

Social Workers Are Laughing

Contributed by Helen T. Whitley

Did you know there are more than 6,000 laughter clubs around the globe designed to promote good physical and mental health, a joyful spirit, and world peace? Social workers are quickly discovering Laughter Yoga™, a new body-mind fitness craze that is sweeping the world. {mosgoogle right}

Laughter Yoga is a dynamic, simple stress-reducing activity, appropriate for all sectors of social work, especially in health care, geriatric settings, academic, and mental health settings. Since their origins in 1995, laughter clubs have popped up in more than sixty countries, with classes led by trained Certified Laughter Yoga Leaders. Clubs are usually free and open to the public.

A Laughter Retreat

As a licensed clinical social worker with a busy psychotherapy practice, I was feeling very burned out in the summer of 2006, when I discovered this new form of body-mind fitness. To cope with my stress, I went to a peaceful yoga retreat in the mountains of North Georgia. After settling in, I looked at the class schedule. On it was a class called "Laughter Yoga." Just seeing the name brought a smile to my face. I couldn't wait to see what it was about.

That Saturday, I stumbled upon a novel way to reduce stress, improve my mood, and connect with others. The funny thing was I was the only person there for the class besides the teacher! It was a slow week at the retreat, and the other summer guests were whitewater rafting that day.

The teacher was grinning from ear to ear as we realized I was the only student. She assured me I would enjoy it anyway. I must have laughed with this woman for about 45 minutes. We did one laughter exercise after another, breathing and stretching in between. My self-consciousness quickly faded away as the laughter connected us. After the exercise portion, she led me through a "laughter meditation." This part of the class allows the body to cool down, thus deriving the most benefit from the laughter. By the end of the session, I was crying with laughter, releasing what felt like years of pent-up stress in my body. It didn't hurt that this woman had one of the most contagious laughs in North Georgia. I could hardly stop the giggles from flowing.

After the class, I wanted to learn more. The teacher generously answered my questions, as she was happy to find a kindred spirit. She showed me global media footage that touched me deeply. I watched senior citizens; college students; cancer patients; and even blind, deaf, and mute children doing it. I was weeping as I saw the joy in their faces. I was simply amazed. This was exactly what I needed. No coincidence here.

The creator of Laughter Yoga had come all the way from India to train a group of new teachers at the retreat just months before I arrived. I couldn't believe I had missed him. I thought it would be a fun way to combat the stress of my practice and get out of my head and into my body. With positive psychology gaining more and more popularity and acceptance, I could clearly see this technique was on the cutting edge of wellness. My husband is a certified hypnotherapist and NLP master practitioner, so this would be a natural extension of his practice, too. What a no-brainer! I was so excited about this new way of infusing laughter into my own and other people's lives. As it turned out, my teacher was able to train us later that year as leaders; the first of two levels of training. In 2007, Dr. Kataria came to Miami, Florida, where we completed the teacher training with like-minded people from all over the world. It was exhausting and exhilarating at the same time. I have never laughed that much in my life.

Fake It Until You Make It—Laughing For No Reason

Dr. Madan Kataria created Laughter Yoga in a flash of inspiration in 1995. He was a practicing family physician, and his wife, Madhuri, a yoga teacher. In a review of the literature on laughter, he realized laughter offers numerous physical and mental health benefits.

Amazingly, the research showed that our body does not know the difference between real and simulated laughter. Therefore, the concept of "laughing for no reason" was born. There is no need for comedy, humor, or jokes to get the benefit from laughing, and almost anyone can participate.

Laughter Yoga is a very low-impact, mind body, aerobic workout that can be very easily modified for seniors or people with physical or mental challenges. The yoga connection is in the breathing. Yogic breathing or "pranayama" has been practiced for more than 4,000 years for good reason. It produces a powerful and immediate positive effect on our physiology. The primary characteristic of yogic breathing is that exhalation be longer than inhalation. Studies show most people are using only one-third of their lung capacity with each breath, thereby signaling the brain to release damaging stress hormones such as cortisol and epinephrine into the body. Stress is a factor in more than 90% of all diseases, and laughter is the fastest, easiest method of exhaling longer, which flushes the lungs and signals the body to reduce the production of stress hormones. This promotes good health, increases the blood flow to the brain, and releases endorphins, the feel-good chemicals the brain produces when we experience pleasure.

Laughter Raises Social and Emotional Intelligence

Laughing causes the body to release into the bloodstream high concentrations of communication substances such as oxytocin, which is related to feelings of happiness, unconditional love, bonding, tolerance, forgiveness, generosity, and compassion. This release of substances can be thought of as a "joy cocktail." Mirror neurons in the brain enable us to experience the emotions of people we communicate with. This explains why laughter is contagious. Studies show that

even the anticipation of laughter makes us feel better. Another meaning of yoga is “union.” While laughing, we are promoting inner peace and wiping out the “isms” we tend to suffer from.

Laughter is truly a universal language. Connecting with others through laughter enables you to relax and changes your mood instantly. With eye contact and a flexible attitude, unconditional laughter exercises lead to genuine laughter, cleansing the body and soul. In a class, we clap rhythmically together while chanting “Ho-Ho Ha-Ha Ha!” between exercises, from deep within the belly.

Some of the laughter exercises are referred to as “value-based,” because they help shift your perspective to a healthier, more positive one. An example of this is “argument laughter,” in which instead of yelling at each other, folks are wagging their fingers at each other while laughing. Argument laughter is always followed by “forgiveness laughter,” in which we bow our heads and hold our ears as they do in India to show forgiveness while laughing simultaneously. These exercises are designed to change negative mental associations to positive ones.

Laughter in Medical/Healthcare Settings

Medical social workers, nurses, and lay people are establishing Laughter Clubs in hospitals, rehabilitation facilities, and other medical settings. Laughter Yoga is gaining acceptance right along with the research showing its benefits. At Swedish Covenant Hospital in Chicago, cancer patients are participating in it while receiving chemotherapy. Patients who otherwise might feel miserable are shifting the paradigm and inspiring others to do the same.

Laughter can help people forget about their pain for a while. Norman Cousins, a medical doctor, and well-known author of *Anatomy of an Illness*, suffered from a painful condition called Ankylosing Spondylitis. He documented that thirty minutes of laughter allowed him to have two to three hours of pain-free sleep.

The cardiac benefits of laughter have been well-established for several years. Laughter Yoga specifically has been shown to reduce blood pressure for a sustained period of time after only a handful of sessions, according to a recent study conducted in India. These very exciting results were presented at the American Society of Hypertension meeting in May 2008.

There are only a few medical contraindications to participating in Laughter Yoga—people with hernias, untreated heart disease, uncontrolled hypertension, and people in early recovery from certain surgeries being the most notable. There have, however, been no known, reported injuries from participation in Laughter Yoga to date.

Laughter in Geriatric Settings

Social workers in geriatric settings are implementing therapeutic laughter as a way to help seniors exercise, breathe deeply, and connect interpersonally. Laughter Yoga is now highly sought after as an activity in senior facilities, as most seniors enjoy it immensely, even if done as chair exercise. It can easily be done while seated, with the benefits being the same. We have done many presentations with this population. Facilitating the senior groups has been extremely rewarding to me. Seniors in institutional settings may feel especially lonely, depressed, and in need of the obvious benefits that laughter offers.

We now know that the number of social interactions a person has each day is a direct indicator of one’s health, wellness, and longevity. I believe Laughter Yoga is the ultimate social interaction for good mental health. In the classes, seniors are effectively getting permission to act silly and young again, while getting a good cardiopulmonary and psychosocial workout. In these settings, the staff tend to be highly stressed, and they can reap the benefits of the laughter classes, as well. In fact, we have trained social workers who had plans to start a club for their facilities’ staff, so they could laugh in a group at the start of their work day.

Laughter in Schools, Colleges, and Universities

Social workers in colleges and universities are incorporating Laughter Yoga as a way to break the ice during orientation and other campus activities. At Hawaii Tokai International College, students participated in a session as a way of breaking down cultural barriers. One of our trainees planned to spread laughter to Brenau University students. Laughter Yoga is appropriate for children, too. They just don’t need it as much. Studies show that children laugh 300 or more times a day, compared to adults, who laugh on average 15 times a day. Generally, children of school age can easily follow along. In fact, there is a school in India that has incorporated it into its daily routine over the past couple of years. At the beginning and end of each school day, the students, teachers, and even the principal line up in long rows and run through the laughter exercises. This school in India has seen dramatic improvements in attendance and the children’s attitudes about school. There will, no doubt, be more Laughter Yoga integrated into primary and secondary education as administrators see the positive changes it brings.

Laughter in Addiction and Psychiatric Settings

Imagine laughter coming from the halls of mental health centers and residential substance abuse centers. Clinical social workers in these settings are seeing this as a stress reduction and interpersonal group exercise. It could be a part of the regular daily or weekly schedule. Clients in substance abuse treatment struggle with a lot of guilt and shame. Part of the recovery skill set is learning to play and be themselves without the drugs or alcohol. Laughter Yoga appears to be very helpful for mild social anxiety and certainly for depression. I submit that it can be thought of as a solution-focused, body-mind technique that makes sense to counteract the lethargy of depression and the “over-seriousness” that often

accompanies it.

There are numerous testimonials from people who say the regular practice of Laughter Yoga has alleviated their depression and anxiety. I am one of those people. It definitely helped me overcome social anxiety and has changed my own mood from glum to happy in just a few short minutes on dozens of occasions. Controlled studies will no doubt be done in coming years to show the psychiatric benefits.

Caution should be used with psychiatric inpatients who are actively manic or in an otherwise psychotic state. Paranoid or manic patients should not participate in Laughter Yoga. It may be too much stimulation, and there is an obvious likelihood that they might misinterpret the intention behind it.

Summary

The applications of Laughter Yoga are far reaching for social workers in all arenas and specialties. Social workers have always been known for recognizing the inherent strengths we all possess. A defining feature of the profession is to focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society. We also understand how important social interaction is to mental health. Social work ethics dictate how valuable it is to make a difference in our own communities.

Free community laughter clubs led by social workers support the core values, objectives, and ethics of the profession. We all have the ability to laugh, and Laughter Yoga provides an ingenious way to reap the rewards laughter brings us. In addition to the physical and mental benefits, Laughter Yoga connects people socially and spiritually. One of Dr. Kataria's goals in creating Laughter Yoga is to bring about world peace one laugh at a time. The laughter begins with you. My favorite quote from Dr. Kataria is, "When you laugh, you change, and when you change, the whole world changes around you."

I hope to have the honor of continuing to spread the laughter in my role as a social worker. As the profession is exposed to Laughter Yoga and more social workers experience it, the relevance and benefits will be obvious. My goal is to train hundreds of social workers in the next five years. Laughing with others is the most rewarding way I can imagine spending my time. As we say enthusiastically in every Laughter Yoga session, "Very good, very good. Yaaaaay!"

References

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Helen T. Whitley, MSW, LCSW, and her husband, Craig Whitley, offer a free, weekly laughter club in the community of Woodstock, GA. She is blazing the trail as the first social worker in the U.S. to offer Laughter Yoga Leader Certification trainings that provide social work CEUs. She may be able to come to your state, if you wish to sponsor a training. Visit her Web site at <http://www.addlaughter.com> for more information. You can e-mail her at helentw@comcast.net. More information on Laughter Yoga can also be found at <http://www.laughteryoga.org>.