a challenging pregnancy. Other than these select groups, Laughter Yoga really is ideal for the general population. And it’s apparently something adults of all ages need.

While children laugh anywhere from 300 to 400 times a day, adults yuk it up only 15 or 16 times daily. “Sense of humor is individual and subjective. If all you do

is wait around until something strikes you as funny, you could go a whole day without laughing,” Craig Whitley said. However, making the conscious decision to set aside time for laughter can help one recapture that childlike sense of abandon and ultimately reap astounding health benefits.

He concluded, “As therapists, [Helen and I] are always looking for ways that are simple yet powerful to impact people. Who would have thought that something as simple as laughter would have such a great therapeutic effect?” **PN**

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