

When you're feeling sad, depressed, sick or lonely the last thing you feel like doing is laughing. But that's exactly what you should do - have a good old chuckle.



Words: Jane Keighley

It's No Joke

All jokes aside - a good, hearty laugh does wonders for your overall health. Throughout history humour and health have been tied together. Even in biblical times, writers reported that "a merry heart doeth good like a medicine" (Proverbs 17:22).

According to a study by the UCLA School of Medicine in America, laughing boosts the body's immune system, enhances pain management and plays a major role in reducing the negative effects of stress. It gives your internal organs a workout and makes your heart beat faster, which improves circulation and respiration.

For over 50 years Stanford Medical School psychiatrist Dr. William Fry researched the relationship between humour and health and found that laughing increases antibodies and white blood cells in the immune system which makes you more resistant to infection.

Laugh yourself healthy

It also makes you fitter. According to Fry, 20 seconds of intense laughter can quickly double the heart rate for three to five minutes. It would take three minutes of strenuous rowing to

get the same effect. It also helps tighten abdominal muscles and improve muscle tone.

In the 1970s American journalist Norman Cousins - who was suffering from a painful disease of the spine (ankylosing spondylitis) - discovered that through watching funny movies, laughing for 10 minutes gave him two hours of pain-free sleep. Not to forget American doctor, Patch Adams, who dressed up as a clown to make sick children laugh, which he believed increased their rates of recovery.

Laughter therapy

But how do you make yourself laugh? What if you don't think funny movies are funny? Well, it's time to get yourself to a laughter club - the latest health craze taking the world by storm.

Hasya Yoga is a combination of yoga and laughter that was developed in 1995 by 'The Giggling Guru', Indian physician Madan Kataria. Kataria discovered that laughing for no reason with laughter exercises - no jokes allowed - practiced 20 minutes a day along with stretching and deep breathing does wonders for your physical and mental health.

"There is sufficient data available from medical research showing

that even if you pretend laughing to act 'happiness' your body produces happy chemicals," says Kataria. "According to the principles of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) our bodies do not know the difference between the theoretical thought and the practical implementation of that thought. So whether you laugh spontaneously at a joke in a specific situation or you do laughter as a form of exercise (willingly), the same set of physiological changes will occur in the body.

"Many actors and actresses have experienced the effect of faking emotions. It's been known for an actor to fall sick after acting sadness for a prolonged season. This clearly indicates that if acting sadness can make you sick, acting 'happiness' can make you healthy. The idea of laughter clubs is based on this philosophy of acting 'happiness'. We also find that motion creates emotions - if you put the body into an act of happiness, the mind follows."

Worldwide smiles

And Kataria must be on to something as there are more than 2,000 clubs worldwide with participants laughing in India, America, Australia, UK, Germany,

Feeling funny

Ten minutes of side-splitting laughter will:

- Help you relax
- Make you feel great
- Reduce the effects of stress and depression
- Make you fitter
- Boost your immune system
- Help you think more clearly
- Increase self-esteem
- Improve stamina
- Control pain
- Improve muscle tone
- Stimulate digestion
- Stimulate metabolism
- Improve sleep

Who will benefit?

You're never too old, or too young, to benefit from laughing. Welch says, "Laughing is great for everyone, regardless of age, occupation or personality type. "However, as a laughing session can be vigorous, if you suffer from high blood pressure, asthma, epilepsy or hernia,

it is important to check with your doctor before you participate."

Funny business

"Members of the business community - managers, sales and marketing personnel, executives and administrators - are living very stressful lives. Most diseases like high blood pressure, heart disease, peptic ulcers, insomnia, depression, allergies and even cancer have some relations to stress," says Kataria. "This contributes to absenteeism, poor performance and addictions. The idea of laughter clubs has been introduced to many work places - all staff start their working day with a 'laugh out'. What a way to start the day. It has helped to reduce stress, improve the work environment, interpersonal relationships and has led to increased productivity."

Funny Bones

Grab a few friends (or even the passenger sitting next to you) and try these laughter club techniques:

Greeting laugh

Greet each other while laughing in a medium tone and holding eye contact. Either join both hands in a prayer-like way or bend at the hips and laugh while looking in the eyes of your neighbour. Follow this with the *Ho-ho-ha-ha-ha* chanting while clapping five to six times and deep breathing twice.

Humming laughter with lips closed

Laugh with your mouth closed while making a humming sound that resonates through your skull. Keep looking at each other, making gestures to make each other laugh.

Medium laughter

Laugh gently in a medium tone while approaching another person. Move around a lot and approach different people, striking your palms with them, like you're doing a high-five.

Swinging laughter

Use lots of playfulness for this one. Stand in a big circle and move forwards making a prolonged sound of *ae-ae-ae-ae-ae-ae-ae* while raising your hands. The group bursts into laughter as they meet in the centre and wave hands. After the first bout of laughter, move back to the starting position and repeat the process, saying *oh-oo-ooo*. For the third and fourth times make both the *eh-ehh* and *oh-oh* sounds.