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Laughing For The Health Of It

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Stress is a major problem today both in our personal and professional lives. Part of the power of laughter is its ability to counteract stress. Sustained laughter causes the brain to release endorphins so we can relax. It also releases serotonin, the body's natural painkiller. These hormones reduce the activity level of our sympathetic nervous system (our emergency fight or flight system) and increases the activity of our parasympathetic nervous system, which promotes relaxation, connection to others and general well being.

Laughter also functions as a social bonding mechanism. People think of laughter as a result of jokes or watching something funny, but if you study laughter in social situations you will find that much laughter occurs when nothing funny was said. It is simply one of ways that we humans relate to each other in a positive way. It has been proven that people who participate in social activities and have a support system are taking care of themselves. Laughter clubs also help to promote social relationships.

Laughter Yoga was created in 1995 by Dr. Madan Kataria, a medical doctor in Mumbai, India. He knew that laughter was the best medicine, so he gathered five friends in a park and started the first laughter club. Initially they tried taking turns telling jokes as a way to generate laughter but quickly ran out of good jokes. Then Dr. Kataria figured out that they could laugh for no reason just by using playful exercises and the contagiousness of laughter to their advantage. Thus Laughter Yoga was born and quickly spread to other parts in India, and eventually throughout the world. Today there are about 10,000 laughter clubs in 120 countries.

Laughter Yoga involves deep breathing and a few stretches, playful laughter exercises (no jokes or comedy), clapping and relaxation. There are no fancy poses. Any age and any level of physical ability can participate in this uplifting experience! When we laugh in our daily lives the amount of time we spend laughing is typically much shorter than in a Laughter Yoga session, which gives you maximum benefits of sustained laughter for twenty minutes with some breath work in-between. A very uplifting experience, the playfulness it creates helps to balance the rest of our lives, as we are usually occupied with left-brain activities most of the day.

People can practice this fun form of self-care by learning how to lighten up about different situations in life, such as laughing when someone cuts you off in traffic, the store is out of your flavor of ice cream, etc. We can all laugh at these situations and also learn how to laugh at ourselves. Try laughing to be happy instead of waiting to be happy to laugh. You can create your own happiness, the best self-care there is!