

the best medicine

The difference between happiness and joy is often laughter, writes Fiona Hoban

There's nothing quite like a good laugh. The most obvious effect of laughter is on our mood. Laughter triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural feelgood chemical. But it's not just our mood that benefits. A good, hearty laugh is a powerful cardio workout – just 10 minutes of hearty laughter is equal to 30 minutes on the rowing machine. Other benefits include increased blood circulation, reduced blood pressure and an antidote to stress which is widely recognised as accounting for up to 80% of all illnesses.

Laughter is a universal language that we all understand; it is not something we learn to do. Its instinctive nature may explain why it's difficult to control consciously (think back to your last fit of the giggles). We often assume therefore that it's difficult to produce it consciously and efforts to do so are forced, fake and futile.

Not so, according to Laughter Yoga founder Dr Madan Kataria. He observed that natural laughter is generally short-lived and left to chance – it may happen, it may not. There isn't always much to laugh about, so if we wait until we have good reason to laugh, we may be waiting for some time. That is why laughing for no reason is the core philosophy of Laughter Yoga classes.

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People often assume you have to be happy in order to laugh. Laughter Yoga makes a clear distinction between happiness and joyfulness. Happiness is a conditional response. It is dependent on certain conditions being fulfilled. Happiness is typically fleeting by nature and is quickly displaced by new conditions. (How long did the happiness last when you got that job, or that house or that car?)

In contrast, joyfulness is an unconditional commitment to be happy for the moment (and for no particular reason) despite life's problems. And one of the easiest ways to trigger joyfulness is through laughter. In that sense, you can laugh even if you're not happy.

You can also laugh even if you don't have a great sense of humour. Research shows that 90% of laughter is not a response to humour or comedy. When we laugh, we are often communicating playful intent. Children laugh more than adults because children play more than adults. Children laugh up to 400 times a day, often as a by-product of their playfulness. Adults, if lucky, laugh up to 15 times a day. (It has been said: "It's not that we stop laughing when we grow older, it's that we grow older when we stop laughing.")

To reap the full benefits of laughter, ie, the positive physiological and biochemical changes in our body, laughter has to be loud and deep – a belly laugh. It also needs to continue for at least 10 minutes. Laughter Yoga classes use stimulated laughter exercises and cultivated child-like playfulness to produce laughter for prolonged periods of time.

In a Laughter Yoga class, you are encouraged to "fake it till you make it" because the brain cannot tell the difference between natural and fake laughter. Fake or real, prolonged laughing delivers the feelgood factor and cardiac workout. Besides, laughter is contagious and eventually you end up laughing naturally.

In essence, Laughter Yoga classes are not about laughter, per se – they are more about cultivating child-like playfulness. This is a skill that can be learned. It's muscle memory: once you learn it, you don't forget it. There is also the added social benefit: laughing with one another creates a positive bond; it breaks down barriers and increases our sense of belonging and social cohesion. We rarely laugh when we are alone; laughter is 30 times more frequent in social rather than solitary situations. When we're alone we're much more likely to talk to ourselves or maybe smile. However happy we may feel, laughter virtually disappears when we are by ourselves.

It seems that laughter really is the best medicine. ✨