

Dr. Madan Kataria, the merry medicine man from India, the "Guru of Giggling" (London Times), is a qualified physician, practising in Mumbai, India. He is the pioneer of the Laughter Clubs Movement all over the world. Dr. Kataria has developed a new technique of Laughter, based on Yoga, in which anyone can participate in Group laughter for 15-20 minutes, without resorting to jokes. Presently, there are more than 5000 Laughter Clubs in India, USA, UK, Canada, Australia, Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, Hungary, Finland, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Singapore, Malaysia and Dubai.

Dr. Kataria's innovative concept has been widely accepted all over the world, and has been covered by prestigious publications like *TIME* magazine *National Geographic*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Daily Telegraph* (UK) and many others. Television networks around the globe like *BBC*, *CNN*, *ZDF*, *NHK* (Japan), *ABC News* (USA) and others have flashed this novel exercise programme. The famous film director Mira Nair has made a film titled "Laughter Clubs of India" in 1999, which was highly appreciated.

Dr. Kataria is a corporate consultant for Holistic Health and Stress Management for a number of national and multinational companies. He has conducted workshops and seminars in USA, UK, Australia, Singapore, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Italy and UAE.

A well-known speaker, Dr. Kataria frequently appears on television and radio, for health talks. He is also an eminent social worker, involved in a number of social projects.



**LAUGH**  
**For No Reason**  
**Dr. Madan Kataria**

# Laugh For No Reason



**New  
Revised  
Edition**

**Dr. Madan Kataria**  
Founder : Laughter Yoga Clubs Movement

# **The Entire World is an Extended Family; Let us join through Love and Laughter**



This book is dedicated to my mother Raj Karni Kataria  
and my only wife Madhuri

**Laughter has no language, knows no boundaries,  
does not discriminate between caste, creed, and colour.  
Laughter is a powerful emotion and has all the ingredients  
for uniting the entire world. We are building a worldwide  
community of people who believe in Love, Laughter,  
Compassion, Appreciation and Forgiveness**

**Mission: World Peace Through Laughter**

Sun demands no reason to shine;  
Water demands no reason to flow;  
A child demands no reason to be happy;  
Why do we need a reason to laugh?

# L a u g h For No Reason

**DR. MADAN KATARIA**  
Founder  
Laughter Yoga Clubs Movement

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## BEFORE YOU BEGIN TO LAUGH WITH US

**T**he idea of starting a Laughter Club came to me as a flash when I was writing an article, “Laughter - the Best Medicine”, for a health magazine that I used to edit. It was on the 13th of March 1995, when the first Laughter Club was started in a public park in Mumbai (Bombay), India, with just five people. Today, after ten years, it has grown into a worldwide Laughter Movement. This small seed has bloomed into a big ‘Laughing Family’ of more than 5000 Clubs in countries all over the world: India, USA, Canada, UK, Australia, Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Hungary, Switzerland, Portugal, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Israel, Brasil, and Dubai. The amount of interest shown by people around the world leaves me with little doubt that this Laughter Movement is a kind of Divine Wisdom, and I am glad that it has been manifested through me.

I must confess that I am not a person with any extraordinary sense of humour, nor am I a comedian or a great joke teller. Neither am I not a Yoga Expert nor very well versed in the *Vedas*, *Upanishads* or *Gita*. I am only a physician who comes from a large agricultural family, from a small village with a population of not more than five hundred. I lived my childhood with rustic, innocent and hard-working people. My experience with villagers taught me that laughter can come to you easily and in abundance, if you have a childlike heart, full of love and innocence. People in big cities try to block their laughter for the sake of looking good and they deny themselves the manifold benefits of that wonderful gift from God, the capacity to laugh.

This book seeks to inform all those who would like to know what the concept of a Laughter Club is, how it started and what it seeks to achieve. What are its programmes and procedures, aims and objects, hopes and aspirations?

A number of people have said kind things about me. While I am very grateful to them, I must mention that it has, all along, been a combined effort of Laughter Club members from all over the world. It will not be incorrect to say that each member of every Laughter Club has contributed, in one way or the other, to the growth of Laughter Clubs. My role has been that of the facilitator.

When we started the Laughter Clubs, it was meant to combine laughter-exercises based on yogic breathing and stretching techniques, to make the benefits of laughter accessible freely and free of cost to one and all. Since 1997, we found a new meaning in laughter. Laughter is not just amusement and entertainment, neither is it all giggling and chuckling. Laughter has to come right from within, from one's soul. One can experience laughter from the soul only when the heart is pure, full of love, kindness and compassion. Laughter becomes more meaningful when it is intended not only to make oneself happy, but also to make others happy. This is what is known in Laughter Clubs, as the “Spirit of Laughter”.

Through this beautiful platform of Laughter Clubs, we will try to bring about attitudinal changes, that we may live in peace and harmony. It will not be very long before the slogan, “World Peace Through Laughter” becomes a reality. It is my firm belief that we have already started out on the journey towards a “Unified World”, where every human being in the world belongs to a large extended family - that of LAUGHTER.

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From just five persons on 13th of March, 1995, to more than 5000 Laughter Clubs all over the world, and hundreds of articles in prestigious publications worldwide, to the laughter story appearing on many television networks and thousands of request letters from all over the world for new Laughter Clubs, all these indicate that such clubs are indeed no laughing matter. This has certainly not been achieved by me alone. I am not that capable. I would like to salute the Divine Force which has chosen to manifest itself through me. Though I did generate the concept of Laughter Clubs, the Laughter Movement has reached its current size and stature due to the untiring efforts of the following people, to whom I would like to extend my love and gratitude.

First and foremost, my loving wife Madhuri, who has dedicated her life to the cause. Another Laughologist who needs to be applauded is P.T. Hinduja, who understood the power behind laughter, and has worked tirelessly towards this cause, even at the age of 75. I can't forget the contribution of late J.K. Kapur, who was the Senior Vice President of the Laughter Club International and young, dynamic Mohit Kapoor from Worli Laughter Club, and B.P. Hirani from Jogger's Park Laughter Club who have helped to make my dream come true, the formation of the Laughter Club International, as well as the organising two big events, World Laughter Day and the Laughter Convention which shook the whole world with laughter.

I would like to thank our Laughter Club Leaders who have put in tremendous efforts to spread this message all over the world. Among them are G.P. Shethia, Manubhai Turakhia, Kamini Bathija (Mumbai), Lakshimi

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# Yogic Laughter - A BREAKTHROUGH!

Over the past two decades, extensive research all over the world has shown that laughter has a positive impact on various systems of the body. Laughter helps to remove the negative effects of stress, the number one killer, today. More than 70 per cent of illnesses such as high blood pressure, heart disease, anxiety, depression, frequent coughs and colds, peptic ulcers, insomnia, allergies, asthma, menstrual difficulties, tension headaches, stomach upsets, and even cancer, are somewhat related to stress. It has been scientifically shown that laughter lowers the blood pressure, relaxes muscles, improves blood circulation, increases oxygen level in the body, elevates mood, brings hope, enhances communication and most importantly it boosts the immune system, the master key for maintaining good health.

Scientists are convinced that laughter has both preventive and therapeutic value. But today, where is our laughter? Who is laughing? It seems as

if people have forgotten how to laugh. According to a study done by Dr. Micheal Titze, a German Psychologist, "In the 1950s people used to laugh 18 minutes a day, but today we laugh not more than 6 minutes per day, despite the huge increase in the standard of living." Children can laugh up to 300-400 times in a day, but when we become adults this frequency drops to only 15 times a day.

On one hand, researchers tell us that laughter has a positive impact on our physical and mental well-being. On the other hand, however, in today's high pressure, high tension, and competitive world, our laughter is disappearing fast. The hearty humour of thirty years ago, no longer stirs, even the faintest smile today.

Laughter is an expression of happiness and it seems that most people are not happy with their lives. We cannot depend upon a sense of humour to create laughter, since humour is a phenomenon of the intellect, the mind. Moreover, humour is unique to the individual, their culture, and it varies from person to person. There may be few reasons for us to smile and laugh, while there are many reasons for us to be sad, depressed and frustrated. The million dollar question is: How can we laugh and who will make us laugh?

## THE NEW CONCEPT OF LAUGHTER YOGA

On 13th March, 1995, I found the breakthrough - while writing an article for my health magazine, on "Laughter - the Best Medicine". I started the first Laughter Club in Mumbai, India. This unique idea proves that anyone can laugh for 15-20 minutes without depending upon jokes, humour or comedy. It combines Laughter Exercises, make believe Laughter and Yoga breathing (*Pranayama*), which turns into genuine laughter, when practised in a group. In a Laughter Club, we begin laughing as a form of exercise, and then when we make eye contact with another person in the group, it turns into real laughter.

In the second part of Laughter Yoga, "Laughter Meditation", the group members sit on the floor in silence for few minutes and then start faking laughter, until it becomes spontaneous and real. It all happens without



Meet the Five People who created the history on 13th March 1995

using humorous intervention. In the final stage of Laughter Meditation, all the participants lie down on the floor with their eyes closed, and laughter flows like a fountain from deep within, and it becomes unstoppable. The laughter comes from your whole being, rather than the body.

## THE CONCEPT AND PHILOSOPHY

### DEVELOPING A SENSE OF HUMOUR THROUGH LAUGHTER

Many people believe that one must have a good sense of humour in order to laugh. Often people believe that a sense of humour is all about telling jokes, being funny and witty. A sense of humour, however, is an individual's capacity to perceive, relate, and experience a given situation in a funnier and more amusing way. We are not born with a sense of humour, but we acquire this skill, as our mental abilities develop. We all are born with tremendous potential to laugh, as you can see in a child who will laugh 300-400 times in a day. In fact, we all did laugh that much when we were children. Children can laugh so often without any jokes at all. They start laughing well, much before the punchline is delivered. A child does

not laugh because it has a sense of humour, but rather because it is in the nature of the child to be joyful. As the child starts growing, he/she is exposed to more and more information and his/her laughter begins to get lost under the layers of seriousness, self-control, responsibility, fear, and insecurity. As a result, an ordinary situation at which the child used to be amazed, and amused no longer triggers a good feeling.

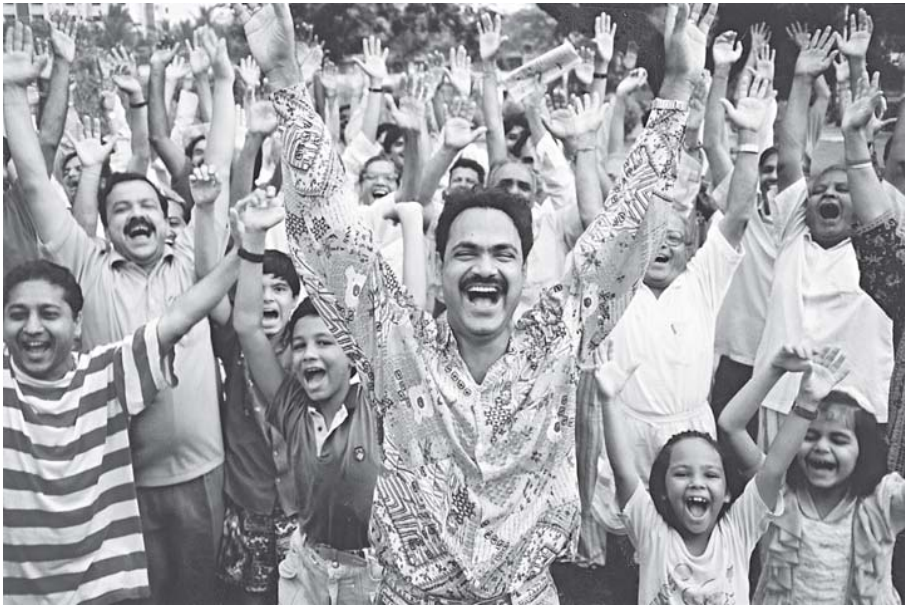
To develop a sense of humour, one needs to remove the layers of inhibition and the mental blocks, which have been created by one's self, one's parents, and society. Once these barriers are removed, the infinite potential to laugh, will unfold automatically, and a sense of humour will start flowing. Teaching a person who has a lot of inhibitions to develop a sense of humour, is like flushing a drain, which is blocked with rubble. Once you remove the rubble, water will flow.

This is exactly what has happened in Laughter Clubs. It is for this reason that we are successful in making thousands of people laugh in a country like India, where people hardly ever laugh or smile. The same people who never used to smile, have started cracking jokes and enjoying humour better than ever before. They have started being playful and creative. Here, nobody was trained to have a sense of humour in order to laugh. Therefore, it is not always the sense of humour that leads to laughter, reverse is also true: The laughter can also help you to develop a sense of humour. Laughter and humour make one unity, each flowing into the other - a cause and effect relationship. By volunteering to laugh in a group we are preparing the ground for a sense of humour to grow. Therefore, if you don't have a sense of humour don't worry: You have to laugh yourself silly, and for no reason at all. Then your sense of humour will start flowing. Laughter Clubs are the ideal platforms for those who are introvert and do not identify with a sense of humour.

### PHILOSOPHY OF 'FAKE IT UNTIL YOU MAKE IT'

There is an old saying, "If you are not happy, act like a happy person and you will become one." There is a great wisdom and science behind "acting out happiness". Medical research shows that even if you pretend to laugh or act happy, your body produces happy chemicals. According to





Laughter Club members are from every age group - school children, college students, housewives, doctors, engineers and elderly people.

the principles of NeuroLinguistic Programming (NLP), there is hardly any difference, between thinking about doing something, and actually doing it. Therefore, whatever may be the source of laughter, it leads to the same set of physiological changes occurring in our bodies. Many actors and actresses all over the world have experienced the effect of faking emotions. Many times they felt sick after acting out sadness. This clearly indicates that if acting sadness can make you sick, acting happiness, can make you healthy.

### **LAUGHTER FROM THE BRAIN AND THE BODY**

There are two ways we can laugh, one is the adult model, and the other is the child model. Adults laugh from the brain, using a mental and intellectual type of humour: Jokes, comedy, and wit. In this model, people perceive the source outside the body and, depending upon their cognitive abilities, they will laugh. Here, a person is a passive participant and the amount of laughter will depend upon mental abilities to understand and perceive what is funny and amusing. For example, how much a person will laugh at a joke, will depend upon how funny the joke is, how it is

being told, and also upon the listener's state of the mind. This is called a mind-to-body model or humour model, and it works from the mind to the body. The problem with this model is that there is no guarantee how much a person will laugh, since it depends upon such conditions as the sense of humour and state of mind. Therefore, the laughter which comes from this model is conditional.

The second model is called the child model or body-mind model. If you observe, children laugh most often when they are playing. Their laughter is not from their minds but from their bodies. Here, the source of laughter is within the body and one can use it whenever necessary because we can move our body at will. The significant feature of this model is that a person actively participates in laughter and humorous activities rather than being a passive participant. In Laughter Clubs, we use the body-mind model, where laughter is initiated in the body without humorous intervention, and once the inhibitions are removed, the humour starts flowing easily. The Laughter Club concept is based on cultivating childlike playfulness, to induce laughter in the body first, and then the mind follows along. The physical model of laughter is easier to practise in a group and suitable for most people, who do not identify with the adult sense of humour.

### **CHANGE YOUR BREATHING CHANGE YOUR MIND**

One of the most important components of Laughter Yoga is combining Laughter Exercises with Yoga breathing (*Pranayama*). According to Yogic texts, we are alive because of life energy force known as *Prana*, which enters our body through breathing and this energy flows through the energy channels called *Nadis*. This is very much like Chinese Chi, which flows through Meridians.

There is a direct relation between the breathing pattern and the state of mind. If your mind is upset, breathing becomes fast, irregular, and shallow. During stress, you breathe from the upper part of the chest. There are spells of breath-holding, according to the number of disturbing and negative thoughts crossing the mind. Similarly, when the mind is at peace, the breathing becomes slower, more regular, and deeper. If we can learn



Leading Gynaecologists of Mumbai city participating in a Laughter Session.

to change our breathing pattern from shallow to deep, we can easily alter our body arousal system. With deep breathing, our body will not experience stress response, even if we have disturbing thoughts. Therefore, by changing the breathing pattern from chest to the abdomen, we can change our reaction to stressful thoughts. Most Laughter Yoga exercises are designed to bring awareness of laughter in the belly, which helps to move the diaphragm. Therefore, belly laughing shifts our breathing pattern from the upper chest to belly breathing.

### **MOTION CREATES EMOTION**

There is a well established link between the body and mind. Whatever happens to your mind, happens to your body. For example, if you observe depressed and sad people, their bodies are also depressed. They walk slowly, talk slowly and all the bodily movements are slower. My father used to tell me, “If you are sad, don’t sit idle, keep doing some physical work, go for a walk or jog, and you will feel better.” And it’s true, I did feel better by keeping my body active. This shows two-way link between body and mind. If we change the quality of thoughts, we can

change the body behaviour because for each type of thought pattern, there is an appropriate body behaviour. If we can bring a change in the bodily behaviour by changing physical gestures voluntarily, as in Laughter Clubs, we will experience peace in our minds.

Laughter Yoga is a repetitive change in bodily behaviour through laughter and breathing exercises, so as to bring change in the state of mind. In other words, we can influence the mind through the body. Even if you are not happy in your mind, if you behave like a happy person or act like a happy person repeatedly, your mind will experience the state of happiness. Therefore, if you can’t laugh, bring laughter to your body first and your mind will soon follow.

### **HAPPINESS VERSUS JOYFULNESS**

To understand the philosophy of a Laughter Club is to know the difference between happiness and joyfulness. Happiness is a conditional response, subject to the fulfillment of certain desires of the mind, related to how your life has been in the past, will be in the future, but never in the present moment. In contrast, joyfulness is unconditional commitment to having fun, despite life’s problems. Joyfulness is more a physical or bodily phenomenon, keeping our awareness in the present moment. For example, you can decide to play some game or dance or laugh despite all the problems in your life. When you are joyful, you will experience physiological and biochemical changes, bringing a sense of well-being and good feelings. Once you are feeling good, your outlook towards life and problems, changes. The Laughter Club phenomenon is not intended to seek happiness, but to be joyful, so that we can navigate through life, more effectively with more opportunities for finding happiness.

### **WILLINGNESS AND COMMITMENT TO LAUGH**

The most important factor in a Laughter Club is your willingness to laugh. The members of Laughter Clubs laugh out voluntarily, with full commitment, and willingness. If you are not willing to laugh, nobody in this world can make you laugh. On the other hand, if you are willing to laugh and give yourself permission to laugh, nobody can stop you from laughing. You don’t even need any reason to laugh. In real life, we laugh





This is how a typical Laughter Club looks like in India

only when there is something funny or amusing. In other words, we leave laughter to chance, rather than, to a commitment. We have to make some effort, if we want to add more laughter. A Laughter Club promotes laughter regularly despite life's ups and downs.

### **APPROPRIATENESS OF LAUGHTER**

The whole world is full of serious people. Even if you want to laugh, those around you, might be disturbed by your laughter. Throughout life, we are not allowed to laugh, cry, or be angry. We keep suppressing our emotions. Therefore, there is a great need for such a platform as offered by Laughter Clubs, where it is always appropriate to laugh freely, without restrictions and as much as you wish.

### **LAUGHTER YOGA ACTIVATES LAUGH MUSCLES**

Yogic Laughter Exercise is not a substitute for the spontaneous laughter which we may experience throughout the day. As a matter of fact, it helps to increase our capacity to laugh each day. According to another research study, if you stretch your laugh muscles on a regular basis, it will make

them respond more spontaneously whenever there is something amusing. Group Laughter Exercises help members to reduce their inhibitions, enabling them to laugh more often.

### **LAUGHTER AND ITS YOGA CONNECTION**

The Sanskrit meaning of Yoga is “*Yuj*” which means, to unite or to connect. Through laughter, we are connecting people with eye contact, touch, and love. The Group Laughter exercises are based on Yoga, which produces a unique physiological balance, by connecting body, mind, and spirit.

Laughter Yoga combines Laughter Exercises with Yoga breathing (*Pranayama*). According to Yogic texts, we are alive because of life energy force known as *Prana* which enters the body through breathing, and flows through the energy channels called *Nadis*. This is very much like Chinese *Chi* which flows through Meridians. Laughter Yoga helps to improve lung capacity, ensuring a free flow of air and life energy throughout the body.

Deep breathing helps to increase the net supply of oxygen, the most important component of our metabolism. According to principles of Yoga, laughter constantly massages the digestive tract, and improves blood supply to the internal organs. Laughter stimulates blood circulation which transports nutrients to the body. It also strengthens our respiratory system which supplies oxygen to the body. Deep breathing also helps to stimulate the calming branch of our nervous system (parasympathetic), by rhythmic movement of the diaphragm and abdominal muscles

### **INNER SPIRIT OF LAUGHTER**

Most people think that laughter is only for amusement, entertainment, to feel relaxed. Laughter is not merely a physical phenomenon. It does not make any sense if a Laughter Club member laughs a lot at the Laughter Club in the morning and screams and shouts at his wife at home. Therefore, one should laugh not only for one's self, but also to make other members of the Laughter Club happy, too. Laughter becomes reflected in one's behaviour and attitudes towards others. The members of Laughter Clubs not only laugh, but they also practise ways and means of sensible living.

Through group discussions, we identify all the negative factors that keep us from laughing. For example, anger, fear, guilt, and jealousy produce negative feelings in us. In each group we cultivate positive emotions such as love, appreciation, kindness, forgiveness, and joy. The motto of Laughter Club members is not only to make themselves happy, but also to make others happy. This is known as in the "**Spirit of Laughter**". The inner spirit of laughter can be cultivated easily in a group. Laughter Club members find it easy to inspire and motivate each other, and share each other's wisdom.

### **LIBERATING YOUR LAUGHTER FROM REASON**

The essence of laughing without a reason lies in cultivating your child-like spirit and playful attitude. We all have a child within us, wanting permission to laugh, without a reason, but our mind always wants a reason to laugh. Today, because of the stress and strain of modern living, few situations make us laugh, while hundreds of events can make us frown, howl, and cry. Like laughter, happiness has also become conditional. Our happiness depends upon many pre-conditions, such as material success and personal achievement. Laughter is an expression of happiness. When we learn to laugh unconditionally, our happiness will also become unconditional. Therefore, Laughter Yoga can help you to liberate your laughter and happiness from reasons in our lives..

### **WISDOM BECOMES MANIFEST IN A GROUP**

We have a wealth of Eastern and Western wisdom which, if practised, can lead us to a happy and blissful life. One may acquire knowledge about swimming after reading a number of books, but all remains good for nothing if one does not get into the water and begins to swim. This is the problem with most of us, that our knowledge about so many good things in life is not manifest because we lack motivation. We know the theory but we do not put it into practice. The success of Laughter Clubs is attributed to a group effort. If we practise laughter in a group, it happens in a much easier way. Who would have thought one could laugh without jokes? It happened only when we all ventured into laughing as a group, where the motivation levels are high. Laughter just happens. You will do it

because others are doing it. If we can laugh together, we can also practise ways and means of wisely living together.

### **LAUGHTER YOGA SUITS ALL AND IS USER FRIENDLY**

Laughter Exercise is short, sweet and can be easily added to your existing fitness programme. It will be a valuable addition at Yoga groups, *Tai-Chi* groups, aerobic centres, meditation centres, health clubs, sports and fun activities. Laughter Yoga is now included in the curricula of Yoga sessions all over the world. Thousands of Yoga practitioners have added 5-10 minutes of unconditional laughter, at the end of their Yoga sessions. You do not have to take special time out to laugh. Ideally, it should be practised in a group and everyday.

Most importantly, laughter does not depend upon external factors, but on your own internal resources. Whenever, wherever the group decides to, they can laugh and gain the benefits. If you are a working person, Group Laughter will give you instant relaxation and help you to increase your well-being, so that you can work hard throughout the day. If you need to socialise and increase social contacts, becoming part of a support group, offers a kind of "social medicine".

This format is ideal for the retired and the elderly. If you are a person with intelligent introspection and a spiritual inclination, it also offers a philosophy. You can learn to enhance the art of living through laughter. In essence, everyone may learn and benefit from being part of a Laughter Club.

### **WORLD PEACE: THE MANTRA FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM**

There is war in the world because we are at war within ourselves. If we can bring peace within us there will be peace outside. If we can bring peace within ourselves by practising Yogic Laughter, living intelligently, and taking part in creating Laughter Clubs all over the world, there will be everlasting peace on this planet.



## Why Do We Need to Laugh More Today?

**T**oday, life is stressful and stress-related diseases are on the rise. More than 70 per cent of illnesses have some relation to stress. High blood pressure, heart disease, anxiety, depression, frequent coughs and colds, nervous breakdowns, peptic ulcers, insomnia, allergies, asthma, irritable bowel syndrome, colitis, menstrual difficulties, migraine, and even cancer are related to stress. To escape stress, people turn to alcohol, smoking and drugs. If you suffer from any of the following symptoms, you are probably heading for any of the above diseases or a combination of them:

- ❖ Nagging ache at the base of the neck
- ❖ Frequent headaches with tender temples
- ❖ Lethargy and constant fatigue
- ❖ Frequent coughs and colds
- ❖ Stomach knots
- ❖ Nausea and indigestion
- ❖ Irritable bowels or constipation

- ❖ Muscle tension with backache and neck ache
- ❖ Difficulty in going to sleep, Waking early
- ❖ Breathlessness, bouts of dizziness, light-headedness
- ❖ Increase/decrease in appetite
- ❖ Increased smoking or drinking
- ❖ Loss of sexual drive
- ❖ Frequent mood swings
- ❖ Feeling of isolation
- ❖ Lack of self-worth
- ❖ Frequent memory lapses
- ❖ Poor decision-making abilities
- ❖ Irritability and aggression
- ❖ Difficulty in concentrating on and allotting priorities
- ❖ Suicidal tendency

All of us have some of the above symptoms off and on in this fast-paced life, but if the symptoms recur and persist for a long time, you need to unwind and become a member of a Laughter Club. People try a number of relaxation techniques such as exercise, massage, Yoga, meditation, and going on holidays, picnics, and outings. All these measures are time consuming and expensive. One needs concentration and will power to stay with these pursuits. Most exercise programmes are abandoned due to boredom and lack of motivation. Yogic Laughter in a group is one of the easiest and most economical de-stressing measures. Not only do we laugh in a group, but we also practise and implement ways and means of intelligent living. Within the group effort, motivation levels are high, one is free of boredom; it is truly a pleasant, thoroughly delightful, and effective exercise.

All the perils of modern living have resulted from competition. While healthy competition is necessary for growth and development, it seems that today's competition is unlimited. It makes us feel like losers even if we are winners. It puts a person at high level stress for fear of losing his position. If someone overtakes you, it brings a sense of shame, depression, negative feelings of inferiority and jealousy. Due to this, people



can't celebrate even their small achievements and this leads to dissatisfaction, frustration, in turn, leading to drug addiction, alcoholism, gambling, violence and corruption. In a collective effort to understand life in a better way and live more joyfully, we have created the platform Laughter Clubs, where like-minded people can resolve to live a value-based life together, rather than running in a perpetual rat race.

### **OVERSERIOUSNESS**

The whole world is full of seriousness. As a child, one is asked by one's parents over and over again, "When will you become serious?" As an adult, if you want to be joyful at times, people will say, "Don't behave like a child! Life is serious, death is serious." There is a lot of seriousness in hospitals and religious places. There is little or no laughter at workplaces. Newspapers and television programmes continually bombard us with bad news and negative thoughts, making people even less secure. At a tender age, children are overloaded with information. Instead of basketball, they play computer games and chess, where you need to apply a lot of thought and there is almost no laughter. Already children of today behave like young adults. People are becoming more logic-oriented; they look for logic in laughter too. The very essence of laughter is absurdity. Where there is logic, there is no laughter. We already pay a heavy price for

taking life too seriously. The time has come to take laughter seriously. We intend to break the seriousness of life through Laughter Clubs, and to revive the spirit of laughter, and joy as a way of life around the world.

### **DEPRESSION IS NUMBER ONE SICKNESS**

Today, people are sad and lonely. Often they have no one to talk to or to share their feelings, their emotions. The world is sinking into deep depression due to isolation and individualism. As we grow older, we laugh less and less. According to some sources, depression is growing at a fast pace, being almost the number one sickness in the world. Many people who stay at old age homes are depressed. Suicide rates are high in Finland, Switzerland, and many other affluent countries. Laughter is a powerful antidote for depression.

### **CONDITIONAL LAUGHTER AND HAPPINESS**

Why can children laugh more than 300-400 times a day and adults only 15 times? This is because children have not decided upon any conditions for their laughter. They laugh because they want to laugh and are joyful. As we grow older, we start setting conditions for our laughter and happiness. If I get this, I will laugh. Only if I get a job of my liking will I be happy. We are always looking for some reason to laugh. Today, there are a few situations which really make us laugh, but there are hundreds of scenarios which can make us unhappy. The Laughter Club is a joint effort of like-minded people to liberate laughter and happiness from the reason. We can simply choose to be happy, regardless of what is happening in our lives.

### **EXPENSIVE MODERN MEDICINE**

Life expectancy has increased significantly because of advanced medical, surgical, and diagnostic techniques. Despite research and development, however, the incidence of heart disease, blood pressure, allergic disorders, psychosomatic disorders, and cancer is rising largely because of stress. For most people in developing countries, modern medical treatment is expensive and beyond their reach. A major part of their income is spent on treating stress-related diseases. The wonder medicine of laughter can save on medical expenses, by strengthening the immune system a key player in preventing many diseases.

## How did the Idea of Laughter Clubs Originate?

Often, I am asked how the Laughter Clubs originated. In 1995, while writing an article for a magazine my wife, Madhuri and I edit, I learnt how much scientific literature has been devoted to laughter's power for the benefit of both the body and the mind. Then I began to observe how few people laugh, even smile, in our home city of Mumbai. I was greatly influenced by the late American journalist, Norman Cousins, author of "Anatomy of an Illness". In his book, he tells how he laughed his way back to good health from Ankylosing Spondylitis, an incurable disease of the spine. More recently, I learnt about the research being done by Dr. Lee S. Berk at Loma Linda University in California. Dr. Berk is showing that mirthful laughter reduces the stress levels in the body, and has a positive effect on the immune system.

At 4 a.m. on 13th March 1995, I was pacing in my living room. Suddenly, an idea flashed in my mind: If laughter is so good, why not start a



Dr. Madan Kataria at his Mumbai Clinic

Laughter Club? I hurried to a public park at Lokhandwala Complex, Andheri, in Mumbai and talked with people about starting a Laughter Club. I thought of the idea at 4 a.m. and at 7 am a plan was in place.

At exactly 7 am, I spoke to more people who were on their morning walk about starting a Laughter Club. Initially, people laughed at the idea and asked if I was feeling alright. They thought I was kidding or had gone crazy. Out of four hundred people walking in the park, I motivated four, to start laughing. People scorned and ridiculed the idea, but when the health benefits were explained, many became interested and the attendance grew. The participants were mostly men aged forty plus, as well as a few women and children.

In the beginning, all the participants stood in a circle, and I would invite someone to come to the center and tell a joke or a humorous anecdote. People enjoyed the fun and after 10-20 minutes of laughter every morning felt better about themselves and their lives. This method worked well for about 10 days, after which the stock of good jokes ran out. Stale jokes, jokes targeted at a particular community, hurtful jokes, and dirty jokes

began to come up, embarrassing many members, especially the women. It was evident that if we wanted to laugh every day we could not depend on someone telling jokes 365 days a year. Jokes were banned and it was decided that the Club members would laugh without them.

### HOW TO LAUGH WITHOUT JOKES

Most members found it difficult to laugh spontaneously, without a reason for doing so. After much soul searching, I came up with a plan to help people laugh without jokes. I learnt from reading “Emotions and Health”, from Prevention Health Care Series (USA), that pretending to laugh has the same effect. The body doesn’t know the difference between real and make-believe laughter. This surprised me, since I did not know that forcing yourself to laugh without any reason will produce the same physiological and biological changes in the body. Then I wondered if laughter could be a form of exercise. I discussed this with my wife Madhuri, who is a teacher of Yoga and has also been deeply committed to developing the Laughter Clubs.

Next morning, we went to the Laughter Club and told our group that even artificially-induced laughter brings similar health benefits. Most people agreed to start laughing as a form of exercise. When we began to fake laughter, it soon became contagious, passing from one to another. In less than a minute, most of the members started laughing for real. This was the first time I discovered that spontaneous laughter can easily be generated, provided you laugh in a group. You don’t even need jokes to laugh.

Some people, the shy and the introverted, found it difficult to laugh this way. They needed to open up. We came up with an idea of warm-up exercises, such as clapping and chanting *ho ho ha ha ha*. This led to loosened inhibitions, and helped people to laugh easily. *Ho ho ha ha ha* exercise was developed from a dynamic Yoga breathing called *Kapalbhati* where there is a rhythmic movement of the diaphragm, the abdominal muscles with a jerky exhalation. We designed specific breathing, stretching and Laughter Exercises. People loved this concept of laughing and breathing exercises, and we named it as “*Hasya Yoga*” or “Laughter Yoga”. In Sanskrit, *Hasya*, means 'laughter'.

### EYE CONTACT - THE KEY

We also observed that when we look into the eyes of the neighbour and start laughing, the other person also starts laughing. The participants are instructed to look at each others' faces, since everyone has a unique style of laughing, to enhance the stimulus and generate natural laughter.

Within a week, we developed different kinds of Laughter Exercises. One of the most popular was “Lion Laughter”. In this Yogic posture, you stick your tongue out and laugh from the belly. In between Laughing Exercises, you take deep breaths by raising your arms up in the sky. After 15-20 minutes of exercising, the members felt refreshed for the day. Even more people joined the Laughter Club. The news spread all over the country through national newspapers and international televisions including BBC and CNN. The new emphasis on the importance of laughter in our lives is giving rise to Laughter Clubs being developed throughout the world. To date some 5000 such Clubs are bringing laughter to life, to living.





## The Right Time and Place for Laughter Sessions

**W**hat is the right time to hold a Laughter Session? “Can I hold a session in the evenings after I return from work?” “Must I go to a public park for my daily guffaws?” “Can’t I just laugh alone at home?” These are common queries from people who want to be a part of the Laughter Movement. You may laugh at any time of the day, but to laugh in a group in a new Yogic way, you will first have to join a group to gain a feel of the concept. Once you understand the concept and learn the various techniques, then it may be possible to laugh with 2-3 people anywhere, or may be, you can laugh alone at home. But to gain the maximum benefits, you must laugh in a group most of the time, and in between you may try Laughter Exercises with one or two people in a family.

Laughter Yoga has two types of laughter activities. First, Laughter Yoga Exercises, where a group of people laugh, as a form of workout, based on Yoga, and then indulge in playfulness which helps the participants to laugh



spontaneously. This type of laughter practice can be done outdoors in a public park or beach, or indoors. These exercises are done standing and there is a lot of movement, interaction and eye contact during the Session.

The second type of activity is called Laughter Meditation, in which you don’t have to make any effort to laugh. Real laughter which is much deeper and more spontaneous, flows out of your body like a fountain. It is highly contagious and very profound. You will experience laughter coming out of your entire being. Laughter Meditation ideally should be done indoors because it needs silence and concentration. Also, one needs to lie down on the floor with eyes closed, in the second phase of Laughter Meditation. That is why we need to have a nice floor or carpet or mattress on the floor.

However, in many places, some Laughter Leaders tried Laughter Meditation outdoors in parks, sitting very close to each other and then lying down on the grass or beach. Though, they enjoyed the Laughter Meditation the results were not good as indoors, because of distractions and lack of silence. Nevertheless, one must keep fine, even if one gets 70-80% result, it is worth trying.

Ideally, a Laughter Session must take place in the morning, especially in

India, where weather conditions are very favourable for people to take a morning walk. In India, we laugh 365 days in a year and 30 days in a month. Most Laughter Club meets are held in public parks, where people enjoy their walks and have Laughter Sessions also. In Northern India, the attendance becomes thin in winter, but still many who are regular walkers, like to continue their Sessions in winter also. Most Clubs have their Laughter Sessions between 6 am and 7 am in open parks, according to the convenience of the participants. The total duration of deep breathing, laughter and stretching exercises should not exceed 20-30 minutes. Timing can be adjusted by a few minutes, according to the suitability of particular groups and weather conditions, if done in an open place. If certain groups would like to add other exercises, they are welcome to do so, depending upon the agreement by the group members.

Why must one laugh in the morning? There are many reasons for this. It is always better to start the day with laughter. It keeps you in good spirits and in a good mood throughout the day. It energises you and 15-20 minutes of laughter carries its benefits throughout the day, till you retire to bed. Though it is beneficial even if you laugh in the evenings, according to our experience, mornings are ideal. Many women in India are unable to come to morning Laughter Sessions, as they were busy with their household tasks. So they decided to set up Laughter Clubs in the evening. In Mumbai and Bangalore many such Women's Clubs have come up and they are very successful.

Another advantage of morning Laughter Clubs is that walking and Laughter Yoga Sessions are complimentary to each other. Both take place in a public place, and hence it is ideal for walkers to have a Session either at the beginning or at the end of their walks. As a matter of fact, I attribute the success of the Laughter Club Movement to the selection of the right group of people, the morning walkers. They are health-conscious people who can easily form a Laughter Club to add to their health-related activities. For those who come for a walk, laughter is a value addition to their exercise programme. Morning walkers don't have to take special time out for a Laughter Session. They are already in public places. Therefore, by

making laughter a part of their morning walk, they make the Session a part of their routine, without the bother of specially finding a particular time for laughing. Thus, the ritual becomes regular and they get the benefits. Upon waking up in the morning, one's body is stiff. This is the right time to do the stretching exercises. Some Laughter Clubs start with stretching exercises first, while people are still gathering. Most Yoga lovers like to start with Yogic postures at the time of sunrise. So the practice of *Hasya Yoga* or Laughter Yoga is started at about the same time. Pollution is least in the morning in big cities. During a Laughter Session at a public park in the open, you will get the freshest air you are likely to get throughout the day. This is an added benefit you get when laughing in the morning.

In Western countries, Laughter Sessions take place once a week or twice a week. Some groups meet once in a fortnight. Somehow, it is not possible to have Laughter Clubs going everyday. In future, when this concept is introduced in the workplace, there is a possibility of Laughter Sessions being held more often. Most Clubs in Western countries meet indoors, and they spend 1-2 hours laughing, playing, sharing, dancing and meeting each other. These are called Social Laughter Clubs. If Laughter Yoga is to be practised in the evening or during the day, there should be a gap of two hours after meals.

In the workplace, one can practice Laughter Sessions during tea/coffee breaks, lunch breaks, or any time in the afternoon. Health clubs, Yoga groups, Tai-chi groups, aerobic centres, sports groups and meditation centres can add 10-15 minutes of Laughter Yoga as a value addition to their ongoing health building activity. The only precaution is that the Laughter Session should not take place immediately after lunch. There should be a gap of at least two hours after a meal.

## What Happens During a Laughter Session?

**H**ow Laughter Club Members Stand? All the members stand in a circle or semicircle, according to the space available, with the anchor person, in the middle. He or she gives commands to initiate different types of laughter and exercises. The most important point to be noted here is that the members should not stand in a line to form a circle, as seen in military parades. The idea is that one should not feel conscious about breaking the circle or the line. It should be like a crowd format with people standing at random, and we encourage the group members to keep moving and meet different group members, and laugh by having an eye contact. While doing different stretching exercises, the distance between the members should be enough to stretch the arms. While doing Laughter Exercises, the members should move closer and interact with each other.

However, some exercises can be done standing in a circle and holding each other's hands, and arms can be moved up and down, depending on the type of exercise. This is good for creating a sense of closeness or intimacy among the group members. Alternatively, while doing some Laughter Exercises, the participants can stand in two groups facing each other. This format is more interactive and playful, and helps to make the laughter more spontaneous and playful.

Laughter Yoga has two components: a) Laughter Yoga Exercises and b) Laughter Meditation.

### IMPORTANT GUIDELINES FOR LAUGHTER YOGA EXERCISES

1. All the participants will start laughing at the same time, when the anchorperson gives the command *1, 2...start* because, when a group laughs at the same time, the effect is good.
2. Do not apply too much force while laughing. It should be more of a feeling and enjoying of the process.
3. The duration of Laughter Yoga Exercises is usually 20-30 minutes, that includes laughter, breathing and stretching exercises.
4. The Laughter Exercises are suggested guidelines to get started, and it is not mandatory to follow the same sequence of Laughter Exercises every time. A group can develop their own new Laughter Exercise to make the session more interesting and playful. However, the style of clapping, deep breathing and certain value-based and Yogic Laughter Exercises should remain constant.
5. Ideally, a group of 15-20 persons makes a good dynamic for an infectious Laughter Session. More number of people always help to create a better impact, but even 5-10 people can have a good Laughter Session, if they are committed.
6. Each Laughter exercise lasts for 30 to 45 seconds, or a maximum of one minute. After each bout of Laughter or sometimes after two bouts, two deep breaths are taken, in order to provide a break. This avoids exertion and tiredness. Sometimes, various neck, shoulder and arm stretching exercises are done in place of deep breathing, between Laughter Exercises.



Western style greeting laughter : Shake hands look into the eyes of the other person and laugh.

7. Those who suffer from hernia, epilepsy, severe backache, uncontrolled high blood pressure or any other heart and lung condition, where a person is not allowed to exert much, should consult their physician, before doing the Laughter Exercises. Please remember that Laughter Yoga Exercises are like any other aerobic exercises, and all the conditions for fitness apply in the same way as that of aerobic exercises.

A typical Laughter Session is a perfect blend of various laughter techniques, interspersed with breathing, stretching exercises, rhythmic clapping and chanting of *Ho Ho Ha Ha Ha*, in unison. Also, the group members vocalize the positive affirmation like *Very good, Very good, Very good* along with clapping.

A typical Laughter Session can be divided into the following parts:

**a) Rhythmic Clapping:** This should be done with fully stretched arms. It is a warm-up exercise that stimulates acupressure points on the palms, helps to bring about a sense of well-being and builds energy levels.

**b) Ho Ho Ha Ha Chanting:** This is done in unison, along with clapping in a rhythm. It is based on dynamic Yogic breathing techniques, where there is a rhythmic movement of the diaphragm and abdominal muscles.

**c) Gibberish Talking:** Gibberish is a language that has no meaning and makes no sense. This is also a warming up technique, to loosen up inhibitions and facilitate communication and eye contact, between the members.

**d) Deep Breathing:** Slow and rhythmic breathing techniques, with movement of the arms help to bring about both physical and mental relaxation.

**e) Yogic Laughter Techniques** are developed from different Yoga postures for physical well being. For example, Hearty Laughter, Lion Laughter, Humming Laughter, Gradient Laughter etc.

**f) Playful Laughter Techniques:** The purpose is to help people become more playful, so that they can reduce their inhibitions and shyness. Playfulness also helps to convert Stimulated Laughter into Spontaneous Laughter. Some of the examples of playful laughter techniques are: one-meter Laughter, Milkshake Laughter, Argument Laughter, Mobile Phone Laughter, Hot Soup Laughter, Shy Laughter, Swinging Laughter, Dancing Laughter, Spring Doll Laughter and many more.

**g) Value-based Laughter Techniques:** Value-based Laughter Techniques are designed in such a way that we attach a special meaning to certain gestures made while laughing, so that our subconscious minds register its deep values, which helps to develop a positive attitude in daily life. For example, Appreciation Laughter reminds us of how important it is to appreciate others, in order to build a strong and harmonious relationship. Some of the Value-based Laughter Techniques are Greeting Laughter, Appreciation Laughter, Forgiveness Laughter, Shake Hands Laughter, Hugging Laughter, Guru Laughter.

**NECK AND SHOULDER EXERCISES:** Since there is some fatigue after completion of the first round, members need to take a break before starting the second round. Here, neck and shoulder exercises are done. They have been incorporated because cervical spondylosis, neck stiffness and frozen shoulders are common complaints after the age of forty. Some of these exercises are described in the next chapter.





A laughter session (Hearty Laugh) at park in Ahmedabad (Gujarat), India.

**POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS:** In between the Laughter Exercises, the group members clap and say *Very good, Very good*, three times in unison. Saying positive words are the anchors we use during Laughter Sessions, which help to connect particular body actions and words, to the release of positive chemicals in our body. This is a kind of NLP technique.

**HO-HO HA-HA-HA EXERCISE:** The Session starts with a warm up *Ho-Ho Ha-Ha-Ha* exercise. All the members start chanting *Ho-Ho Ha-Ha-Ha* in unison, with rhythmic clapping 1-2, 1-2-3. (*Ho-Ho; Ha-Ha-Ha*). The sound should come from the navel, so as to feel the movement of abdominal muscles, while keeping the mouth half-open. While chanting *Ho-Ho Ha-Ha-Ha*, a smile should be maintained, one should keep moving and meeting different people and maintain good eye contact. Good movement and enthusiastic clapping will help to build up good energy levels (philosophy of motion creates emotion).

**DEEP BREATHING:** The Session starts when one takes a deep breath through the nostrils and simultaneously raises the arms up towards the sky. The breathing-in should be rhythmic, in accordance with the movements of

the arms, and one should keep on filling as much air as possible into the lungs, and then hold one's breath for 4-5 seconds. Then the breath is released slowly and rhythmically, by bringing the stretched arms back to the normal position. One can breathe out through the nose or preferably through the mouth by pursing the lips, as if whistling silently. This is, in accordance with Yogic deep breathing (a type of *Pranayama*) where the duration of exhalation is prolonged to almost double the time of inhalation.

Some anchorpersons have added healing and helping words. For example, while breathing-in, they say "*Forgive*" and they say "*Forget*" while breathing out. Other words that can be used are "*Live*" while breathing-in and "*Let Live*" while breathing out. Some more slogans can be created by Laughter Club members like "*We care*", "*We serve*" etc. Anchorpersons will say these words loudly, while all the members will say them in their minds, during the breathing exercise. This is optional, not mandatory.

**GREETING LAUGHTER:** It is always good to start the Laughter Session with Greeting Laughter as it helps to connect the group through shaking hands and eye contact. This is called Handshake Laughter. One can shake hands and look into the eyes while laughing gently (Western way of greeting). The Indian way of greeting is to join both the hands (*Namaste* Laughter). Alternatively, a group can do the greetings gestures from different cultures and laugh at the same time. There could also be many other ways of greeting, according to the region, state or country. This is followed by *Ho-Ho Ha-Ha-Ha* chanting and clapping 5-6 times and deep breathing twice.

**HEARTY LAUGHTER :** After the *Ho-Ho Ha-Ha-Ha* exercise, the first kind of laughter is Hearty Laughter. To initiate all kinds of laughter, the anchor person gives a command 1,2,3..., and everybody starts laughing at the same time. It builds up a good tempo and the effect is much better than it would be, if different members laugh with different timings. In a hearty laugh, one laughs by throwing the arms up and laughing heartily. One should not keep the arms stretched up all the time during a hearty laugh. Keep the arms up for a while and bring them down and again raise them up. At the end of a hearty laugh, the anchorperson starts clapping and chanting *Ho-Ho Ha-Ha-Ha* 5-6 times. That marks the end of a particular kind of laughter. This is followed by two deep breaths.



Lion laughter is an adaptation of a yogic posture called *Simha mudra*.

**MILK SHAKE LAUGHTER:** Participants are asked to hold two imaginary glasses of milk or coffee and at the instruction of the anchorperson, the milk is poured from one glass into another by chanting *Aeee.....*, and then pouring it back into the first glass by chanting *Aeee...* After that everyone laughs while making a gesture, as if they are drinking milk. This process is repeated four times, followed by clapping while chanting *Ho-Ho, Ha-Ha-Ha*.

**ONE-METER LAUGHTER:** This laughter is very playful and it duplicates how we measure an imaginary one-meter. It is done by moving one hand over the stretched arm on the other side, and extending the shoulder (like stretching to shoot with a bow and arrow). The hand is moved in three jerks by chanting *Ae...., Ae....., Aeee.....* and then participants burst into laughter by stretching both the arms and throwing the head a little backwards and laughing from the belly. (First, the imaginary measurement is done on the left side and then on the right). This cycle is repeated twice. People enjoy the chanting of *Ae... Ae..* in a staccato manner.

**LION LAUGHTER :** This particular laughter has been derived from a Yogic posture known as *Simha Mudra* (Lion Posture). In the Lion Posture, the

tongue is stuck out fully, while keeping the mouth wide open. With eyes wide open, the hands are stretched like the paws of a lion and roaring like a lion is followed by laughter coming from the belly. Lion Laughter gives very good exercise to facial muscles, the tongue and throat. It removes inhibitions and is good for strengthening of the throat. It also improves blood supply to the thyroid gland.

**SILENT LAUGHTER WITH MOUTH WIDE OPEN:** In this type of laughter, the mouth is opened as wide as possible and participants laugh looking at each others' faces, while making different gestures showing their palms to each other, while shaking their heads and sometimes their hands. Silent Laughter should be done with quick movements of the abdominal muscles, as we do during spontaneous laughter. It should not be like a prolonged hissing sound, which is more artificial.

**IMPORTANT :** One should not apply excess force or overexert while laughing without sound. It can be harmful if intra-abdominal pressure is raised unnecessarily. One should try to impart more feeling rather than apply more force.

**HUMMING LAUGHTER WITH LIPS CLOSED:** In this type of laughter, the lips are closed and a person tries to laugh while making a humming sound, which resonates throughout the skull. People can keep on looking at each other, make some gestures to stimulate each other. They can shake hands with each other, or put in any other kind of playfulness. Some people also call it Pigeon Laughter.

**CAUTION:** One should not try to laugh without sound, while keeping the mouth closed with force. This raises undue pressure in the abdominal cavity that may be harmful.

**SWINGING LAUGHTER:** This is an interesting kind of laughter, as it has a lot of playfulness. All the members move outwards by two meters to widen the circle. On instruction from the anchorperson, people move forward by making a prolonged sound of *Ae... Ae... Aeeee.....*, simultaneously raising their hands, they all burst into laughter, while meeting in the centre, and waving their hands. After the bout of laughter, they move back to their original positions. The second time they move forward by

## 15 - Step New Model of a Laughter Yoga Session

**DURATION :** 20 - 30 minutes

**STEP 1:** Clapping in a rhythm 1-2.....1-2-3 along with chanting of Ho-Ho, Ha-Ha-Ha and gibberish talking.

**STEP 2:** Deep breathing with inhalation through the nose and prolonged exhalation. ( 3 - 5 times)

**STEP 3:** **Greeting Laughter** - Joining both the hands and greeting in Indian style (*Namaste*) or shaking hands (Western style) with at least 4-5 people in the group.

**STEP 4:** **Hearty Laughter** - Laughter by raising both the arms in the sky with the head tilted a little backwards. Feel as if Laughter is coming right from your heart.

**STEP 5:** **One-Meter Laughter:** Move one hand over the stretched arm of the other side and extend the shoulder (like stretching to shoot with a bow and arrow). The hand is moved in three jerks by chanting Ae...., Ae...., Ae... and then participants burst into Laughter by stretching both the arms and throwing their heads a little backwards and laughing from the belly. (Repeat 4 times).

**Milkshake Laughter (a variation):** Hold two imaginary glasses of milk or coffee and at the instruction of the anchor person pour the milk from one glass into the other by chanting Ae... and then pour it back into the first glass by chanting Ae... After that everyone laughs, while making a gesture as if they are drinking milk. (Repeat 4 times).

**STEP 6:** **Cell Phone Laughter:** Hold an imaginary mobile phone and try to laugh, making different gestures and moving around in the group to meet different people.

**STEP 7:** **Lion Laughter** - Extrude the tongue fully with eyes wide open and hands stretched out like the claws of a lion and laugh from the tummy.

**STEP 8:** **Silent Laughter without sound** : Open your mouth wide and laugh without making any sound and look into each others' eyes and make some funny gestures.

**STEP 9:** **Humming Laughter with mouth closed** : Laughter with closed mouth and a humming sound. While humming keep on moving in the group and shaking hands with different people.

**STEP 10 :** **Argument Laughter:** Laugh by pointing fingers at different group members as if arguing.

**STEP 11 :** **Appreciation Laughter** - Join your pointing finger with the thumb to make a small circle while making gestures as if you are appreciating your group members and laughing simultaneously.

**STEP 12:** **Forgiveness/Apology Laughter:** Immediately after Argument Laughter catch both your ear lobes and laugh while shaking your head (Indian style) or raise both your palms and laugh as if saying sorry.

**STEP 13:** **Gradient Laughter:** Gradient Laughter starts with bringing a smile on the face, slowly gentle giggles are added and the intensity of Laughter is increased further. Then the members gradually burst into hearty Laughter and slowly and gradually bring the Laughter down and stop.

**STEP 14:** **Heart to Heart Laughter (Intimacy Laughter):** Come closer and hold each others hands and laugh. One can shake hands or hug each other, whichever feels comfortable.

**STEP 15:** **Shouting 3 Slogans:**  
The Closing Technique is to shout 3 slogans:  
"We are the happiest person in this World" Y.....E.....S  
"We are the healthiest person in this World" Y.....E.....S  
"We are Laughter Club member " Y.....E.....S

**Most Important:** In the end, all the members should stand with their eyes closed for one minute with their arms spread upwards, hoping for world peace.





Laughter Yoga Session at Zurich, Switzerland

saying *Oh... Oooooooo..* and burst into laughter. Similarly, the third and fourth times they make the sounds of *Eh... Eh... E....* and *Oh... Oh... O...* Many people are seen behaving like children and enjoying the fun.

**CELL PHONE LAUGHTER:** This is also known as Mobile Phone Laughter. It is very amusing and playful. The participants hold imaginary mobile phones and try to laugh, while making different gestures and moving around in the group, to meet different people, and laugh as if they are enjoying the laughter. Mobile Phone Laughter can also be done in two groups facing each other, and at the command of the anchorperson both the groups cross each other, while laughing and holding their mobile phones. If required, the two groups can cross over again, to come back to their original positions. While crossing, the members must look at each other and laugh.

**ARGUMENT LAUGHTER:** This laughter is a competitive kind of laughter between two groups separated by a gap. Two groups look at each other and start laughing by pointing their index fingers at the members of the other group. Usually, the women are on one side and men on the other. This is also quite enjoyable and amusing.

**APPRECIATION LAUGHTER:** This is a value-based laughter where the anchorperson reminds the participants of how important it is to appreciate others. In this kind of laughter, the tip of the index finger is joined with the tip of the thumb, making a small circle, while the hand is moved forward and backward in jerks, looking at different members and laughing in a very gentle manner, as if you are appreciating your fellow beings in the group. It is followed by *Ho Ho Ha Ha Ha* chanting along with clapping.

**FORGIVENESS/APOLOGY LAUGHTER:** Immediately after Argument Laughter is the time for Forgiveness Laughter; the message behind this laughter is that if you fight with somebody you must apologise. How important it is to say sorry. In Apology Laughter, participants hold both their ears lobes, by crossing the arms and they then bend at the knee and laugh.

**GRADIENT LAUGHTER:** This laughter is practised at the end of the session. All the members are asked to come closer to the anchorperson. Gradient Laughter starts with bringing smiles on faces and looking around at each other. Slowly, gentle giggles are added by the anchorperson. Others follow and start giggling too. Slowly and gradually the intensity of laughter is increased further and then, the members gradually burst into hearty laughter. This goes on for about a minute. It is very refreshing and infectious.

**HEART TO HEART LAUGHTER (INTIMACY LAUGHTER):** This laughter should be done last of all, and here the participants come closer and hold each others' hands and laugh with compassionate eye contact. They can shake hands or hug each other while laughing if they find it appropriate. This is also known as Intimacy Laughter. In conservative communities, ladies and gents can do this in separate groups.

**CLOSING TECHNIQUE (AFFIRMATIONS AND PRAYER FOR WORLD PEACE):** At the end of the Session, three slogans are shouted. The anchorperson delivers the first punchline by saying "*We are the happiest people in the world*". Everyone raises their arms and says. *Y-e-ee-s*. "*We are the healthiest people in the world!*" *Y-e-s*. "*We are Laughter Club members!*" *Y-e-e-s*. After the slogans, all the members stretch their arms out towards the sky and





Laughter Yoga Session in Melbourne, Australia

close their eyes to pray for world peace. The standing in silence should last for 30 seconds to one minute.

**LAUGHTER MEDITATION:** After Laughter Yoga exercises, the second part is known as Laughter Meditation. In Laughter Yoga exercises we make an effort to laugh in a group, which soon becomes infectious. In Laughter Meditation one doesn't have to make an effort to laugh, but laughter flows out like a fountain without any reason, much more spontaneous and deeper. To reach the meditative stage of laughter here are some of the basic guidelines:

1. In the first stage of Laughter Meditation, the members are required to sit on the floor in such a way that people can see each other without anybody obstructing the view.
2. The most important instruction is nobody should talk or distract during Laughter Meditation, because talking and any kind of disturbance will keep the conscious mind active and one can't experience infectious laughter coming from the subconscious mind.

3. Sit in silence with eyes closed and keep the awareness on the breath. After the silence, open the eyes and sit in a relaxed position (not in a meditative posture like in traditional meditation).

4. We initiate the Laughter Meditation by simulating laughter in a slow and gradual manner as we do in Gradient Laughter. The philosophy is *"fake it until you make it"*. Very soon the Genuine Laughter will start coming up from one person to another. After 10 minutes under the guidance of the group leader, the group should sit again in silence for about five minutes, and keep the awareness on observing the breath and feel the relaxation in the different parts of the body.

5. In the second part of Laughter Meditation, lie down on the floor and keep the eyes closed for few minutes and initiate the laughter until it becomes contagious. This Session lasts for about 10 minutes and is followed by silence. One can learn Laughter Meditation during our seminars and workshops.



**Laugh Like a Spanish Dancer**





Every morning 5000 groups all over India meet in public parks to practice Laughter Yoga in a group. They combine Laughter exercises with Yoga breathing.



Greeting Laughter (Namaste Laughter):  
Join your hands and look into each other's eyes and laugh gently.





**Hearty Laughter:** Spread your arms up in the air with the chin raised up, and feel as if Laughter is coming right from your heart.



**Mobile Laughter:** Hold an imaginary mobile phone against your ear and laugh while interacting with other members of the group.



**One-meter Laugh:** Measure an imaginary one meter by stretching one arm over the other and chant Aee.....Aee.....Aee.....Ha Ha Ha...Ha Ha Ha.



**Guru Laughter:** Put one hand over your head and say, "I learn from my mistakes Ha... Ha... Ha..." Put the second hand over your head and say, "I learn from others' mistakes Ha... Ha... Ha..."





Milkshake Laughter: Hold two imaginary glasses of milk and mix them by saying  
Aee....Aeee.....Ah...ha...ha...



Hot Soup Laughter: Move your hands up and down as if you have had very hot  
and spicy soup and say Hee...Hee..Hee.



Gradient Laughter: Laugh slowly and gradually, start with a smile and then a little giggling,  
then chukling until you are laughing loud and heartily.



Shy Laughter: Hide your face behind your palms and look left and right towards  
various group members and laugh as if you are a shy person.





Rowing the Boat Laughter in Helsinki, Finland.



Lion Laughter: Stick your tongue out fully, pose your hand like paws of the lion.  
First roar like a lion and then laugh.

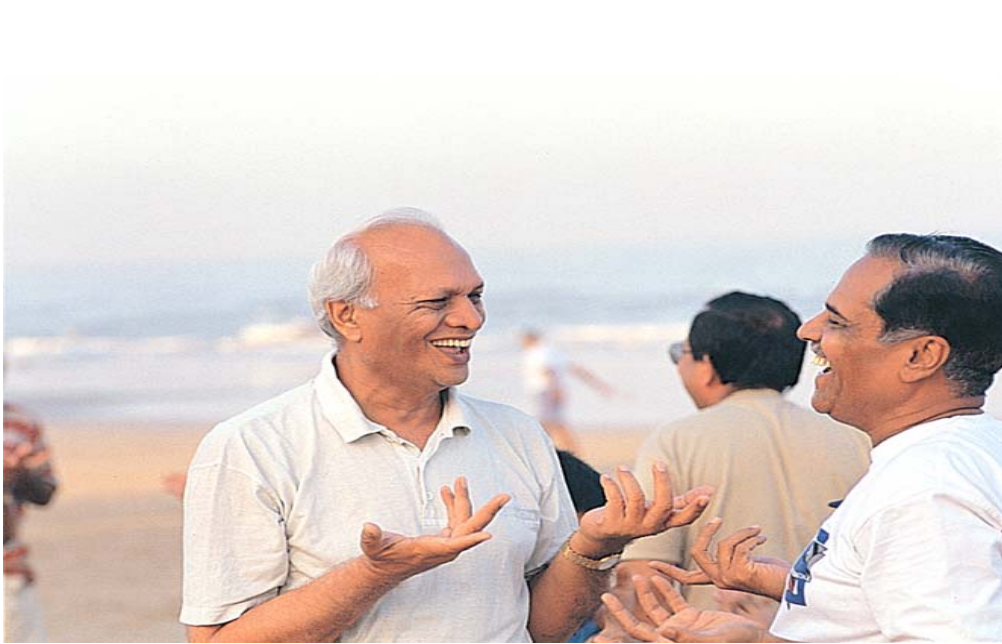


Participants of Teacher's Training programme at Interlaken, Switzerland.



Argument Laughter: Look at each other and wag your finger as if you are arguing and laughing. This exercise can be done in two big groups, facing each other.





Just Laugh: Somebody asked why are you laughing? We are just laughing for nothing said the Laughter Club member.



Take a deep breath while stretching your arms up in the sky, hold the breath for 3-5 seconds and release. Repeat five times.



Laughter Meditation: When you don't have to make any effort to laugh and laughter flows out of your body like a fountain. This is much more profound and deeper laughter.



Shoulder Exercise: Put your fingers on both your shoulders and try to draw an "O" with your elbows. There are some neck stretching exercises also in Laughter Clubs.





Prisoners laughing their anger out, at a Mumbai prison.



Members of a senior citizens' home participating in a Laughter Session in Philadelphia, USA



Dr. Kataria teaching policemen how to laugh their stress away.



Special children enjoying a laughter session in Perth, Australia.





A Laughter Session among school children in India.



A Laughing Session with blind school girls.



Dr. Kataria laughing with a group of orphans in Chennai, South India.

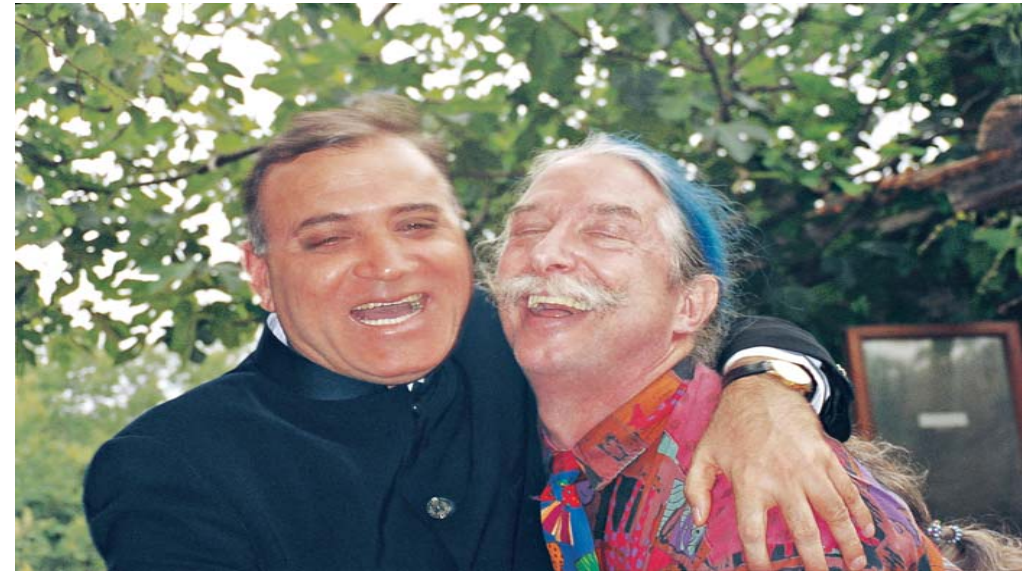


A Laughing Session at the National Association for the Blind in Mumbai, India.





Laughter Yoga session with physically challenged (deaf and mute) children in India.



Two Laughter Doctors meet in Italy: Dr. Kataria and Dr. Patch Adams.



Laughter Yoga Session among Prisoners in Udaipur, India.



Dr. Kataria with Dr. Lee S Berk and Dr Fujimoto, at Loma Linda University, USA.

## Stretching Exercises in Laughter Clubs

**M**ost people living in cities lead sedentary lives. They use vehicles even for short distances. Sometimes, I wonder, when I see people waiting for more than five minutes for the elevator, to go even to the first or second floors of a building. All this shows a lack of inclination to do exercise. This makes it difficult to stick to an exercise programme, because one gets bored after sometime, and abandons it. Being a physician, I treat a large number of patients for aches and pains, cervical spondylitis, backache and stiffness of joints, with a variety of pain-killers. I am sure, all these problems can be solved with regular exercise. I, myself, belong to an agricultural family. During my childhood, in the countryside, I saw people working day and night, walking long distances in the fields. Rarely did they complain of aches and pains. They ate a lot of saturated fats, milk and milk products, yet, the incidence of hypertension and coronary artery disease was very low. My grandmother must have swallowed tons of oil and she died at the age of 104. I

believe, they could maintain good health because of plenty of exercise that was a part of their routine.

The introduction of exercises (these are described in some detail, a little later) and deep breathing in between the different kinds of laughter had the desired effect. A small percentage of people who had stiff necks and frozen shoulders, got rid of their painkillers. Some go to the extent of saying that the exercises have benefited them even more than laughter. And I have not heard anyone complaining of boredom, presumably because of the preceding or succeeding laughter.

### WALKING AND LAUGHING

Some have remarked that most Laughter Clubs seem to be located at places frequented by morning walkers. This is true. When I thought of starting Laughter Clubs, I could not think of a better place than a public park, where people go for a morning walk.

I thought morning walkers, being health-conscious, would listen to anything conducive to good health. These are the people who are there every-day. One does not have to call them specifically for a laugh. Looking back, it seems to me that selection of public parks for starting Laughter Clubs was appropriate, and contributed substantially to the success of the Laughter Movement. If, in the formative days of Laughter Clubs, I had to invite people specifically for a Laughter Session, I am not too sure if many would have turned up regularly. Morning walkers were already enjoying the benefits of their walks and they didn't mind experimenting with laughter. It was like a value addition to their morning walks. Walk and laugh, laugh and walk turned out to be a perfect combination. With the introduction of Laughter Clubs, those who were not so regular, started walking, without missing a single day. And, those who come merely for laughter, by and large, could not resist the combination.

### EXERCISING FACIAL MUSCLES

There are very few exercises designed for facial muscles. Due to constant frowning, the skin develops wrinkles. Different types of laughter help to tone up the facial muscles. Laughter also improves the blood



supply to the facial skin and brings a glow to it. Stretching of facial muscles contracts tear sacs to pour tears into the eyes, which form a thin film and reflection of light in this film results in a shining spot in the eyes.

### **OTHER EXERCISES**

After the Laughter Session is over, many groups do different types of other stretching exercises, and Yogic deep breathing. Laughter Groups have become very active and they have started organizing Yoga camps, meditation courses, health talks and acupressure training classes. All this has happened because they are able to share a common platform - the Laughter Club.

### **NECK EXERCISES**

Today, neck pain is a very common complaint. Because of stress, bad posture, soft beds, or too many pillows, the muscles around the neck and shoulder go into spasm. Yoga gives a lot of importance to neck exercises, because all the major nerves and the spinal cord pass through the neck and control the whole body. Major blood vessels also pass through the neck and supply blood to the brain, which is the most important organ of the body.

Thus, the neck is like a bridge between the brain and the body. Everyday, in between various kinds of laughter, the following neck exercises are done. By moving the neck towards right and left, a pleasurable stretch is maintained for at least a few seconds. The neck is moved first from left to right and then up and down. People suffering from cervical spondylosis should not move the chin downwards. Instead, they should move up and then come to normal position. Lastly, the neck is rotated in a full circle, first from the left side and then from the right side.

**CAUTION:** Elderly people who feel giddy and uncomfortable while doing neck exercises, must refrain from these exercises and get themselves investigated by a qualified physician. Scores of people suffering from cervical spondylosis and neck pain have benefited from this exercise, as they are able to maintain regularity, because they exercise in a group.

### **SHOULDER EXERCISE**

Place your fingertips on both shoulders and point both the elbows straight and move them slowly in a circle, backwards to forwards (anti-clockwise) five times and in reverse order (clockwise) five times. This exercise will ensure smooth movement of the shoulder joints. Due to a sedentary lifestyle, stress or diabetes, after a certain age, people are prone to developing frozen shoulders. This exercise has both preventive and curative properties against frozen shoulder.

### **STRETCHING EXERCISES**

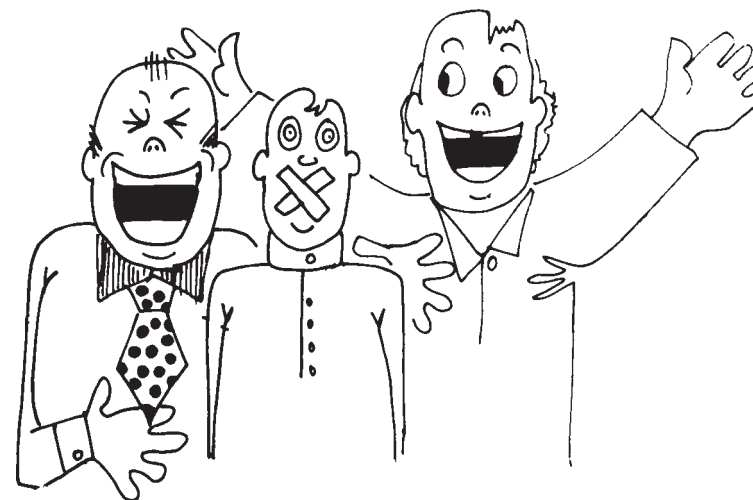
Cross the fingers of both hands, bend a little from your waist, lift both hands while taking a long deep breath, stretch both the arms above your head, reverse the palms, stretch your full body and bend a little backwards. This stretching exercise prevents stiffness of the body. It stretches the muscles of the front portion of your body, keeps the spinal cord straight, and relaxes the muscles of the entire back portion of the body. It can be repeated 2-3 times. The above three exercises are standard for every Laughter Club. There are a few optional exercises from among which, time permitting, a Club can choose.

### **DURATION**

The exercises during each Laughter Session can be introduced in between different types of stimulated laughter techniques. Exercises can be done at the beginning of the Laughter Session, while members are gathering, or in-between various kinds of Laughter, to take a break, or in the middle of the Session, as per the convenience of each particular group.

## For Who is Laughter Yoga Exercises Unsuitable?

**E**ver since the inception of Laughter Clubs, there have been some people intrigued by the idea, but with a shade of doubt, about its side (or ill) effects. This is especially so, among cardiac patients, and those who have undergone bypass surgery. Fortunately, there has not been even a single untoward incident in the history of the Laughter Movement. But, being a medical person, I am aware of the fact that people are instructed to force themselves to laugh, and stimulate others to laugh. This involves some physical strain, and a rise in intra-abdominal pressure. Some people, in order to get more benefits, become over enthusiastic and do forceful laughter by over-straining themselves. There are others who might have silent ailments with no obvious symptoms. In order to work out the various possibilities of side effects which might occur, I held discussions with a number of medical experts from various medical and surgical specialities. Thereafter, a list of ailments was worked out, and patients with these ailments were advised caution and medical advice, prior to joining a Laughter Session.



### HERNIA

Hernia is a protusion of abdominal contents - various parts of the intestine, usually the small intestine - through the weakened wall of abdominal muscles. In those who have undergone any abdominal surgery, the site of the incision becomes the weakest point. With a repeated increase in intra-abdominal pressure, one might get an incisional hernia. Another common type of hernia occurs at the groin. The abdominal contents can protrude through the inguinal canal, and produce a swelling in the groin area, while coughing, sneezing or laughing. Elderly people are more prone to this condition, because of muscles weakened by advancing age. Those suffering from long-standing cough due to asthma or chronic bronchitis, should be extra careful, because they are more prone to develop hernia. People with an enlarged prostate, who have to strain a lot while passing urine, and those with chronic constipation, are also susceptible to hernia.

The abdominal contents can also get pushed into the scrotal sac, and cause swelling of the scrotum. This is also a variety of inguinal hernia, known as indirect inguinal hernia. Another common site of hernia is at the umbilicus (navel). Some people do get a small umbilical hernia during childhood, which progresses later on, and becomes bigger. If someone



gets a swelling on any part of the abdomen, or discomfort while laughing, they must get themselves examined by a general surgeon. The more susceptible people are those who have a chronic cough, an enlarged prostate, or chronic constipation.

If you have a hernia on one side, there is a possibility of developing it on the other side too. The best option is to have a periodic examination, and not to apply undue force while laughing. At the same time, there is no need to be extra cautious or fearful about developing hernia. There are, in fact, more chances of developing hernia with coughing, sneezing and forceful expulsion in a constipated person, than with laughter. I have not come across persons who are enthusiastic laughers, having developed hernia. If diagnosed to be suffering from hernia, once surgical correction is done, the person should be assessed by a surgeon, for fitness, before attending Laughter Yoga Sessions.

### **ADVANCED PILES (HAEMORRHOIDS)**

Those suffering from piles with active bleeding, or those at a stage when piles protrude from the anus, should not join the Laughter Session, as these conditions may worsen, with increase of intra-abdominal pressure. The patient may join a Laughter Club once surgical or other type of treatment is done.

### **HEART DISEASES WITH CHEST PAIN**

People suffering from anginal chest pain should not join Laughter Sessions, without consulting their physicians, or preferably a cardiologist. However, heart patients who are doing well on medication, and those who have had heart attacks in the past, and record a Stress Test (Treadmill Test) within normal limits, can join the Sessions, without any problem. Even those patients who have undergone bypass surgery, can participate in Laughter if their Treadmill Test results are fine. In a nutshell, if you are allowed to take a basic walk for 45 minutes, you can definitely join a Laughter Session. Avoid Laughter Therapy for at least three months after a heart attack or coronary artery bypass surgery.

### **EPILEPSY**

Anyone suffering from any kind of epilepsy should refrain from Laughter Exercises and Meditation, as it can precipitate an attack.

### **SEVERE BACKACHE**

If someone has prolapsed inter-vertebral disc (slipped disc), one should not do laughter and other exercises, unless advised by their physician. With bad disc, forward and backward bending can aggravate the symptoms of slip disc.

### **RECENT SURGERY**

To be on the safe side, one should not join a Laughter Session, within three months of any major operation, especially on the abdomen. In the latter case, one must get a go-ahead from one's surgeon.

### **UTEROVAGINAL PROLAPSE**

In some women, ligaments supporting the uterus become weak after the age of 40. Downward sagging of the uterus occurs, causing discomfort in the lower abdomen. One of the signs of such prolapse is involuntary passage of urine while coughing, sneezing or laughing. Such women should avoid Laughter Sessions until they are treated surgically.

### **PREGNANCY**

In a small percentage of pregnant women, there is a possibility of abortion if there is a repeated rise in intra-abdominal pressure and they should avoid Laughter Sessions, till some conclusive data is available, after conducting research on the effects of laughter on pregnancy.

### **ATTACKS OF COLD AND FLU**

Acute viral infections are highly contagious and if a person with such an infection laughs, he is likely to spread the infection by way of droplets in the air. People should stay away for about a week, once they catch a cold. The good news is that regular Laughter Therapy increases the resistance of the upper respiratory mucous membrane and people are getting fewer coughs and colds, as shown by a recent survey done in the first phase of clinical research on Laughter Clubs.

## **RULING OUT TUBERCULOSIS**

Tuberculosis is rampant in India and there is a possibility of spraying out bacteria while laughing, in open cases of tuberculosis. Through the anchorpersons, a vigil is kept on participants who have a cough for more than 10 days. In such cases, a chest X-ray, sputum and bloods tests are recommended to rule out the possibility of tuberculosis. Fortunately, there has not been even a single case of tuberculosis among more than 20,000 Laughter Club members all over the country. But we can't take this for granted and proper medical supervision is a must. Keeping a handkerchief or tissue handy, is highly recommended, for those who are prone to getting phlegm while laughing, especially those with chronic bronchitis, smokers or asthmatics.

## **EYE COMPLICATIONS**

Any person with high intra-ocular pressure (glaucoma) or with a history of retinal or vitreous hemorrhage should take the opinion of an ophthalmologist, before joining a Laughter Club.

## **ANY OTHER DISCOMFORT**

If members, who do not have any ailment, experience discomfort during a Laughter Session, they should discontinue their attendance, and consult a doctor. If there is no problem, probably there is something wrong with the Laughter's technique. We are holding regular anchorperson-training programmes, to improve the techniques of Laughter Yoga exercises.

## **CONCLUSION**

All the don'ts stated above should not scare a person away, and deprive him/her of the beneficial effects of this wonderful nature cure. Caution should be observed against any untoward effects of laughter. We are setting questionnaires for all Laughter Club members, to gather vital information about the physical health of the participants and screen vulnerable groups. We are also making periodical announcements and sending circulars to make people aware of various precautions that they must take while participating in Laughter Yoga Session.

## Health Benefits of Laughter Yoga

**I**t is more than ten years now, since the first 'Laughter Club' was set up. There is a growing demand for opening such Clubs at many more places in India and abroad. Almost everyday, more and more people are joining Laughter Clubs and are being benefited. One of the reasons for these benefits is, of course, that laughter puts the members in a positive frame of mind, and gradually makes them positive thinkers.

People suffering from a variety of stress-related diseases have benefited in some way or the other. But we don't claim that long-standing ailments have been cured by Laughter Yoga, unless we have scientific studies to prove the benefits on different ailments. Laughter Yoga is more of a supplementary and preventive exercise. We are starting clinical research on it very soon. It will take a couple of years before we are in a position to publish some very authentic research data on Laughter Yoga. The research on Laughter Yoga methods, has already indicated positive results at the University of Graz, in Austria.



Dr. Kataria sharing a laugh with a child in a hospital in Perth, Australia.

In order to get multi-fold health benefits of laughter, one can't depend upon the spontaneous laughter, which arises during the course of the day, in our daily life, because it comes in for a few seconds, here and there. To produce the significant physiological and biochemical changes, the laughter has to be frequent, for at least 10-15 minutes in a day. That is why Laughter Yoga Exercises are so important to bring measurable physiological changes like oxygen levels in the blood, muscle relaxation, blood circulation and release of certain hormones in the body. It really does not matter whether laughter comes from the humor in the mind, or playfulness in the body, the health benefits are the same. Laughter Yoga is a complete package for physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being of an individual. It has all the elements of a perfect health building activity.

### ANTI-STRESS

Laughter is one of the finest, most economical and easy-to-practice anti-stress measures. Laughter is one of the best muscle-relaxants. Laughter expands blood vessels, and sends more blood to the extremities and other

muscles all over the body. A good bout of laughter also reduces the levels of stress hormones epineprine and cortisol. It can be said to be a form of dynamic meditation or relaxation.

For meditation, one has to put in concerted effort to completely detach oneself, on mental and emotional levels, from one's own feelings and thought processes, as well as from the physical world, to prevent distractions. On the other hand, while laughing, we do not have any conscious thought process, and all our senses naturally and effortlessly combine in a moment of harmony, to give joy, peace and relaxation. In other types of meditation, you need to concentrate a lot, to take your mind away from distracting thoughts, which is easier said than done. Therefore, laughter is, if I may say so, the easiest form of meditation, and one that brings you instant relaxation.

### **STRENGTHENS THE IMMUNE SYSTEM**

The immune system plays a very important role in maintaining good health and keeping away infections, allergies and cancers. It has been proved by psycho-neuro-immunologists that all negative emotions like anxiety, depression or anger weaken the immune system of the body, thereby reducing its fighting capacity, against infections. According to Dr. Lee S. Berk of Loma Linda University, California, USA, laughter helps to increase the count of Natural Killer cells (NK cells - a type of white cell), and also raises the antibody levels. Researchers have found that after Laughter Therapy, there is an increase in antibodies (Immunoglobulin A) in the mucous of the nose and respiratory passages, which is believed to have a protective capacity against some viruses, bacteria and other microorganisms. There are many members of Laughter Clubs, who have noticed that the frequency of common colds, sore throat and chest infections, has decreased. The effect of laughter on the immune system is considered to be very significant, with regard to deadly diseases like AIDS and cancer.

### **DEPRESSION, ANXIETY AND PSYCHOSOMATIC DISORDERS**

The stress and strain of modern life are taking a heavy toll of the human mind and body. Mind-related diseases like anxiety, depression, nervous



Lion laughter in the Dubai desert: Dr. Kataria with Ram, Gautam and family.

breakdowns and sleeplessness are on the rise. Laughter has benefited many people who were on heavy anti-depressant pills and tranquilizers. With Laughter Therapy, they are now getting better sleep, and their depression has reduced. People with suicidal tendencies have started living life, with more hope.

### **HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE AND HEART DISEASE**

There are a number of causes for high blood pressure and heart disease, like heredity, obesity, smoking and excessive intake of saturated fats. But stress is one of the major factors. Laughter definitely helps to control blood pressure, by reducing the release of stress-related hormones and bringing relaxation.

In experiments, it has been proved that there is a drop of 10-20 mm Hg (or torr) pressure after participating for 10 minutes in a Laughter Session. It does not mean that those who are taking 2-3 tablets for blood pressure everyday, will be completely cured. Maybe, you will require 2 tablets if you are taking 3, or borderline high blood pressure patients may not require any medication after some time. It takes years to develop high blood



pressure. It cannot be reversed in a few days or a month. But definitely, laughter will exercise some control, and arrest further progress of the disease. Similarly, if you are at high risk of developing heart disease, laughter could be the best preventive medicine. Those who are suffering from heart disease and have stabilized on medication will find that laughter improves the blood circulation and oxygen supply to the heart muscles. Due to improvement of blood circulation there are less chances of forming a clot. Those who have had heart attacks or have undergone bypass surgery can also participate in a Laughter Club's Laughter Therapy.

### **NATURAL PAIN KILLER**

Laughter increases the levels of endorphins in our bodies, which are natural painkillers. Norman Cousins, an American journalist, who was suffering from an incurable disease of the spine was benefited by Laughter Therapy, when no painkiller could help him. Endorphins, released as a result of laughter, may help in reducing the intensity of the pain, in those suffering from arthritis, spondylitis and muscular spasms of the body. Many women have reported a reduced frequency of migraine headaches.

### **BRONCHITIS AND ASTHMA**

Laughter is one of the best exercises for those suffering from asthma and bronchitis. It improves the lung capacity and oxygen levels in the blood. Doctors recommend chest physiotherapy, to bring out mucous (phlegm) from the respiratory passages. Blowing forcefully into an instrument and blowing balloons is one of the common exercises given to asthmatics. Laughter does the same job, more easily and almost free of cost. There are many individuals suffering from asthma and bronchitis who are members of Laughter Clubs. They have reported a reduced frequency of their attacks. Laughter Therapy may cause some discomfort if you have severe broncho-spasm. A small percentage of asthma patients may get a little aggravation by doing any exercise (exercise-induced asthma). Such individuals should consult their doctors before taking up Laughter Therapy. One of the most common causes for frequent attacks of asthma is infection. Laughter Therapy increases the antibody levels in the mucous membranes of the respiratory passages, thereby reducing the frequency of chest



Laughter Club of Ghatkopar (E) in Mumbai, India.

infections. It also tones up the normal mucous clearing system of the bronchial tubes. Stress is another factor, which can bring on an attack of asthma. By reducing stress, laughter can improve the prognosis of the disease.

### **CANCER AND OTHER CHRONIC ILLNESSES**

Those suffering from cancer and long-term chronic illnesses, have both organic disease, as well as psychological element, which determine the progress of the disease and relapses. It has been found, that if a person has a positive mental attitude, it greatly influences the course of the disease, by altering the immune system, as well as other biochemical changes in the world. We have had many members suffering from cancer, immune disorders, multiple sclerosis and other chronic diseases who reported relief from their symptoms, thereby reducing the requirement of the drugs they were taking. In the past, inspired by the research on laughter, many cancer patients tried to use humor in order to laugh. During my discussions with many laughter leaders who work with cancer groups, I was told that sometimes it is so hard to use humor and find something funny,

when one has a disease like cancer. This is where Laughter Yoga has an advantage over humor-based laughter. Since Laughter Yoga is a physical method, it is ideally suited for cancer groups who can practice laughter as a form of exercise, to get benefits. We tried Laughter Yoga method with people suffering from multiple sclerosis, with excellent results in UK. Similarly, this method is also ideal for older people, to get the benefit of health, from laughter, because due to senile dementia and Alzheimer's Disease, their cognitive abilities are not optimal to understand mental part of humor.

### **LAUGHTER YOGA AS CATHARSIS**

Laughter not only works at the physical level, but it is a very good psychological release for pent up emotions. On one side, it releases the physical tensions and relaxes the body, and, on the other, it helps people to release their negative emotions. With our experience in Laughter Clubs, we have found that after Laughter Yoga exercises and meditation, some people start crying, to release their sadness, while others laugh out their aggression and anger. The most common problem is that many people are not able to express their emotions, and they keep it suppressed. It is not easy to express emotions, as other people might react adversely to them. Laughter Yoga is a harmless way of releasing the negative emotions.

### **BEST AEROBIC EXERCISE**

The one benefit almost everybody derives is a sense of well-being. After 15 minutes of laughter in the morning, they feel fresh throughout the day. There is no medicine like laughter, which gives you such an instant result. The reason for the sense of well-being is that you inhale more oxygen while laughing. Laughter can be compared to any aerobic exercises, except that you don't have to wear fancy shoes or clothes. You don't need to sweat hard on the jogging tracks. According to Dr. William Fry of Stanford University, one minute of laughter is equal to 10 minutes on the rowing machine. In other words, laughter stimulates heart and blood circulation, and is equivalent to any other standard aerobic exercise. Laughter Exercise is suited to sedentary people, and those who are confined to bed or wheelchair.

### **IMPROVES STAMINA IN ATHLETES**

Since breathing capacity is one of the factors which determines stamina in sports, laughter before any competitive sports activity, will increase the relaxation levels, and hence, Performance. Laughter, I think, can be beneficially introduced as a regular exercise in any kind of sports activity.

### **INTERNAL JOGGING**

There are plenty of exercises available for your muscles, but laughing provides a good massage to all internal organs. It enhances their blood supply and increases their efficiency. It has been compared to magic fingers, which reach into the interior of the abdomen and massage the organs. The best massage it gives, is to the intestines. It improves the blood supply, and helps the bowels to move properly.

### **GOOD FOR ACTORS AND SINGERS**

Laughter Therapy can be very beneficial for singers and actors. Increased lung capacity and exercise of the diaphragm and abdominal muscles, will help to gain better control over speech. Another benefit would be, enhanced self-confidence and reduced stage fright, due to an increase in the body's relaxation level, which results from laughter.

### **MAKES YOU LOOK YOUNGER**

People do exercise for all the muscles of the body, but there is no regular exercise designed for facial muscles except in Yoga. Laughter is an excellent exercise for your facial muscles. It tones up the muscles of the face and improves facial expressions. When you laugh, your face becomes red, due to an increase in blood supply, which nourishes the facial skin and makes it glow. Laughing people look more cheerful and attractive. By squeezing the tear glands through laughter, it moistens the eyes, adding a little sparkle to them. Laughter exercises the abdominal muscles and helps to improve muscle tone of those with potbellies.

### **INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Laughter brings people together and improves interpersonal relationships. All the members of a Laughter Club meet each other with open

minds and they care for each other. You will get a chance to interact with a number of people with a positive frame of mind. Today, members of different Laughter Clubs are like family members. They know each other well; they share their grief and sorrow. They share their joyful moments too, by meeting each other, going out on picnics etc. They organize health workshops, Yoga camps and naturopathy seminars from time to time. People from various walks of life come together and greet each other with smiling faces.

### **SELF CONFIDENCE THROUGH LAUGHTER**

When you are laughing in a group, at a public place, with your arms up towards the sky, it removes your inhibitions and, over a period of time, you become a more sociable, unreserved and outgoing person. Admittedly, some people are initially a bit reluctant to join the Laughter group, in spite of a strong inclination towards doing so, for fear of appearing absurd to onlookers. However, this is a passing phase, and the very decision to join a Laughter Club, opens your mind. Gradually, it also adds to your self-confidence. It will also help to develop your personality and leadership qualities.

### **UNFOLDING INFINITE POTENTIAL THROUGH LAUGHTER**

The human brain has a left and a right hemisphere. The left side of the brain is analytical, logical, calculative and concerned with learning skills. The capacity of the left side is limited. You can't learn beyond a certain limit. The right side of the brain is concerned with intuition, imagination, inventions, music, art, creativity, meditation and healing. The power of the right side of the brain is unlimited. One of the easiest ways to stimulate the right side of the brain is by playfulness. By being playful, one can become more creative and imaginative. It will unfold the unlimited potential of our being, but the problem with most of us, is that we can't be playful all the time, or with everybody. A Laughter Club is an ideal platform that gives an opportunity to be playful in a group, without a feeling of embarrassment.

### **SOCIAL BENEFITS OF LAUGHTER**

Ongoing research shows that people suffering from depression are more prone to many illnesses like high blood pressure, heart disease and cancer. Depression also affects the immune system adversely. Common causes of depression are social isolation and a diminishing family value system. These are more pronounced in Western countries, but are now slowly affecting the East also. Laughter Clubs have helped many people get rid of their anti-depressant pills, in a short period of time. The magic that has worked wonders, is the friendship and brotherhood gained from Laughter Clubs. Laughter Clubs are fast developing into close-knit communities. With the spread of Laughter Clubs in every locality, each Club has taken the shape of a small community, wherein its members experience a sense of affiliation and belonging, to the group. Laughter Clubs are turning into large "Laughing Families".



**Laugh Like a Roman Emperor**



# Global Laughter Yoga Movement: The Happy-demic Spreads

From just five persons in March 1995, Laughter Clubs have spread all over the world like a *happy-demic* (the word coined by my friend Dr. Dale Anderson from Minnesota, USA). At present, there are more than 3500 Laughter Clubs in India, USA, UK, Canada, Brazil, Australia, Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Hungary, Switzerland, Portugal, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Israel, Dubai and many other countries. Everyday, I receive enquiries from all over the world to set up Laughter Clubs. Why is this Laughter Movement spreading like a wild fire?

There are some reasons that make laughing without a reason acceptable to the common man. Some of the reasons behind the success of the Laughter Movement are: a) Never before in history has laughter been so well structured and made an organised exercise routine, to be practised by the common man. This practice promotes instant relaxation from stress, and has helped scores of people worldwide derive health benefits. b) Everybody



Laughter Club in Gubbio, Italy.

knew that laughter is the best medicine but nobody had an idea of how to bring more laughter into their lives. Humour and jokes are not working enough and there are not many happenings in life that make us really laugh. Also, there is the problem of an appropriate time to laugh, and people rely more and more on a sense of humour that is not very common.

There was a strong need for a platform on which people could laugh, without bothering about a sense of humour. People were looking for such a platform where there is a commitment to laughter. I think people have found everything they wanted in a Laughter Club. They are laughing because they want to laugh, they are celebrating life, having fun and cultivating playfulness. c) This idea of laughing without a reason, is universal and can connect people all over the world, without any language barriers. d) A Laughter Club is a practical platform, where one can actually practice laughter rather than just talk about laughter. Everyone is encouraged to find their own laughter, rather than look for someone who could make them laugh. e) It is an ideal platform for people to connect with each other, socialise and cultivate fellowship. This has helped many

people to overcome depression and isolation. f) The unique feature of Laughter Clubs is that laughter is free. Laughter Clubs constitute a social Movement that is non-political, non-religious and non-profit making. There is no membership fee for Laughter Clubs. g) A group laughter exercise, is easy to practise and gives benefits that are the same as those gained from real laughter. People are opening up and finding their sense of humour through laughter. h) This particular way of laughing is free from any kind of negativity, associated with negative humour. i) This is a short and sweet 10-20 minute exercise, which can be a value addition to other health building activities like Yoga, meditation, aerobics, Tai-Chi, etc.

### THE BEGINING WAS TOUGH

Going down memory lane, I recall how it all started for fun, and I never dreamt it would become such a big Movement. During the formative days, it was quite difficult for me to get started. People were afraid of being laughed at, if they joined the group. The first to object were a few representatives of the garden authorities, in the suburb of Mumbai, where we started the first Laughter Club. They thought it would be a public nuisance and noise pollution, and advised me to discontinue. However, I persisted and went around motivating people. It was after a few talks that I gave on the health benefits of laughter, that people started coming forward. Still, many ridiculed the idea and called us a “*Murakh Mandli*” (“Band of Fools”) in our local language.

There were about 300-400 people walking in that park everyday, but only 15-20 people joined initially. When they started enjoying a sense of well-being after the sessions, more and more people trickled in. This made the park authorities soften their stand, and they allowed the group to go on with the activity. Soon, the number swelled to 55-60 including a few women. Initially, we laughed at jokes but that didn't work after some time. We learnt the art of laughing without jokes by inventing a variety of stimulated kinds of laughter.

The very idea of laughing in a public place without any reason, sounded intriguing to many people who saw about 50 people engaged in what they perceived as a funny activity. Scores of people used to watch us from

balconies of adjoining buildings and roadsides and the hundreds who walked inside the park couldn't resist staring as they passed us. The initial reaction of most of these people was amusement, and surprise. The question in their minds was: How can they laugh in a public place without any reason? Some of those living around the park took half-hearted objection on the specious ground of being woken up by the laughter. But that was largely for the psychological reason of opposition to anything new, even if it is for the better.

Among those watching from the roadside were youngsters who would watch the fun, standing on the bridge nearby. They would respond with sounds of “*Ho Ho Ha Ha*” and then, shy away from the scene. Many autorickshaw and taxi drivers, who were not carrying any passengers, would stop for a while, and then proceed, with shy smiles on their faces. Even bus drivers would slow down to get a glimpse of the laughing group. The good thing was that it was very amusing. But there were a few, who raised their eyebrows, and thought we were wasting our energy and disturbing others. Some of them passed sarcastic remarks. It must be said to the credit of those who laughed, that they took all this as a part of the game.

There were a few people who would stand a couple of yards away, and keep watching the proceedings, without gaining the courage to join in. Many who wanted to join the group would hold themselves back, thinking that there may be some fees to be paid before joining. Efforts were always made to clarify this impression. Membership of a Laughter Club involves neither filling up a form nor paying any fee, or any other fuss. Those who were slow to get into the spirit of the laughter, expressed the opinion that it was artificial or forced. Those who practised it daily found it beneficial, and began spreading the news, by word of mouth. Soon the concept caught on in the residential complex, and many people would come just to watch these funny people in action. As we kept updating our laughing techniques, people from adjoining localities also joined us and, soon, they expressed their desire to start similar clubs in their areas too. We were very happy to share the happiness. It was not more than two months from



the start of the first Laughter Club that “Seven Bungalows”, a nearby suburb of Mumbai, was resounding with the guffaws of the second Laughter Club.

### **MEDIA BREAKTHROUGH**

The first media coverage of our Laughter Club was by India’s most popular cultural show, ‘*Surabhi*’, on the national television network, *Doordarshan*. The office of the production company is located near the park where we had our Laughter Sessions everyday. It tickled the curiosity of many newspapers and magazines all over the country. One fine day, the news of Laughter Clubs hit the headlines of India’s most popular English daily “*The Times of India*”. The paper carried a picture of Laughter Club members on the front page with a report saying, “*This club is not a laughing matter*”.

I was flooded with telephone calls and it created a flutter in the entire city. The effect was magical; the attendance at our Laughter Club went up by 50 per cent. Requests from other areas started pouring in. Within three months, there were 16 clubs! Lokhandwala Public Park became a famous hunting ground for journalists from various newspapers, magazines; and national and international television networks. Our first international exposure was on BBC News, followed by coverage on CNN and NHK (Japan). I have not seen such enthusiastic media coverage for any other social movement. Soon, I lost count of the frequency with which the Laughter Movement appeared in some national or international newspaper or magazine.

It did not take very long for the Movement to spread outside Mumbai. Madhuri and I started travelling all over India, on invitation, and helping people to start Laughter Clubs. I ignored my medical practice and my wife, Madhuri, was not really laughing without money, because we did not charge anybody for the Laughter Clubs. Somehow, we carried on and Laughter Clubs multiplied at an astronomical pace. Everyday, new Clubs are being opened and many Yoga Groups are adding Laughter Yoga to their yoga routines. In India, most Laughter Clubs meet in the morning at public places, but there are some evening women Clubs and Clubs in



Hundreds of people walking on the road in Pune, India, at the World Laughter Day celebrations in May 2000.

offices and factories, schools, blind schools, deaf and mute children, prisoners, disabled children’s schools and old age homes.

### **LAUGHTER YOGA GOES GLOBAL**

Some Indians settled abroad, while on a holiday to their homeland, were impressed by the idea and felt that it could be effective in terms of social interaction. They took video films and also got acquainted with the Laughter Techniques. They tried to establish Laughter Clubs in their places of residence, but their efforts did not make much headway. Still, there is a great deal of interest in Laughter Clubs abroad, due to the awareness created by the media. The *National Geographic* (May 1997 issue) carried a double spread picture along with the message of Laughter Clubs. This coverage was instrumental in spreading awareness of the concept all over the world, because of the magazine’s wide readership. Hundreds of articles appeared in newspapers and magazines and the story of Laughter Clubs appeared on prominent television networks all over the world. These include the *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *The*

*Daily Telegraph*, *ABC News* (Peter Jennings show), *BBC*, *CNN*, *NHK* (Japan), *ZDF* (Germany), *National TV* (in France and Belgium), *Channel 9* (Australia) and many others. In the month of February 2005, *TIME* magazine carried the story on Laughter Yoga Clubs. I give major credit to the communication breakthrough of the 20th century - the Internet - that has helped to spread the message of laughter to each and every corner of this planet. I travelled extensively in America, Europe, Middle East and the Far East, along with my wife Madhuri, and conducted seminars and workshops to train Laughter Leaders, so that they could start their own Laughter Clubs.

## LAUGHTER CLUBS IN USA

The United States of America was the first country outside India to start Laughter Clubs. The brain behind the US Laughter Club Movement is Steve Wilson, a psychologist and America's joyologist. He had already written several books on humour, healing and positive work environments. Steve was planning a lecture tour to India in 1998, when he got a fax message from his father about the article that appeared in the *LA Times*, about Laughter Clubs in India. He contacted me over the telephone, and expressed his desire to meet me in Mumbai. We had an instant rapport, like brotherhood, based on a mutual sense of urgency to disseminate information about the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual healing powers of laughter. Steve met me in Mumbai and we had a series of conversations about laughter, and we saw the enormous potential that existed in the systematic routine for laughing, without using jokes, under the guidance of a trained leader/motivator.

I took him to the Laughter Club at Juhu Beach in Mumbai, and it was an exhilarating experience for Steve. He told me that I must go to America. In May 1999, Steve along with Karyn Buxman, a registered nurse and prominent humourist, organised a marathon laughter tour, that covered the length and breadth of America. In one-and-a-half months, we visited 14 cities and conducted about 25 seminars and workshops. People in USA loved the new idea, and a number of articles appeared in newspapers, magazines, radio and television networks. We made appearances in cities



Gabriela from Switzerland with Susan from Denmark doing milk-shake laughter.

like New York, New Jersey, Phoenix, Louisville, Minneapolis, San Jose, Philadelphia, Boca Raton, St. Petersburg and Columbus (Ohio). We were houseguests of the Wilsons, and spent time laughing and exchanging ideas, information and visions while appreciating each other's cultures.

The first Laughter Club in the USA was established prior to the lecture tour, by Jenni Reusser, at the YMCA in Orrville, Ohio. The first USA Laughter Club in a nursing home was established in Canton, Ohio, and then the first Club in an elementary school in the same city, thanks to Peggy Stabholtz and Nancy Engle.

Laughter Yoga Clubs Movement is being represented by our Laughter Yoga teacher, Sebastien Gendry in LA, California. He conducts training programmes, public seminars, and other awareness programmes. Also, he is assisting the research being done by a team led by Dr. Lee S Berk of Loma Linda University, CA, USA. He is also co-ordinating Laughter Club activities in North America besides providing information to all the Laughter Yoga Leaders and teachers, through his website [www.laughteryoga.us](http://www.laughteryoga.us).



## **LAUGHTER CLUBS IN CANADA**

Laughter Club Movement in Canada started in Montreal (Quebec). Michel Abitbol, a dynamic and very humorous person, started the first Club in Montreal, in 2003. After that, Jan MacQuarrie started training the Laughter Yoga leaders in Ontario. It was with the efforts of Shiv and Sarita Sud in Toronto, that there was an explosion of Laughter Clubs in Ontario area. On the West coast, Allan O'Meara and Carole Fawcett took the initiative to start Laughter Clubs in British Columbia. Now, there are Laughter Clubs in Vancouver, North Shore, Surrey, Vernon, Whiterock, Calgary, Edmonton, Lethbridge, Okotoks, Ancaster, Brantford, Grand Valley, Ottawa, Toronto, Montreal, Dartmouth and Yellowknife. For more details you can visit <http://www.laughteryoga.ca>.

## **LAUGHTER CLUBS IN GERMANY**

In March 1998, Henz Tobler, a young man from Wiesbaden, came to Mumbai, to learn about Laughter Clubs. He visited the different Clubs in Mumbai, and learnt some of the Laughter Yoga exercises. He mentioned to me that many people in Germany had read about Indian Laughter Clubs, in newspapers and magazines. In October 1998, he demonstrated some of the Laughter Yoga techniques at the Humour Conference, held in Basel, Switzerland. He displayed photographs of various Laughter Club activities during the conference. I was invited as a speaker to the Humour Conference in Basel, Switzerland, in October 2000, and conducted a day-long workshop on Laughter Yoga. Over 600 participants from all over the world attended the conference. Most of them were from Switzerland and Germany. This helped to spread the message of Laughter Clubs in Germany. At that conference, I had the privilege of meeting eminent German psychologist, Micheal Titze, who has worked on laughter and humour, for many years. We shared thoughts and he endorsed the philosophy behind Laughter Clubs.

I also got an opportunity to meet Micheal Burger, a businessman and philanthropist from Wiesbaden. I was very much impressed by his love and passion for laughter and humour. He invited me to Wiesbaden, to conduct a 2-day Laughter workshop for a group of 30-35 people.



A laughter session at a workshop in Hamburg, Germany.

This workshop was held at a church called “Humour Church” that is being used to promote laughter and humour activities. Gudula Steiner Junker was trained as a Laughter leader and started the first Laughter Club in Wiesbaden.

## **HAMBURG LAUGHTER CLUBS**

Robert W.L. Butt, a young dynamic English teacher came to Mumbai, for personalised training and he is the Founder of the Hamburg Laughter Club. He invited my wife Madhuri and me, to Hamburg, to do a Laughter workshop in 2001, and again in February 2002. Thanks to Robert's hard work, media attention in the form of articles in newspapers and television coverage, enhanced the awareness of Laughter Clubs in Hamburg. He has established Dr. Kataria's School of Laughter Yoga, in addition to his weekly Laughter meetings.

## **LAUGHTER MOVEMENT IN DENMARK / SWEDEN / FINLAND**

Jan Thygesen Poulsen, the President of the Laughter Club International - Denmark Chapter, saw an article in a Danish newspaper in 1998, about

the World Laughter Day celebrations in Mumbai, where thousands of people laughed for world peace. He contacted me by e-mail, and expressed his desire to organise a similar mega event, by gathering together thousands of Danes in Copenhagen. In January 2000, Jan single-handedly gathered nearly 10,000 people in the Town Hall Square and laughed with them. It went into the Guinness Book of Records!

After his phenomenal success, he decided to lead the Laughter Yoga Movement all over Denmark. I have visited Copenhagen several times to conduct workshops and training programmes on Laughter Yoga methods. Now there are more than 40 Laughter Clubs all over Denmark. I found Danes are very good at laughing, and very enthusiastic about this concept. Jan and many other Laughter Leaders are regularly conducting seminars and workshops in many organisations, corporations and social groups.

Maud Skoog Brandin from Kalmar, initiated Laughter Movement in Sweden, and she trained many Laughter Leaders all over Sweden. Today, there are many Laughter Clubs in Stockholm, Gutenberg and other cities. The Laughter Movement in south Sweden is being lead by Charlotte Schanner in Lund, and by Vivi and Ulla in Malmo.

In Finland, Essi Tolonen was the first Laughter Yoga teacher who came to India in 2004, to start the Laughter Movement there. A year later, Taina Kalenius organised a weekend Laughter Leader training and public seminar in Helsinki. We visited the Nokia country in the month of June 2005.

#### **LAUGHTER MOVEMENT IN FRANCE**

Many articles on Laughter Clubs appeared in newspapers and magazines all over France, and I used to get many inquiries from those interested to start Laughter Clubs in France. In early 2001, Daniel Kiefer, a young businessman from Mulhouse, saw a documentary film on Laughter Clubs of India. He was inspired and joined me for a training workshop in Copenhagen. He started the first Laughter Club in France and organised two workshops in May-June 2002. On 13th June, a film on Laughter Clubs, appeared on the most popular programme on national television called

*‘Envoy Special’*. This created an awareness about Laughter Clubs all over France. There are more than 100 Laughter Clubs in France now. In addition to the social Laughter Clubs, our Certified Laughter Yoga leaders are doing Laughter Yoga with companies, old age homes and prisons.

#### **LAUGHTER CLUBS IN AUSTRALIA**

**(REPORT COMPILED BY SHIRLEY HICKS FROM SYDNEY)**

There are now approximately 80 Laughter Clubs operating in Australia with new clubs coming in-line all the time. The Australian experience with the Laughter Club concept, is gaining momentum now, bodes well for the future growth of Laughter Clubs throughout the Pacific region.

Media support for Laughter Clubs has been exceptional. Many of the Laughter Club leaders have been extensively involved in radio interviews, with Susan Welch, the Queensland Co-ordinator, utilising radio very effectively, to educate the general public about the health benefits of laughter. Earlier this year, Radio National presented an excellent story covering the New South Wales-based Laughter Clubs. As quoted in this interview, participants were glowing with the results that they gained from regular Laughter Sessions. One particular participant, who has struggled with seriously poor lung health his entire life, quotes the Laughter Club as being the “most effective bronchodilator” that he has come across, in all the years of treatment that he has received. Other participants say that they will never miss a Laughter Club Session, as it has provided them with not only a valuable boost to their health but also a community of like-minded, fun people with whom they can let their hair down and just laugh. In Adelaide, Peter maintains a regular Radio Spot and continues to educate the public about how they can become more spontaneous in their joy and laughter.

Laughter Clubs, as profiled on national television programs, such as *Body & Soul* and *Health Dimensions*, have increased general public awareness greatly. Most people when asked, will say that they have heard of Laughter Clubs. Local community and health groups have warmly embraced the concept, with many leaders volunteering their time and expertise to bring the benefits of laughter, to the widest cross section of people.

Organisations such as Mission Australia, The Schizophrenia Fellowship, Cancer Support Groups, Women's Health Centres, high schools and technical colleges are all looking towards incorporating laughter into the programs that they offer their clients.

#### **A REPORT BY SUSAN WELCH FROM BRISBANE**

Laughter Clubs, which I describe as “the thread that is weaving the society together, one stitch of laughter at a time”, are also doing great work in Australia, and spreading quickly. Although my experience as a Laughter Yoga Instructor is relatively new, I believe that when you find your passion, combined with such valuable community service work, the universe rushes in to support you. In the first three months of running Laughter Clubs in Queensland, I have had thousands of people come through Sessions and I have trained two-dozen people to run these clubs.

The public acceptance of Laughter Clubs here has been unequivocal, people know that these clubs are therapeutic and they accept them wholeheartedly as tools to improve their health and happiness, relationships with each other, and overall, to get society back together.

Although we are not as formalised as American Laughter Clubs, or as big as Indian Laughter Clubs, we are not short on enthusiasm! The New South Wales Clubs, under the direction of Shirley Hicks, a naturopath, have been in existence, longer than the Queensland and Victoria Clubs. Peter Salerno, in South Australia, has worked much earlier, with laughter, humour and motivational speaking, while Ian Hall is happily at the helm in Western Australia. Phillipa Challis, a keynote speaker, has overseen the formation of Victorian Clubs, and all credit to her for doing so, despite her health challenges! Phillipa really believes in the healing power of laughter.

We eagerly await the commencement of clubs in the Northern Territory, Tasmania and Australian Capital Territory. Regionally and rurally, my aim is to have Laughter Clubs available to all, who want to access them. We are all well on the way to a more formalised association of Laughter Clubs in Australia, and remain connected in spirit by what we do and why we do it.



Laughter meditation at Town Hall Square in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Physically, mentally and emotionally, laughter has done wonders for some of our previously seriously ill Club members. Some of the testimonials I have heard have been real tear-jerkers. One of the women that participates in Laughter Club sessions on the Gold Coast had a double lung replacement, and attributes her speedy recovery and health improvement to laughter and the positive outlook it gives people. A Redcliffe Club woman had been seriously ill, long term with chronic fatigue and depression. She described “using laughter and singing to get (herself) out of an oppressive hospitalisation through the Out-door, not the morgue door”. A Sydney testimonial came from a serious car accident victim, who was befriended by Laughter Club members, and whose rehabilitation was sped up considerably, compared to her prognosis. The woman was uplifted by the compassion and positivity of the group, who would carry her to Sessions regularly, until she finally had the strength to stand unaided. Just as amazing as the testimonials we have heard, are the places Laughter Yoga can permeate. There seem to have been no doors unopened when laughter knocks.



I have started Laughter Clubs in City Councils, schools - with both students and teachers in psychology practices, with diversional therapists, in aged care, with special needs people, in health retreats, and soon hopefully in corrective services and emergency services. I have seen laughter reunite people, improve work and play spaces and give participants hope and health. At a recent Laughter Club Leader meeting in June 2002, our Australian Laughter Club's mission statement was decided as:

“Laughter Clubs are a voluntary, community-based organisation, committed to bringing the health and social benefits of Yogic Laughter, to all members of the community. Through the formation of group laughing, participants are supported to discover that happiness and laughter are states of mind, and laughter can be an unconditional state of being, irrespective of the ups and downs of life.”

We look forward to a united future through laughter, and the imminent approach of laughter's acceptance as “the best medicine”, at all levels.

As Doctor Jane Yip, Australia's leading research psychologist into laughter, recently remarked: “This is the beginning of a very promising peaceful social initiative with the potential to unite the world regardless of class, gender, race, political and religious affiliations, because we all laugh in the same way. Scientifically speaking, we may be scratching the surface of a new field: Social psychological intervention to health and group effectiveness - a much-needed area in this stressful world. It is my dream that, in the not too distant future, Laughter Yoga can find a place in health benefits schemes, to help lessen the burden of the public's dependency on pharmaceuticals, to cope with depression, pain and stress. We also look forward to finding suitable sponsors to fund the valuable work that many of us continue to do on a voluntary basis.”

## LAUGHTER CLUBS IN SINGAPORE

Singapore was the first country to send me an invitation that was sponsored by a Government Department. ‘The Lifeskills & Lifestyle Division of the People's Association’ invited me to hold a full-day workshop to train a group of Laughter leaders, in the year 2000. Four community



World Laughter Day Celebrations in May 2005 in Taiwan

Laughter Centres were established in 2001. Thomas Peh Chee Kin organised the Laughter Clubs and two Laughter Clubs are very popular in Singapore. One, run by Zareena Bana, in the East Coast - Joo Chiat Laughter Club and the second, run by Gellene Lim (Miss), in the Northeast - Tampines GRC Laughter Club. In November 2001, the Ministry of Manpower organised the Singapore Learning Festival where more than 1000 business people participated, and I was invited to speak on Community Learning through Laughter. The idea was appreciated as a possible breakthrough in stress management in the corporate world.

## LAUGHTER CLUBS IN THE UK / IRELAND

The first international television news channel to cover the Laughter Club news was ‘BBC World’ and numerous articles appeared in magazines and newspapers, about the new concept of Laughter Clubs. But, it took a long time before I could establish the first Laughter Club in the UK. I trained several Laughter leaders in Copenhagen and Zurich, who were from the UK, but it was Paul Maguire from Birmingham, who took

the initiative to establish the first Laughter Clubs in Solihull, Birmingham. I did a Laughter workshop in Birmingham, followed by a very successful public seminar at Brinxton Hall in London. Julie Whitehead, a yoga teacher from London successfully started the first Laughter Club in London. It seems that the Laughter Club idea has finally taken off in the UK, thanks to Paul Maguire, Julie Whitehead and Laura.

In Ireland, our Laughter leader Mary Mitchell from Donegal, who did the training with me in Munich, has been very successful in spreading Laughter Yoga in Ireland. She gave many presentations for media, television and did Laughter leader trainings. Now, we have several Laughter Clubs in Ireland.

### **LAUGHTER CLUBS IN BELGIUM AND THE NETHERLANDS**

Laughter Yoga was first introduced in Belgium in year 2003-04, when Marc De Wilde invited us to do public seminar and Laughter leader training in Brussels. Since then, there are more than 16 Laughter Clubs in Belgium, in both French and Flemish-speaking part of Belgium. Jean-Claude and Hika are the two Laughter leaders who are spearheading the Laughter Club Movement in Belgium. Kunti and Raymond Nota are the first trained Laughter Yoga teachers, who were spreading the Laughter Movement in Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, and also they are closely networking with different Laughter leaders in Holland.

Wil Hendriks introduced Laughter Yoga in Netherlands for the first time in 2004. We visited Netherlands and trained 20 Laughter leaders in June 2005. There have been several newspapers articles and television coverage on the Laughter Clubs there.

In a nutshell, the Laughter Movement is spreading in all the five continents. We have many Laughter Yoga Clubs in Hungary, Romania, Tunisia, Portugal, Egypt, Iran, Brazil and Iceland. More details on international Laughter Clubs can be found on [www.laughteryoga.org](http://www.laughteryoga.org)

## The Essential Link Between Laughter and Yoga

**W**hat does a simple emotion like Laughter and an universally acclaimed form of exercise such as Yoga have in common? Yoga has always been distinguished as a classic system of ancient Indian philosophy, because of the marvels of bodily control instilled by its practice. Yoga produces an unique physiological balance in the human body by connecting body, mind and spirit. Laughter, on the other hand, is a cognitive, affective and behavioural response familiar to every one of us. Let us try to find similarities between the two.

The word “Yoga” arises from the Sanskrit root ‘Yuj’ which means to get hold of, integrate, harmonize. It means getting hold of our lives, integrating all aspects of life, harmonizing our bodies with our minds, spirits and society. When I first thought about the idea of Laughter Club, it was only to have fun and laughter. I didn’t have Yoga in my mind at all. In spite of

initial ridicule by people, I pursued the idea till most of the members, in public parks, accepted it as an enjoyable exercise. When jokes didn’t work, we learnt to laugh without them. I thought of how to make all the members practice these Laughter Sessions everyday for 10-15 minutes, because everybody felt nice after their morning guffaws. Morning walkers are obviously health-conscious people and they would want to do it religiously.

I have been a student of Yoga and used to give health talks at one of the popular Yoga institutes in Mumbai. One day, while doing my dynamic breathing exercises from yoga known as *Kapalbhati* and *Bhastarika*, I found similarity between these fast-breathing exercises and laughter. In both, there is the rhythmic movement of the diaphragm and abdominal muscles. I thought, why not connect Laughter Exercise with Yoga breathing? For a few days, I kept thinking about different aspects of Yoga and how they could be connected to Laughter. I discussed this with my wife, Madhuri, who is a Yoga teacher, and went through a couple of books on Yoga, and gained an insight – Why not deliberately structure all the Laughter Exercises on Yoga and call it Laughter Yoga? In Sanskrit, we call it *Hasya Yoga* where *Hasya* means laughter.







Laughter Club in Ahmedabad, India

## DEEP BREATHING

Since the act of laughter depends upon our breathing apparatus, the lungs and respiratory muscles, I thought of starting each session with (*Pranayama*) deep breathing, which is an important part of Yoga. Deep breathing has a calming effect on the mind, and provides more oxygen to body tissues. Secondly, I wanted to give some pauses, in-between the bouts of laughter, and I thought: Why not intersperse the different types of laughter with deep breathing? This will definitely increase the vital capacity of the lungs, and hence their capacity to laugh. Later on, I realized that deep breathing is one of the most important parts of Laughter Exercises. In the normal course, the common man has no patience to do Yogic deep breathing. We made it an integral part of a Laughter Session, and thus it became a ritual.

## PROLONGED EXHALATION IN YOGA BREATHING AND LAUGHTER

Normally, Yogic deep breathing is done slowly and rhythmically, with concentration, and perhaps visualization. But this was not possible in a group, where most people were standing. To give a rhythm and slow

tempo, I told my fellow participants to raise both their arms up towards the sky, and at the same time breath in, slowly and deeply. After inhalation, they were asked to hold the breath, and stretch the arms for 4 seconds, and then breathe out, slowly through the mouth, as if whistling silently, while bringing the arms down. The idea of breathing out through the mouth was to prolong the exhalation, as in a variety of *Pranayama*, the expiration time is double the time of inspiration. Scientifically speaking, even when one exhales completely, there is some amount of air left in the lungs, called residual air. This residual volume is more in those suffering from chronic bronchitis and asthma. There are more chances of bacterial infection and less exchange of oxygen, if the residual volume is more. Prolonged expiration as in *Pranayama*, and some dynamic breathing exercises, help to remove the residual air, which contains more carbon dioxide, and replace it with fresh air that contains more oxygen. This is how deep breathing and laughter help to increase the net supply of oxygen to the body, for better functioning.

If you observe carefully, when we laugh, we are exhaling the air out from the lungs. Therefore, Laughter Yoga exercises help to remove the residual air from the lungs, and the result is the same as we find with prolonged exhalation in Yoga breathing. As a matter of fact, Laughter is a much easier way of emptying out stale air from your lungs. After a bout of good laughter, when we inhale deeply, there is free flow of air and breath is much deeper.

## HO-HO, HA-HA EXERCISE

If one observes the process of laughter carefully, one will see that during the act of laughter, there is a rhythmic movement of the diaphragm (the major respiratory muscle which separates the thoracic cavity from the abdominal cavity), abdominal muscles and intercostal muscles (between the ribs) which helps to expel air from the lungs in rhythmic jerks, which produces rhythmic vibrations from the vocal cords. Also, there is contraction of the throat, palate muscles and facial muscles. There are some dynamic Yogic exercises called *Kapalbhati* and *Bhastarika*, which involve similar rhythmic contraction of all the groups of muscles involved in laughter.



Mobile Phone Laughter

In my search for a method of how to laugh without any reason, when they were told to force themselves to laugh, many people found it difficult to laugh. Therefore, I introduced a warm-up exercise of laughter called *Ho-Ho Ha-Ha*. People would open their mouth and chant in unison this *Ho-Ho Ha-Ha*. Doing so helped remove inhibitions, and there was a sense of participation by the members. The whole atmosphere was charged with laughter, and many people would get stimulated and start smiling and giggling.

This *Ho-Ho Ha-Ha* exercise has some similarity to *Kapalbhati* and *Bhastarika* (respiratory passage-cleaning, with jerky movements of the abdominal muscles). Later, this *Ho-Ho Ha-Ha* exercise was supplemented with rhythmic clapping of the hands, which gave good stimulation to the acupressure points in the hand. The *Ho-Ho Ha-Ha* exercise, along with clapping, is done at least 3-5 times, at the end of each bout of laughter.

### DEEP BREATHING AND STRETCHING EXERCISES

We adapted many stretching exercises for the neck, arms and shoulder along with deep breathing. While inhaling, the arms are raised up towards

the sky, and stretch the back and neck backwards, and then hold the breath. While exhaling, the arms are brought down and bent at the waist. This exercise helps to fill in more air in the lungs, and helps to expand the capacity of the lungs. Bending at the waist while exhaling helps to squeeze out air from the lungs completely.

### LION LAUGHTER

Another type of laughter that is practised exclusively in Laughter Clubs, which is similar to “*Simha Mudra*” of Yoga, is Lion Laughter. Here, a person is supposed to laugh while fully sticking the tongue, keeping the eyes wide open, and posing the hands like the paws of a lion. This is a direct adaptation of the Yogic Lion Pose. This posture has proved to be a good exercise for facial muscles, and beneficial to throat ailments. According to Yoga experts, this also stimulates the thyroid gland. Often, such kinds of laughter are embarrassing, especially for women in a social gathering. But the participants of Laughter Clubs gradually get over such inhibitions, and hence this exercise provides its full benefits.

### INNER SPIRIT OF LAUGHTER

The traditional system of Yoga is not all about body posture and stretching. But Yoga also lays emphasis on the way we live life. The inner spirit of laughter is the guideline to help people bring attitudinal changes. The Sanskrit meaning of Yoga is “*Yuj*” which means, to connect. Laughter Clubs are social organisations that help to connect people and develop community feeling among members, who share their sorrows and joy together. Through the platform of Laughter Yoga, we impart the required knowledge base to develop unconditional love, compassion, appreciation and forgiveness, which is in accordance with the principal teachings of Yoga.

## Scientific Rational of Yoga & Laughter

**A**ll the organs of the body are made up of tissues. To keep these tissues in perfect health and organic vigour, there should be a constant supply of nourishment like proteins, carbohydrates, fats, salts, minerals and vitamins. These are derived from one's food and drink. Their supply depends upon the quality of food one eats, and the power of digestion and absorption of the digestive system. To reach the nutrients all over the body, one's circulatory systems should be efficient. Therefore, the digestive and circulatory systems should be kept in good order, for optimum health. Finally, when the nutrients reach all the tissues of the body, oxygen is required for their metabolism. To get a better oxygen supply, our respiratory systems must be in perfect order.

### TONING UP THE DIGESTIVE SYSTEM

According to principles of Yoga, health and vigour of the body depend upon the quality and quantity of food. Once you eat the right food, your



British actor John Cleese with Madhuri Kataria after a laughter session in a factory in Mumbai.

digestive system should be in perfect order, to get most of the nutrients from the food. All the principal organs of digestion, like the stomach, intestines, liver and pancreas, are situated in the abdominal cavity, supported by strong muscles from all sides. Nature has provided a gentle massage to all the digestive organs, by the movement of the abdominal muscles and diaphragm, twenty-four hours a day, during normal respiration. During inhalation, the diaphragm pushes the abdominal organs downwards and forwards, and at the same time, relaxes the abdominal wall muscles. During exhalation, the abdominal muscles are contracted, and they push all the organs of the abdominal cavity, inwards and upwards. Thus, nature has provided an automatic and gentle massage to the digestive organs 16-20 times a minute (the normal respiration rate).

But, if the abdominal muscles are weak, and the muscles of the diaphragm are not exercised regularly, they cannot provide an effective massage. Today, due to a sedentary lifestyle and obesity, abdominal muscles lose their tone, and this leads to excessive fat deposits on the abdominal wall. As a result, the abdominal organs get displaced from their normal



places, and their blood supply also gets affected. This can result in dyspepsia and a variety of digestion problems. To ensure perfect health of the digestive system, the abdominal muscles should be strong and elastic. There are many Yogic poses that make them strong and elastic, and give an excellent internal massage to the internal organs.

In Laughter Clubs, we have different varieties of belly laughs that can exercise all the abdominal muscles, and the diaphragm simultaneously. In between the laughter, there are stretching exercises for abdominal muscles, by raising the arms, and taking a deep breath. Scientists have called laughter as 'internal jogging' or a 'Magic Finger' that goes right inside your tummy, and gives an excellent massage to your internal organs. Regular Laughter Exercise not only strengthens the abdominal muscles and gives a constant massage, but also holds the abdominal organs in their proper places, to ensure proper digestion and absorption.

### **FOR A STRONG CIRCULATORY SYSTEM**

Once the food is digested properly and absorbed, the nutrients must reach each and every part of the body and the circulatory system is the transport system. All the nourishment is absorbed into the blood, processed a bit in the liver, and passed on to the central pumping system, the heart, to be pushed throughout the body, through a network of blood vessels.

Similarly, the blood, after supplying the nutrients and collecting the wastes of metabolism, should return to the heart and lungs for purification. The most important organ of circulation is the heart. By rhythmic contraction and relaxation of the diaphragm and intercostal muscles, the resulting expansion and contraction of the lungs provide a good massage to the heart muscles. A constant change in intra-thoracic pressure while laughing helps to draw in venous blood, returning from all the major venacavas of the upper and lower body. In a good bout of laughter, there is dilation of blood vessels all over the body, giving a flushed appearance, and feeling of warmth. Pulse rate and blood pressure rise as the circulation gets stimulated, before they settle down, even below the original levels, ten minutes after the cessation of Laughter Therapy. In a nutshell, laughter helps to tone up the circulatory system of the body.



A Laughter Workshop in the forest near Zurich, Switzerland.

### **FOR A STRONG RESPIRATORY SYSTEM**

Once all the elements of nourishment are carried to the tissues, the most important element that forms a part of many enzyme systems of metabolism is, oxygen. The principal organs of respiration are the lungs. For effective supply of oxygen, so that the full breathing capacity of lungs may be utilised, the respiratory passages should be clear and muscles of respiration should be strong.

Yoga lays more emphasis on breathing exercises, because they help to improve oxygen supply for optimal function. The life force energy *prana*, enters our body through breathing. Therefore, breathing is the most important part of health building at the physical level, as it supplies oxygen. At the mental level, it helps to calm down the mind, and at the spiritual level, the life force energy can be upgraded through various types of breathing exercise (*Pranayams*). I deliberately incorporated deep breathing exercises to provide a break in between two kinds of laughter. Normally, in one's general routine, nobody remembers deep breathing, but in

a Laughter Club one becomes habituated to deep breathing, as it is done at least 10-15 times during each Laughter Session.

Normally, a person at rest breathes 16-18 times a minute. During daily tasks it goes up to 25-30 times a minute. During heavy exercise and intense emotional pressure, breathing can go up to 30-40 times a minute. Individuals suffering from chronic bronchitis, bronchial asthma or cardiac failure, have higher respiratory rates. During the stress and strain of daily life, breathing rates go up and become shallow. As a few lung cells, due to lack of deep breathing, cease to participate in respiration, they have a tendency to collapse and become non-functional. The lung capacity (vital capacity) goes down, and as a result, the person feels breathless after a little exertion. Regular deep breathing, as practised in Laughter Clubs, keeps the lungs at their full breathing capacity, and also helps in emotional calming down. If one wants to achieve higher spiritual levels, one's breathing channel should be in perfect order.

### RESIDUAL VOLUME

After the inhalation, when the air is exhaled, some amount of air is left within the lungs. That is known as residual air. This air contains more carbondioxide, and can only be removed by forced exhalation, or in a prolonged bout of laughter. There is a type of *Pranayam*, a breathing exercise where exhalation is more prolonged than inhalation, with the idea of removing as much air from the lungs as possible. In our Laughter Sessions, participants are advised to inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth, by making pursing gestures to prolong the exhalation, so that the residual volume is replaced by fresh air, which contains more oxygen. Similarly, all the bouts of laughter are like prolonged exhalations with brief periods of inhalation. After 30-45 seconds of laughter, the Laughter Group is asked to relax and take two long deep breaths. This increases the net supply of oxygen to the body.

### CLEARING RESPIRATORY PASSAGES

Laughter Sessions, along with deep breathing, are like chest physiotherapy for those who are smokers and have problems of bronchitis and respiratory



A laughter session at Kalmar University in Sweden.

airway obstruction. The *Ho-Ho Ha-Ha* exercise is akin to Yogic *kriya* like *kapalhati*, *shwashuddi* and *bhastarika*, where exhalation is done in jerks with force. Many people feel that after a Laughter Session, they keep bringing out some mucous during the day, which makes their breathing clear. Laughter also increases the local resistance in the throat and they, thereby get fewer colds and attacks of tonsilitis. Various breathing exercises, along with Lion Laughter, help to keep the respiratory passages more healthy.

### EFFECTIVE REMOVAL OF WASTE PRODUCTS

Another condition that is important for maintaining health of the tissues is the effective removal of waste products from the body. Carbondioxide is a by-product of metabolism, and gets cleared from the system by deep breathing, and a variety of stimulated laughter. The massage to the digestive tract provided by Laughter Exercises helps to maintain good bowel movements. Good tone of abdominal muscles also prevents constipation by promoting proper evacuation and bowel movements.

## Is the Laughter in Laughter Clubs Real?

**A**s I have stated elsewhere, to start with, we took the help of jokes and humorous anecdotes, to make people laugh, but the major hurdle to this endeavour, was that there was not a large enough stock of good jokes. Besides, not everyone found all the jokes funny, and most of them were targeted at some community or gender. This used to hurt the sentiments of one or the other. All this was, indeed, disappointing. Some went to the extent of suggesting that the idea of a Laughter Club, or group laughter, may be given up completely. After some soul searching, it became clear to me, that if people have to laugh everyday, the idea of someone making them laugh, would not be workable. That meant, laughter had to be self-induced and for no reason, except to derive its many benefits. When I put this idea before the group, the reaction was that of total disbelief. They could not comprehend that, something that they had never seen happening, could be possible. I was of

the view that, in a group, not all laugh for the same reason. Some laughed because others were laughing. This, we all witness in a cinema hall. When the whole hall roars with laughter, it is not because all have understood the joke.

After some explanation and persuasion, the group agreed to give the idea of self-induced laughter, a try. They were pleasantly surprised to see the good results that were coming out, gradually. Psychologists say that the human mind tends, initially, to resist any change, even if it is for the better. Similarly, I think, anything new, particularly an idea such as that of laughing for no reason, draws cynicism. Many people, mostly from outside the group, expressed the opinion that laughter at the Laughter Clubs is artificial, as compared to laughter arising from jokes, which they called natural. This artificial laughter they said, cannot possibly have any benefit. Since some people seem to be very struck with this thought, I propose to deal with it, at a little length, to put the matter into a proper perspective.

God has given mankind the capacity to laugh which he has not given to any other species. This capacity is inborn, as even a new born baby, is able to laugh. What is, therefore, natural is, this capacity to laugh and not any kind of laughter.

### DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO LAUGHTERS

Though the laughter resulting from a joke and the laughter at the Laughter Clubs are not identical, if we look at them a little more closely, we find that there are more similarities between the two than differences. The difference is in the initial stage of providing a stimulus, and triggering off laughter. In one case, a stimulus is provided and laughter is triggered, not by nature, but by something done by a person other than the laugher; in the other, it is by the laugher himself. Robert Provine writes in his book, 'Laughter - A Scientific Investigation', one of the many reasons which makes us laugh is laughter itself. He has also stated in his book that, in daily life we don't laugh much at funny or amusing things, but being with people creates laughter opportunities, for example, we laugh when we meet friends by just saying "Hello! How are you?" etc. and these situations are not necessarily funny. Being convinced of the many benefits of





Laughter Yoga Session with school children in Taipei, Taiwan

laughter, a member of a Laughter Club goes there to derive those benefits. With that stimulus and motivation, triggering of laughter is not at all difficult. The reason is simple.

### **CULTIVATING PLAYFULNESS**

The reason why Laughter Clubs are multiplying worldwide indicates that people are deriving health benefits from these exercises. This is based, not on the theory, but practical experience. Laughter in Laughter Clubs is from the body, not from the mind. It is the result of cultivating child-like playfulness, which grown up people find it difficult, when they are with the family or, in the workplace. Laughter Clubs have provided an ideal platform to cultivate child-like playfulness, which help people to laugh more than they normally do.

Recently, at Laughter Clubs, we have developed a number of playful Laughter Techniques, which help us to convert our self-induced Laughter Exercises into real laughter. Moreover, in Laughter Meditation, real and genuine laughter springs like a fountain, without any reason. This Medi-

tative Laughter is much more spontaneous, and far deeper than any laughter which arises from humor or a joke.

### **QUALITY OF LAUGHTER**

At times, it is contended that the quality of laughter in the two cases is different, and one is more pleasurable than the other. This is also only an impression, and, of course, a wrong one. The source of laughter in all cases being the same, what I think is meant by quality, is the intensity of laughter. That, as also the pleasure drawn, cannot possibly depend on who or what triggers the laughter but, rather the reaction, that is, how hearty the laughter is, whatever may be the type of laughter. The above is evidenced by the fact that all persons who hear a joke are not equally amused by it, and therefore, do not laugh with the same intensity. Some laugh heartily, others just smile, and some are totally unmoved as they find the joke not at all funny. It is also true that some members of a Laughter Club laugh more heartily than others. That difference could be due to mood, level of commitment and degree of playfulness.

The pleasure and the benefits a person derives from laughter, do not depend on the name of the laughter, but on the extent to which he enjoys it. Therefore, if the thought of the laughter at the Laughter Clubs being artificial is withholding anyone from becoming a Laughter Club member and deriving the benefits of laughter, my request to him/her is, please leave that doubt aside and walk up to the nearest Laughter Club without any further delay. You will not regret it. Even if you do not enjoy the experience or do not enjoy it much, as you will find from what is stated below, enjoyment will come, and till that happens, there will still be benefits, because scientists have found that even false laughter has benefits.

### **ACTING HAPPINESS**

Paul Ekman and Robert Levenson, psychologists from the University of California, have come to the conclusion that the advice, “*Put on a happy face*” may actually be beneficial. Their research has shown that facial expressions are not only reactions to emotional states, but can provoke these states as well. The latter is what happens at Laughter Clubs.

As discussed in earlier chapters, I am referring to the theory of ‘motions create emotions’ and ‘emotions create motions’. Even if you act like a happy man, over a period of time, you become one. For a person to act happy is a little difficult (not impossible), but it becomes far easier to act out happiness in a group. This is exactly what happens in our Laughter Clubs. We all are acting happy and the chemistry is changing to happiness, according to Dr. Dale Anderson (of Minnesota, USA), who visited our Clubs and found a lot of sense in the laughter at the Laughter Clubs. In fact, we acquired one slogan from him, which is getting popular in Laughter Clubs which is, *FAKE IT, FAKE IT... till you MAKE IT. Act Chemistry, Act Chemistry and the Chemistry becomes real.* Thank you, Dr. Dale for a beautiful thought.

Here, I would like to quote the work of Dr. Dale Anderson, M.D. of the ACT NOW project, based in Minnesota, USA. He has a beautiful exercise in his workshops, where he tells all the participants to hold a pen between their teeth and write a few words on a piece of paper. Because the facial expressions of holding a pen between the teeth resemble a smile or a wide grin, it produces happy chemicals in the brain and the mood changes. Similarly, when the same exercise is performed by holding the pen between the lips the facial expression resemble that of sadness, one feels low after some time.

### THE DUCHENNE SMILE

Although Norman Cousins’s book “Anatomy of an Illness” on curing oneself with laughter, was a layman’s viewpoint, scientific research too shows that smiles and laughter, actually trigger pleasure centers in the brain, even if artificially induced. Dr. Paul Ekman has opined that we do not know as of now, what specific parts of the brain are involved in each emotion, but we are gathering fundamental knowledge, and showing that there is a brain pathway that allows you to generate your own emotions. Dr. Ekman has identified 18 different kinds of smiles, each of which uses slightly different muscles or groups of muscles. He found that a bored smile, a cynical smile, or smiling at someone’s humiliation will do nothing to raise your spirits.

There is only one smile which activates the brain center for happiness, and that is the ‘Duchenne Smile’, named after Guillaume Benjamin Amad

Duchenne, a French neurologist who experimented with, and studied the muscles of the face, when engaged in smiling. He discovered that when lips part and turn up, the eyes crinkle up, showing crows’ feet and the upper lip droops slightly, then there is heightened activity in the left anterior region of the cortex of the brain, which is the center for happy emotions. Even an induced smile can turn your gloominess into an upbeat mood.

### BALAMCHALANA

There is a *Kriya* in the science of Yoga known as *Balamchalana*, in which one lies on the floor and begins to roll about and laugh for no reason. Another example of artificially-induced laughter which turns into the real thing, with practice.

### VALUE ADDITIONS ALONG WITH LAUGHTER

Even if you regard laughter as a mere exercise, it tones up your facial muscles. People do a number of exercises for all the muscles of the body, but there are very few exercises designed for facial muscles. Voluntary laughter is an excellent exercise for your facial muscles, throat muscles, lungs and abdominal muscles. It brings a happy glow to your face and makes your eyes shine with a thin film of tears, which are squeezed from the lachrymal sacs, during the act of laughter. Deep breathing is an integral part of Laughter Clubs. According to the science of Yoga, life energy (*prana*) flows through the breath. By controlled and deep breathing, we can enhance our own well-being. With the 20-25 minute package offered by the Laughter Club, you will carry home the healthy habit of deep breathing at least 10-20 times a day. This helps to increase the lung capacity, thus enhancing oxygen supply to the body.

One set of stretching exercises relaxes the muscles of the neck and shoulders, which become painful, due to the stress and strain of modern life. According to Yoga, the neck is like a bridge between the brain and the rest of the body. All the important nerves, spinal cord and blood vessels, pass through the neck. Neck, shoulder and back muscles need to be in proper tone, to maintain the free movement of the neck. Along with



Jan Thygesen Poulsen leads a Laughter Session at Copenhagen, Denmark.

laughter, we do a lot of rhythmic clapping with outstretched hands. This also adds to well-being, by stimulating acupressure points on the palms.

If you are not able to generate natural laughter, the simple chanting of *Ho Ho Ha Ha* will help to tone up your abdominal muscles. It gives an excellent internal massage to the digestive tract, and enhances blood supply to important internal organs like the liver, spleen, pancreas, kidneys and adrenal glands.

You get an opportunity to meet with like-minded people, go for outings, celebrate birthdays, attend health seminars and workshops and participate in national and international events focused on laughter and happiness. You will also establish contacts with laughter lovers all over the world, and may get an opportunity to visit other cities and countries on behalf of Laughter Clubs.

Talking about enjoying laughter at the Laughter Clubs, meet Mr. P.T. Hinduja (75 years young), winner of the 'Best Laughing Man' competition twice, once in 1996 among the members of the various Laughter

Clubs of Mumbai and again, in September 1998, at the All India Laughter Convention held in Goa. He was declared the winner, because both times, the judges found him to be enjoying his laughter the most. Someone asked him "How do you manage to enjoy your laughter? He replied, "When I found that I was not enjoying the laughter very much, a little introspection told me that it was I, my own self, who was preventing me from enjoying it, no one else. I then decided that I am going to enjoy my laughter at the Laughter Club to the maximum extent possible, and thus derive the maximum benefits." That determination and a little action, did the trick and put the principle "motions create emotions as much as emotions create motions", into action.



**Laugh Like a Goth**



## The Difference Between Laughter Clubs and Humour-Based Activities

**W**hat is the difference between laughter and humour? This is the most common question people ask me in my seminars and workshops all over the world. Let me make a statement that, 'Though we do laugh without using humourous activities, we are helping people to develop their sense of humour, through laughter. Laughter and humour run in unity; they cannot be separated. Humour is more subtle, and it is the awareness and ability of a person to see something funny, or express something in a funny way. Laughter is one of the expressions of humour. Laughter and humour have a cause-and-effect relationship. Humour is the cause and the effect is laughter, which brings physiological and biochemical changes in the body. But in Laughter Clubs, we do not use any type of mental and cognitive humour as a cause, we use physical act of laughter as a cause, which helps people to do away with their inhibitions and shyness, and become more open, and start seeing what's funny



Laughter Yoga Session on a beach in South France

in life. In other words, laughter is helping our Club members to develop a sense of humour. In Laughter Clubs, we laugh without using any humourous activities to stimulate laughter. We laugh in a group at absolutely nothing, but that does not mean that there is no reason at all for group laughing. Laughing in a group at nothing, itself makes the idea so absurd that it makes us laugh. Secondly, we are using the infectious and contagious nature of laughter, as a reason for our stimulated laughter.

Why we are not using humour as a cause to stimulate laughter, is because, humour is a very mental and intelligent phenomenon, and as perceived by the common man, there are very few people who claim to have a good sense of humour. Therefore, they believe that they can't laugh much, because they don't have a sense of humour. Thus, a Laughter Club is a place for the majority of people to bring more laughter to their lives, without bothering much about their sense of humour. In fact, laughter itself helps them to open their perception and sense of humour. In Laughter Clubs, laughter is the cause, and humour is the effect. It is like putting the cart before the horse, and it works.

### **What Makes Laughter Yoga Methods Practiced in Laughter Clubs, Different From Other Humorous and Laughter-Filled Activities?**

- ❖ Laughter Yoga Clubs practice organised activities that are based on ancient practices, such as Yoga and meditation. Also, they are based on the research studies conducted on the beneficial effect of laughter on our body and mind.
- ❖ Members of Laughter Clubs are engaged as active and interactive participants, not as a passive audience, being entertained. It has been proved that people who actively participate in any humour and laughter activity, get more benefits, than those who passively receive humour and laugh. The source of laughter is within the body, and one can generate laughter with conscious effort, and commitment, anytime he or she wants to. Laughing at something is conditional laughter, and is dependent upon the availability of the source.
- ❖ Laughter Clubs promote laughter as a genuine form of exercise, based on Yoga stretches, along with rhythmic and dynamic breathing techniques, based on Yoga. Irrespective of the source of laughter, it brings about physiological and chemical changes that are conducive to good health.
- ❖ Laughter Clubs makes the natural and positive power of laughter, a widely accessible health option in long-term care, for example. It is an activity that is emerging as recognized and valued by professional Activity Therapists and Recreation Therapists as well as counsellors, nurses, social workers, teachers, chaplains, clowns and others. The therapeutic effects of laughter are due to a reduction in stress levels. Since most diseases today have some stress and psychological element, laughter has some therapeutic value against stress-related disorders, and psychological ailments. Let me emphasize once again, that we are using laughter as a preventive medicine. Our slogan is “Laugh Before You Fall Sick”. There is no substitute for conventional medical treatment, but laughter can be added, as complementary medicine, along with popular medicine.
- ❖ Most often, the laughter activity takes place in a group that comes together with a common purpose, and provides social support. There-



Dr. Kataria at the World Health Day celebrations in Mumbai.

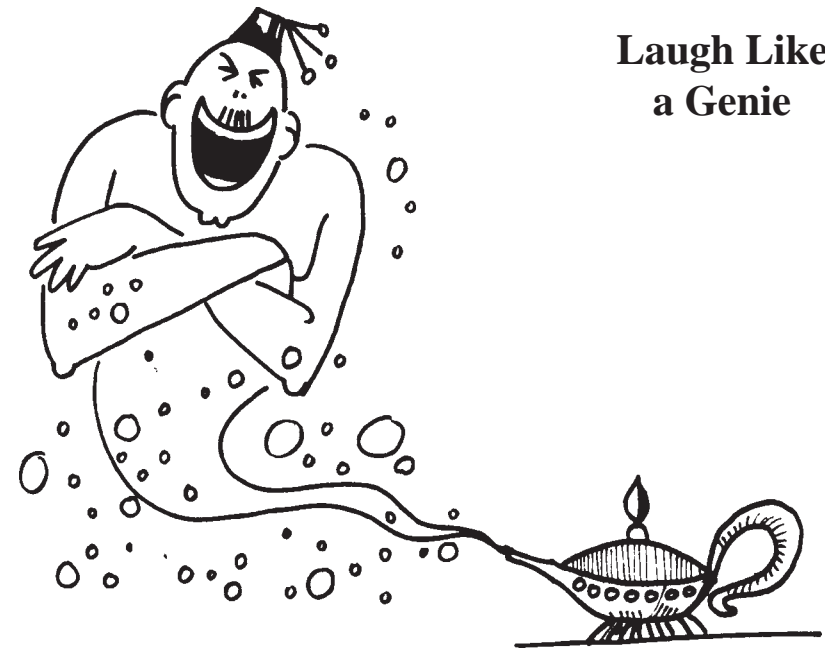
- fore, the method and viewpoint can be applied in communities as a form of social glue. The very reason why Laughter Yoga Clubs are spreading all over the world is that, they bring people together and cultivate brotherhood and fellowship. These laughter activities are particularly relevant for bringing people from all over the world together, because one does not have to use language, as a base for laughter. This could be the real breakthrough for bringing the whole world together and I dream of a unified world as a ‘Universal Laughing Family’.
- ❖ Since Laughter Clubs are group activities, they help people to inspire and motivate each other, to keep working on their inhibitions and shyness, till they find their sense of humour. Remember, laughter is not an individual phenomenon, but it is a group activity, and much easier to come by when practised in a group. The Laughter Group members act as a source of motivation, and help each other to keep going. Otherwise, as in any other health building activity, there is an element of boredom and the chances of abandoning such activities are much higher.
  - ❖ A Laughter Yoga Club’s programme has a structure that can be learned;

leaders can be trained. Leaders demonstrate, motivate, educate and inspire.

- ❖ If humour occurs in a Laughter Club session, it is a spontaneous occurrence within the group, not forced, expected or required.
- ❖ Humour is very individual and subjective; laughter is universal. When jokes are used to evoke laughter, many people don't get the joke, or don't like the joke. Using jokes runs the risk of being offensive or hurtful. Laughter Clubs operate on a value system that minimizes and eliminates this risk.
- ❖ Humour is difficult to define and "funniness" is almost impossible to measure. However, the physiological changes that accompany laughter are relatively easy to measure, and the benefits can be observed and studied more readily.
- ❖ Laughter Clubs can meet as often as the group likes, without becoming stale or boring. The members are encouraged to keep contributing their creative inputs like inventing their own exercises, which keep their self-interest and motivation very high.
- ❖ Since Laughter Clubs are a global network, and we have a common method and shared values, Laughter Club leaders and members share ideas, and to give each other encouragement and inspiration. Through the network of leaders and members, the method will improve continuously. New exercises are always being invented and we are discovering necessary cultural adaptations too.
- ❖ Laughter Clubs are open to everyone; nobody is excluded. Laughter Clubs are non-political, non-religious, non-exploitive and non-commercial. Let me clarify here that, there is no individual membership fee to become a Laughter Club member, anywhere in the world. However, there is an affiliation fee for a Laughter Group so that we can keep providing updates, innovations and scientific information. The Laughter Leader Training Programmes are chargeable. If there are some incidental charges involved in hiring the venue for the Laughter Club, the cost has to be shared by the Club members. The use of

laughter activities in profit-making corporations and business houses is chargeable, to generate funds for promoting the Laughter Movement around the globe.

- ❖ The Laughter Yoga methods are adaptable to all ages, backgrounds, and even adapt to various physical and mental (cognitive) limitations.
- ❖ Laughter Yoga is a complete discipline for body, mind and spirit. We have a philosophy behind our Laughter Movement - '*Laugh and make others laugh*', '*Laugh and have the spirit of laughter*'. Through the spirit of laughter, participants in Laughter Clubs achieve a better balance of emotions, reduce the negative effects of stress, release harmful anger and judgementalism and find a path to world peace.
- ❖ Because there is a common method, philosophy and values, Laughter Clubs link members and enthusiasts all around the world. Laughter Clubs promote observances of World Laughter Day (the first Sunday in May).



**Laugh Like  
a Genie**



# How Do You Convert Laughter Exercises into Genuine Giggles?

If you happen to see any Laughter Group forcing their laughter, without any fun and pleasure, don't frown. It still has its benefits, and remember, with all the benefits of acting happy, are value additions like deep breathing and stretching exercises, based on Yoga. If you find that a particular group's quality of laughter is not very amusing, perhaps, they might not have been trained properly. There are many ways we can transform stimulated laughter into intermittent spontaneity. Here are a few techniques: 1. Good eye contact, 2. Theory of stupidity, 3. Playfulness and fun, 4. Childlike actions, 5. Gibberish talk.

## EYE CONTACT IS THE KEY

Want to see the magic? Select someone close to you and look into the eyes of that person. Start smiling slowly and then giggle a bit. You will see that the other person will start laughing without even knowing why you laughed. It is because of the infectiousness of laughter and the absurd-

ity of the situation. This is the most important factor we apply in Laughter Clubs to initiate laughter. Eye contact, effectively applied, is enough to generate laughter. People who are too shy to have eye contact lack self-confidence. Therefore, learning to have good eye contact during a Laughter Session, will also enhance your self-confidence. This self-confidence will be projected into your personal life as well as in business. The spontaneity of laughter in Laughter Clubs will depend upon the effective use of eye contact with other members of the group.

## THEORY OF SILLINESS

People who really understand the philosophy of laughing without reason, can laugh without any problem. But today, everyone needs to be convinced, and wants a logical answer. If you find it hard to get into the spiritual depths of laughter, then think in the simplest way. This is known as the "Theory of Silliness". At the outset, the very name "Laughter Club" is amusing to many people and makes them laugh silently in their hearts. The onlookers in public parks can't help laughing, when they see a group of gigglers laughing for no reason. On the face of it, it is the absurdity that makes them laugh. The idea of a Laughter Club makes them laugh. Laughter Club members laugh for the enlightenment and health benefits they get, but onlookers laugh at their silliness. Whatever it is, the idea is ongoing and mind-tickling, and sufficiently absurd-sounding to attract people. They, then find plenty of reasons to become regular members. I have interviewed many people who swear by their health that the Laughter Club has changed their lives, but initially they thought that it was foolish, and laughed at their silliness.

This theory can even help one to laugh at poor, and already heard jokes. Someone asked me, "How can I laugh at a joke which I have already heard?" I said, "Why not? Another reason for you to laugh is that you already know the joke which is being told to you, by someone with great effort, and you may start laughing in your mind, even before the punchline is delivered." Believe me, I have laughed at many sick and poor jokes because of this theory of silliness. This will happen only if you look at the person's face closely, while he is saying a joke which you already know.



A laughter session in progress at Saibaba garden in Mumbai, India.

Another effective reason to laugh at a poor joke is that, it is good for one's health, if one laughs. A Laughter Club member can easily laugh at anything because he practices laughter everyday. Another possibility is, if you already know the joke don't worry. The style of relating it might be more amusing, if you watch carefully. You may enjoy the joke in a better way, than when you heard it earlier. While you are participating in a Laughter Club, if you happen to make eye contact with someone who is laughing for no reason and in a funny way, it becomes a reason for you to laugh. One member may think that other members are silly!

Another application of this theory is that if you want to laugh alone looking into the mirror, try to imitate the laughter of someone you know, maybe a movie character, say *Ha Ha Ha Ha*, and continue this for some time. If you are not able to imitate properly, you will feel silly. The moment one begins to feel silly, a genuine laughing sensation springs up, which is a great feeling and can be enjoyed as long as one allows the feeling of silliness to persist.

## SILLINESS OPENS PERCEPTION

There is a lot to learn from the silliness in Laughter Clubs. A person who can laugh at himself without caring about the persons watching him, is a person who can make his laughter real. In the beginning, when we decided to abandon jokes and laugh for no reason, some people found it difficult to come out of their shells. To remove inhibitions, we tried child-like actions like swivelling the tongue, talking gibberish and dancing in a funny way. Silliness really opened the doors of perception. Being silly is the first step towards freedom and creativity. The word 'silly' is derived from *sealy*, which means blessed, happy and joyful. We all have been silly during our childhood, and played with endless possibilities of nonsense, absurdity and silliness. In fact, all great inventors were snubbed as silly to begin with, and the rest is history. Silliness is the gateway for inventions and innovations. A serious person will never take a chance, for he is always afraid of ridicule by others. He will hesitate to explore possibilities, and will not always be ready for experimentation.

Lastly, silliness will help to develop egolessness in a person. A person who can laugh at himself, will not have a bloated ego. The ego is the seat of many negative emotions like anger, jealousy and greed. We play silly games in Laughter Clubs, and it is amazing to see creativity at its best, when the members come up with funny ideas, every now and then. Acting silly is one of the basic necessities of being a Laughter Club member. Once your inhibitions are removed, you will find yourself at your best.

## PLAYFULNESS IN LAUGHTER CLUBS

There is a saying that "We don't stop playing because we are old, but we grow old because we stop playing". Playfulness gives immense pleasure, especially in a group. If you observe people playing games without stakes and gambling, you will always observe smiles and some laughter. Children laugh a lot while playing any game. Playfulness is restricted only to our school days. Play is abandoned as soon we enter college.

As adults, people become very serious, and are sure that playing is only meant for children. And whenever adults play, they play to kill time or start gambling along with the game, and it is rarely accompanied by smiles

or laughter, while children always play for fun. In Laughter Clubs, we have devised different types of stimulated laughter with a lot of playfulness. Swinging Laughter, One-meter Laughter and Cocktail Laughter, Argument Laughter, Mobile Phone Laughter and Milkshake Laughter are some of the examples. In Laughter Clubs, we remind people over and again, that no one is ever too old to play, and that the spirit of play lives forever.

### **FUN GAMES IN LAUGHTER CLUBS**

Keeping up with the playfulness, we are developing many fun games. We play during picnics and also during our regular meetings. Many Laughter Clubs and thousands of members are engaged in creating new ideas and fun games that have tremendous potential to make people laugh. These fun games can make people laugh better than jokes. The most important thing is that, the members actively participate and create laughter, rather than passively watch any humorous thing.

### **CHILD-LIKE PLAYFULNESS IN LAUGHTER CLUBS**

If you want to get rid of your dependence on jokes and still want to laugh, simply become child-like. In the initial stages of the genesis of Laughter Clubs, when we found jokes could not make us laugh much, we forced ourselves to laugh in a group. But many people found it mechanical and used to become a bit bored with the activity. Laughing in a group provides a stimulus, while child-like behaviour by adults helps them to get over their inhibitions. We do a lot of child-like actions in Laughter Clubs; like producing funny sounds by swivelling the tongue inside the mouth, tapping air-filled cheeks, laughing like a child and talking gibberish. We keep reminding our members about the importance of being like a child.

Robert Holden in his book “Laughter - The Best Medicine” says: “Every child is born with abundant creative potential for laughter, fun, play, happiness and love. Any restraint on any of these has an adverse effect on the child’s growth and development. Anyone who grows with the inner child will find health, harmony and happiness. Therefore, instead of growing out of the child, we should grow with the child.”

As adults, very few persons retain the excitement of a child. Poems have been written about the desire to get back to one’s childhood days. This alone is not enough. Some additional action is necessary. Just as one cannot learn swimming without getting into the water, one can be child-like only by behaving like a child. In a given period of time, everyday we all the Laughter Club members, try to revisit our childhoods, and try to carry that carefree spirit over to daily life. Child-like activities can be done either with one’s own children/grandchildren, or in a group of adults at Laughter Clubs.

### **GIBBERISH GAME**

Talking gibberish is one of the best methods to drain out stress. It has very good cathartic value. But in Laughter Clubs, we use this as a tool to remove inhibitions and act like children, so as to create laughter. Nowadays, it is being extensively used as a warm-up exercise in Laughter Clubs to open up. In addition to gibberish talking, there are many humour-activating techniques like gibberish singing, gibberish contests and whiff-piff talking, which help members to generate laughter.

### **Laugh Like a Chinese Emperor**





## Sensible Living: Paying Compliments - The Inner Laugh

Soon after Laughter Clubs started gaining momentum, the wife of a Laughter Club member, telephoned me to complain that while her husband laughed heartily every morning in his Laughter Club, at home he continued to shout at the family members, just as he did earlier. Then she asked: Should not Laughter Clubs be doing something to check that laughter travels inside the members also?

When I requested her to clarify what exactly she meant by laughter travelling inside, she fumbled a little, as it was evident that she had not prepared herself for such a question. But, with some effort, she said that what she really meant was that, to be Laughter Club members in the true sense, they should develop the spirit of laughter also. I thanked her for the suggestion and assured her that it would be considered seriously. To be honest, I did this first to be polite, but her suggestion did not leave me, because while I had got used to calls imparting critical comments, this

was the first time someone had, I felt, made a constructive suggestion. On further reflection, the lady's suggestion struck me as very profound. After all, I asked myself, was it not true that laughter would not add up to anything very much, if a person did not shed at least some of his negativity?

After some serious discussion amongst those involved in the Movement, it was decided that the aims of Laughter Clubs be revised from "Laugh and be Healthy" to "Health and Happiness through Laughter and the Spirit of Laughter", the spirit of laughter, being making not only one's own self happy but also making others happy. Some members interpret this as laughter, and the spirit of the laughter becoming a part of the life and living of members.

The above I consider as an important step, along the route of the Laughter Club Movement, as it brought about a qualitative extension to the focus of the efforts and the action at Laughter Clubs. We now tried to identify actions as steps that would make not only the members happy but would also motivate and equip them to make others happy.

Looking back, I thought it would be a good idea to do something about those members who come for a daily guffaw, and had not changed. I thought this was a wonderful platform where people meet everyday, and it would be a good idea to adopt some resolutions, to bring about changes in their thinking. The idea was to change negative thinking into positive. We started looking for negative emotions and habits that stop us from laughing.

### PAYING COMPLIMENTS

One common bad habit most people have, is criticizing others just to kill time, or just for the heck of it. During morning walks, the common topics of discussion are politics, the price rise, government corruption, pollution, traffic jams, the bad economy and the like, followed by problems relating to youngsters and other family members. I could not stop every one of them. But, I thought of replacing negative thoughts with positive ones. To do away with the habit of criticising others, why not start complimenting others, and raise their spirits and self-esteem? One fine



The historical first Laughter Club at Lokhandwala Complex, Mumbai, India

day, I made an announcement after a Laughter Session was over. *“Ladies and gentlemen, today is Monday, and every Monday we are going to resolve that during the week, we will pay compliments to others. We will appreciate their good qualities and make more and more friends in our buildings, offices, social circles, etc.”*

Paying compliments was the first Commandment we introduced in our search for identifying various ways and means of sensible living. On Sundays, after the Laughter Session, we shared our experiences about paying compliments. To whom had Club Members paid compliments and what were the results? Initially, the response was not very enthusiastic, but some people thought it was a good idea. Many people found it difficult to pay compliments just like that, as it seemed like flattery and sycophancy. I repeatedly made announcements that one of the objectives of Laughter Clubs is health and happiness through laughter. The happiness aimed at is, not only to make one's own self happy but also to make others happy, which further results in one's own happiness. One of the ways to make others happy is by paying genuine and deserved compliments to others.

Some members got very good results and they started appreciating their spouses and children in the house, while others said good words to their servants. In India, very few people appreciate their wives with words, they may feel affection in their hearts but they may not verbalise their feelings. For example, very few people actually say to their wives, *“I love you”*. One fine day, one of the members went home after the Laughter Session and told his wife *“You are looking very beautiful”*, as she was getting up from bed. She wondered what had happened to her husband, because he had never said this in the last 25 years of their married life. In the first place, he had never told his wife before, that she was beautiful, but when he said it, the timing was wrong. Had he said these words when she was dressed in her best, before going to a party, it would have made more sense.

I was surprised to know that many people find it very difficult to compliment others. The human tendency, by and large, is to see only the wrong and bad in others, ignoring the good, and then to criticize and condemn. As a result of this tendency, a lot of negative energy is generated and there is unpleasantness, bitterness, intemperance, tension and bad relations, all round. Therefore, the idea of sharing their experiences with compliment-paying was to give members an insight on how to gracefully give compliments. How many things can you compliment and in what ways? The most important thing we tell members, is to look for good qualities in others, and then appreciate them. Giving irrelevant, undeserved, unnecessary compliments might look like a gimmick or pure sycophancy.

### IS PAYING COMPLIMENTS NECESSARY?

People of all ages and backgrounds, and at all stages of success and failure, need love and recognition in order to live happily. Everyone, if he is to function at his best, needs to be noticed and appreciated. Most of us want to be told how we are doing. If our best efforts are met with silence, we tend to become careless, negligent and hostile.

Each one of us have a mental picture of ourselves, a self-image. To find life reasonably satisfying, the self-image must be one that we can live with and can like. When we are proud of our self-image, we feel confident and

free to be ourselves. We function at our best. When we are ashamed of our self-image, we attempt to hide, rather than express ourselves. In such a situation, one becomes hostile and hard, to get along with. A sort of miracle happens to the person whose self-esteem has been raised. He suddenly starts liking other people better. He becomes kinder and more co-operative with people around him. Praise is a like a polish that helps to keep one's self-image bright and sparkling. By raising someone's spirits and adding to someone's self-esteem, you make him want to like you and co-operate with you. To flatter or put into words, emotions we don't feel, amounts to insincerity that is easily spotted, and benefits none.

Withholding a compliment is cheating. It should be passed on as quickly as possible. It might give some unhappy person a moment of joy, or help him cope with deep despair. It will help someone defeat the two arch-rivals of human happiness — loneliness and insignificance.

### **HAPPINESS COMES BACK**

As an artist finds joy in giving beauty to others, so also, anyone who masters the art of praising, will find that, it blesses the giver as much as the receiver. There is truth in the saying that *"Flowers leave part of their fragrance in the hands that bestow them"*. If you increase your sense of gratitude and your willingness to express it, you will make the people around happier, and you will become a happier person yourself.

### **HOW TO PAY COMPLIMENTS**

One can pass on compliments in a casual conversation, or in a letter, or a written note. There is yet another way — that of third party compliments. When someone says something pleasant to you directly, there is a possibility of that being discounted as mere politeness or even flattery. There are many others who find it difficult to pay compliments directly, as it may cause some embarrassment. They can take recourse to what may be called 'third party compliments'. This form of appreciation is much easier and could even be more effective. When indirect compliments reach the concerned party, they may be better than direct ones, because most people believe that if someone praises you behind your back, he probably means exactly what he says.

### **WHEN TO PAY COMPLIMENTS**

The golden rule of appreciation is - *Do it now!* Do it while your sense of gratitude is fresh and strong. If you feel a flash of thankfulness, act on it before the impulse goes away.

### **A FEW EXAMPLES FROM LAUGHTER CLUBS:**

Though the idea of paying compliments has not taken off fully, it has already made a good beginning. I would like to cite a few stories.

1. There is a cobbler who sits at the corner of the lane where I live in Mumbai. I found him fully involved and happy doing shoe-repairing jobs. One fine day, I stopped for a while and wanted to express my feelings about him. I said, "My dear Sir, you are doing yeoman service to humanity. Do you know that the job you are doing for a few paise, is considered a dirty job by many people?" He smiled and was thrilled to receive such a compliment. After that he smiles at me whenever I pass his shop. I could clearly see his spirits raised by my acknowledging his contribution to society.

2. On Sundays, during our extra meeting to share the secret, one member said, "I didn't pay compliments to anyone but once when I was beginning to criticize someone, my inner voice suddenly stopped me saying, *"Hey! Hey!! What are you doing? You are a Laughter Club member and you are supposed to compliment others!"* That was an achievement, I believe.

To conclude, what the Laughter Clubs really seek to achieve is not only laughter outside us but also laughter within us. Paying compliments would result in what we would like to call "Inner laughter", that is "the Spirit of laughter". I often ask Laughter Club members during our monthly meetings, "Why does one go on to make a lot of money, beyond what's needed for one's basic necessities?" It is to get appreciated and noticed. Building a palatial house has no meaning if you don't hold parties and have more and more people appreciate your achievements and taste.

If you spend huge amounts of money only to get appreciation and recognition, there is no need to break your heart in earning that much money.



If people spend so much of money in search of compliments, why not give them free and liberally?

On behalf of the Laughter Club International, we are building a network of like-minded people who will share their experiences about complimenting others and we plan to publish a book on “How to Compliment Others in How Many Ways?” This would provide a wealth of knowledge from which millions of people would draw inspiration, in order to spread happiness. The idea of paying compliments is nothing new. But through the platform of Laughter Clubs, it will get manifested, rather than remain mere knowledge. By paying compliments, we, the members of Laughter Clubs, are developing a conscious habit of praising others and winning hearts. Indirectly, it will help to shun the habit of criticizing others that creates a hostile atmosphere, and stops us from laughing.



**Laugh Like a Red Indian**

## Sensible Living: What has Forgiveness to do with Laughter Clubs?

**L**aughter in Laughter Clubs is not meant to be only outer laughter or physical exercise, but also inner laughter, that is, developing the spirit of laughter by being happy and making others happy. It is a joint effort to search for different formulas for stress-free living. To live in peace and harmony, we need to identify and be aware, all the time, of what stops us from laughing. Going through the various aspects of human behaviour, it has been found that there is an entity called the Ego, which gets hurt over and over again, and makes our lives miserable, in spite of our best achievements. Regarding the strange behaviour of human beings, something which has puzzled me through the years, is that it takes years to build a relationship, and it needs just one stroke to sever age-old ties. Friends and relatives become foes and set out to finish each other, the very same people who earlier could not live without each other. What makes all that difference and causes a change of heart? My learned friends told me that it is 'ego'.

We all go through life, in a world, where even well-meaning people hurt one another. A friend insults or betrays, a parent abuses, a lover ditches, and so on. That gives rise to a stream of painful memories. If these grudges and grievances are not forgiven, the rancour and resentments, keep the old wounds alive. They continue to haunt and harm both parties, physically as well as psychologically. As preached extensively in Jainism, Christianity and many other religions, forgiveness breaks the grip of pain on our minds, and opens the doors to the possibility of repairing resentments and grievances; whereas, hate and revenge are totally counterproductive. In the long run, apologising/forgiving is the best alternative for both the forgiver and the forgiven.

But, it is all easier said than done. Still, there is something deep inside us that stops us from asking for forgiveness even if we want to. It feels humiliating for most people to give an apology. And many people find it difficult to forgive others who have caused a grievous hurt. Even if the hurt is well recognised by both parties, then the question arises, who will ask for forgiveness first?

### **FACTORS THAT HINDER APOLOGY/FORGIVENESS:**

There are certain misconceptions, which hinder recourse to the best alternative of apology/forgiveness. Let us review these misconceptions more realistically, as this will help overcome hurdles.

a) The first misconception is that apologising will depict the apologisee as a weak person, and may invite humiliation. This is incorrect, and contrary to experience. It is the impression of one who has not tried it earlier. The fact, however, is that apologising requires a lot of moral courage and instead of humiliating, it raises the apologisee in the eyes of the other, which prompts the latter to consider forgiving.

b) The apologisee feels doubtful about whether the forgiver will accept his apology. Actually, most people are understanding, and when one admits that he is at fault, it touches the generosity instinct which every person has. Even if your apology is rejected once, it may be due to the deep hurt or sensitivity of a person. If persistent efforts are applied, most people

will not resist, and you will definitely get a chance for peaceful co-existence. If your apology is not accepted, perhaps your expression was not repentant enough to assuage the hurt of the other person.

c) The natural response to deep and unfair hurt is hate, which comes more easily, and gives rise to the desire for getting 'even', and hurting back. Therefore, on the face of it, forgiving requires the forgiver to be contrary to his interests, and appeals to him to be unnatural and unjust, as his sense of fairness tells him that people must pay for their wrong doings. For these reasons, the forgiver thinks that forgiving is weakness. These feelings and emotions may be correct on the surface, but when examined in depth, it becomes clear that to forgive is to be tough and not weak. It needs a lot of guts to let a person alone, who has done harm to you. Though the idea of forgiving may appear to be passive to some, genuine forgiveness is a positive act, that requires enormous spiritual strength. Therefore, people who ask for an apology and those who consider forgiveness, are not ordinary people. It needs a very stable mind to understand in depth, the future implications of hate and revenge. In contrast, if the apology is asked for, or forgiveness is considered out of fear that the other person may be stronger, the results may not be fruitful in the long run.

d) Another problem that hinders forgiveness, is that, one person may keep on hurting the other, and ask for forgiveness, over and over again. If this is happening, the forgiver may choose his stand, and communicate it to the apologisee, emphatically. But one must not think about this possibility in the very first case.

e) Forgiveness becomes very easy if you analyse the situation, and find out if the act of wrong doing, is deliberate, or unintended. Calm consideration of the matter will make the hurt person see the truth, and then seriously, consider the best alternative of forgiveness. Even if the hurt is deliberate, a proper communication of your desire to live in peace, will make the other person realise his/her mistake.

It is very rare that the wrong doer is 100 per cent at fault, and the person hurt, is 100 per cent innocent. If someone has insulted or hurt you, look



Albert Bensimon from Australia with a group of Laughter Club members from Jogger's Park in Bandra, Mumbai.

deep into yourself, to ascertain if your actions, in a small way, were responsible for the act. If you can see your contributions, however small, it becomes much easier to forgive. No person is all good or all bad and everyone has some good and some bad in them. But in practice, the application of this truth is one-sided. If I am the wrong doer, to minimise the wrong done by me, I say, "I am not as bad as I am being made out to be. After all, there is so much good in me." This is very conveniently forgotten, and overlooked, when the wrong doer is someone else. His wrong doings get exaggerated and good points are ignored. If the forgiver reminds himself, that the other person also has something good, it becomes much easier to consider apology or forgiveness.

### AN EFFECTIVE APOLOGY

Many times apologies are not considered for forgiveness, because they are not projected properly. Naturally, an apology must be sincere and satisfy the forgiver for better results. Otherwise, the entire effort may go waste. For an apology to be effective, the following points should be kept in mind:



a) The apology should be direct, and the apologisee should never pretend to be doing something else.

b) The forgiver has to be made to realise, that the apology is really meant. Therefore, the apologisee must not be looking at the ground or elsewhere, but into the eyes of the forgiver, though it may be a bit embarrassing for a moment.

c) The apologisee must show readiness to accept responsibility. It should be a total acceptance. One should avoid making excuses because that dilutes the apology. A 'No Excuses' apology, leaves both the parties feeling better about themselves.

d) Most of the time, it may not be enough to merely say "I am sorry", because the victim wants to see that the apologisee is really feeling bad, and looks upset. If the apologisee can put a bit more expression into his apology, it is more likely to calm down the recipient.

### **EFFECTIVE FORGIVENESS**

Like an ineffective apology, ineffective forgiveness can also render all efforts fruitless. For forgiveness to be effective:

a) It must be gracious.

b) It must be sincere and show a change of heart on the part of the forgiver.

c) It must not appear as if being done as a favour to the apologisee. It must not be accompanied by warnings or threats. Rather, it should suggest that the apologisee avoids such provocations in future so that, both can live in peace and harmony.

d) Acceptance of an apology is very important. Therefore, the forgiver must be seen to be really accepting it. Since most people find it difficult to apologise, the acceptance could be by words like, "I know it must have been hard for you to apologise and I very much appreciate your saying that." It could be by inviting the other party for a cup of tea. Another effective acceptance is by writing a letter which will have better registration. Such symbolic gestures can strengthen the bond of forgiveness. Holding of the hand and a couple of hugs, if appropriate, will add flavour to the future relationship.

### **NEVER RE-OPEN OLD FILES**

The two words 'forgive' and 'forget', generally go together. And rightly so, because if the forgiver is not able to forget, he would not have really forgiven. Forgetting takes some time. That, however, is no cause for worry, because if there is genuine forgiving, the wounds will heal, and forgetting will eventually come. Forgetting, however, does not mean obliterating the whole event from memory. What has to be forgotten is the hurt, resentment and bitterness. Details of the happenings, which remain in memory, without bitterness and hurt, could serve the useful purpose of enabling others to learn from the experience. All the best efforts will be nullified, if one tries to open old files, at the slightest provocation. I have seen people making each other's lives miserable for years together, referring to an event that had happened twenty years before.

To illustrate this point, we narrate and enact a story, as to how hunters catch monkeys. They fix a box with iron bars placed at such a distance, that a monkey can put in his empty hand to take the bananas kept inside. Once the monkey holds a banana, it becomes difficult for him to pull his hand out of the box. If it has the wisdom of leaving the banana, it could go free. By holding on to the banana, he gets caught. In our workshops, we actually tell one of the participants to hold a banana, and try to take his hand out, which does not happen. Taking a cue from the story, we remind our members: Whenever you make the mistake of opening old grievances, remember that you are acting like a monkey, holding on to his banana.

### **ADVANTAGES OF APOLOGY/FORGIVENESS:**

Experts have come to realise, that forgiving and forgetting, is one of the first means of defence. These are untapped and least understood sources of healing power.

a) If a person realises his mistake, but does not pick up the courage to apologise, that does not benefit him in any way. Rather, he is perpetuating endless self-punishment. Seeking forgiveness can free him of that punishment.

b) In a strained relationship, both the parties live under stress. An apology and forgiveness, can result in new happiness for both.

c) It breaks pain's grip on our minds, and opens the doors for new possibilities. A new beginning could arise from past pain.

d) Forgiveness transforms hostility into helpfulness, and lifts the spirits of both the forgiver and the forgiven.

e) It is said that the most important ingredient in forgiveness is 'love', and at its best, forgiveness is done for those persons who are our loved ones and have hurt us. Forgiveness, in such cases, is at its most powerful, renewing friendships, marriages and careers.

f) Hate and revenge disturb the harmony of the entire family. Hate, whether passive or active, is a malignancy that grows, eats you from within, and keeps on releasing harmful chemicals that give rise to a battery of illnesses. And vengeance never evens the score. It leads to an endless spate of retaliation. History is full of such examples, where a little act of revenge has wiped out entire families, and has led to war between nations. Mahatma Gandhi once said that if we all live by an "eye for an eye" kind of justice, the whole of mankind would be blind.

### DOUBLE BENEFIT

There are many situations in life where one is provoked into a state of anger. If you get angry with someone who is bothering you, and fight with him unavoidably, there is a lot to be achieved, by saying 'sorry' after some time, when your temper has cooled down. You may fire your child, your family member, an employee or a neighbour. They will have hurt feelings, even if they are not able to express them. But if you pick up the courage to go up to the person with whom you fought a short while earlier, and say, "Sorry. I got angry with you, but I got upset because I didn't like the way you behaved with me." Here, by saying "Sorry", you are neutralising the hurt feeling, inflicted by your outburst, and you can take this opportunity to remind the person once again, about the reason why you got angry.

### FRIDAY FOR FORGIVENESS

In Jain religion, there is a festival once a year, called "*Michhami Dukkadam*", meaning 'asking for forgiveness'. On one particular day, after prayers in the temple, people ask for forgiveness from each other.



Laughter during laughter meditation becomes very intense and deep, the kind of laughter we rarely experience in daily life.

Also there are Forgiveness Cards like New Year greeting cards, which are sent out to relatives, friends and business colleagues, asking for forgiveness, if they have been hurt directly or indirectly. Since ancient days, it has been a good platform for those who feel inhibited, to verbalise their apologies directly to the people concerned.

I attended one such function and was highly impressed with the idea, and thought it worthwhile to implement 'forgiveness', through Laughter Clubs. Somewhere in March 1997, I explained this idea to the members, and most of them liked it. Doing this once a year, might not help to register this idea, and it may take too long to experiment with various practical aspects of it. Therefore, I thought, why not remind the members every Friday, even though there is no relation of a particular day, with 'forgiveness'? Every Friday the anchor person makes an announcement, "*Dear Friends, today is Friday, our Forgiveness Day. If you think you have hurt someone, and you have not been on talking terms with somebody for a long time, this is the time to muster up some courage and offer an apology, saying, 'Knowingly or unknowingly, if I have hurt you in any way, I am*

*sorry.*” Invite the person for a cup of tea or to come over for dinner, in order to make a new beginning.

## **LAUGHTER CLUBS AND FORGIVENESS**

Designating Friday as “Forgiveness Day” by Laughter Clubs, is not a gimmick or an empty slogan. If properly implemented, it will be a valuable means of enhancing the inner laughter of members. By making repeated announcements, and doing a sort of dress rehearsal every Friday, the chances of getting this idea registered, are much higher. The trouble with most people is that even if they want to say ‘sorry’, it is difficult to verbalise these feelings. By doing it over and again, we are making it a conscious habit, so that apologies come out easily, when required. I, myself, have been benefited immensely from this idea. I must have renewed over a dozen relationships, by giving an apology. As a matter of fact, many bonds have become much stronger than before.

## **WHAT DOES NOT CONSTITUTE FORGIVENESS?**

Forgiveness is the ability to control anger, by understanding the situation in depth, and then choosing the right kind of response, instead of a prompt reaction. It prevents generation of anger, and enables one to control the emotion of revenge. Forgiveness is kindness, tenderness, affinity and love expressed after careful thought.

Hypocrisy is to forgive outwardly, and cultivate revenge, enmity and a desire to punish inwardly. It is not forgiveness. If one forgives under the threat that: “My enemy or opponent may harass me if I don’t forgive”, it is not real forgiveness. If greed and temptation are motives behind forgiving: “If I don’t forgive, my motive will not be served”, then it is not real forgiveness. If your ego is dictating forgiveness, “I am powerful, I am the master and only I can forgive him and save him, and in return, can get things done to my convenience”, it is not forgiveness. In short, forgiveness originating from ego, fear, hypocrisy, greed, lust is not real forgiveness. Selfless, motiveless, unperturbed manifestations of love, kindness and affection constitute forgiveness.



## Laughter Clubs: Now Developing into Close-knit Communities

**O**n going research shows that people suffering from depression are more prone to many illnesses like high blood pressure, heart attacks and cancer. Depression also affects the immune system adversely. Common causes of depression are social isolation and a diminishing family value system. These are more frequent in Western countries, but are now slowly affecting the East also. Laughter Clubs have helped many people to get rid of their antidepressant pills in a short period of time. The magic that has worked wonders is the friendship and brotherhood gained from Laughter Clubs. Laughter Clubs are fast developing into close-knit communities.

Laughter is an important tool in our social interaction. It is not only a biological release or a cognitive process, but more importantly it is a social and psychological phenomenon, which initiates and facilitates communication. With the spread of Laughter Clubs in every locality, each

Club has taken the shape of a small community, wherein, its members experience a sense of affiliation and belonging to the group. Clubs are turning into large “Laughing Families”.

### SOCIAL GLUE

The affiliation, in more than one way, has been positive for most members. These Clubs are now, not only responsible for enhancement of physical health but also for safeguarding emotional health, and more importantly, communicating harmoniously. Laughter is a common language. It knows no religion and has no gender bias. There is no discrimination according to caste, creed or colour. Laughter is a powerful emotion and social glue. When Steve Wilson, a psychologist from the United States, visited some Laughter Clubs in Mumbai, he had the unique experience of participating in a Laughter Session at Juhu Beach. In a matter of the few minutes that he spent laughing with so-called strangers, it appeared at the end of the Session, as if he knew everyone in that group. There was a strange feeling of closeness with them. Many of our visitors from all over the world share similar views. Thinkers, whether they are sociologists, psychologists, behaviourists or historians for that matter, have always believed that ‘Man is a social animal’. We are very well aware of the fact that our behaviour is the result of social values and norms, and we all survive on the basis of our social interactions. And, there is no doubt, that sociability of any kind is considered definitely worth cultivating.

Research conducted in various fields, has provided mounting evidence, to support the fact that people who belong to a network of community, friends and relatives are happier and healthier, better able to cope with stress, and remarkably resistant to emotional and physical ills. Each Laughter Club, with no monetary inclination, has become a close-knit community, where people enjoy the caring and warmth of its members. More important, people form close ties with others, irrespective of the economic stratum they belong to.

Prof. Dennis T. Jaffe, Ph. D., a Professor of Psychology at Saybrook Institute in San Francisco, has found that, “A close-knit community can act as a protective envelope against stresses of environment.” Belonging



The members of the Laughter Clubs are like an extended family.

to the Indian subcontinent, we are very fortunate, since our culture supports the family value system. But now, a growing Western influence has slowly started taking its toll. Today, due to materialization, people have become more self-centered and socially isolated with a rapidly changing social system. Even the way in which we view our elders, has changed. A feeling of being worthy and of importance to others is essential, not only for a person's self-esteem but also for emotional health. When an individual is younger, this is a natural experience, because a family is dependent on one another, irrespective of whether one is a man or a woman.

Being a man, one is more often looked upon for economic security, and being a woman, for ensuring a happy, well settled home. Though this pattern is not a given rule, it is not uncommon either. But when there is a transition from youth to old age, this is when perception changes. Evidence from research suggests that, in communities where elders are considered a source of wisdom, they are not abandoned, as is the case in other societies. The mortality rates are much lower when compared to other societies. In Laughter Clubs, a majority of members are from an

older group, but nowadays, many youngsters have also started coming in, because of the value addition and health benefits.

### ISOLATION IS SICKNESS

In a recent study, participants said they had experienced ties within a Laughter Club, such as those in every close-knit family, wherein, not only an individual's happiness but also one's sorrows are shared. And hence, it is this sense of social worth that is reinforced, by belonging to an accepting and caring community. We ask ourselves the question: What acts as a buffer to stress? The answer is: Our spouses, our friends, our siblings, in other words, our social network.

In modern society, where social isolation is becoming a sickness, Laughter Clubs are a welcome introduction to bring back the social value system. I am proud to say that, the friendship and brotherhood in Laughter Clubs, have made people much more secure, than their non-member relatives and friends. I would like to quote an example of a senior member from the Johnson Garden Laughter Club in Mumbai, India, who fell sick and was admitted to hospital. He burst into tears of joy, when he found his room flooded with flowers from visitors of the Laughter Club, when none of his family members and relatives turned up.

### A TOUCHING INCIDENT

Another incident that I will never forget is when I visited the Laughter Club of Bandra Reclamation in Mumbai, where members laugh everyday in the compound of a temple. At the end of one particular Laughter Session, the birthday celebrations of a 78-year-old lady were held. This Club has a unique way of celebrating birthdays. All the members surrounded the "birthday baby" and sang a Happy Birthday song for her, and danced around her, in a circle. Later, she was taken to the temple, a few yards away, where she was made to sit on a chair, in front of the Ganpati idol. She was offered a coconut, flowers and sweets by the priest, and then many Laughter Club members touched her feet (a sign of respect in India). Throughout the celebrations, tears rolled down her cheeks. They were nothing but tears of joy. I had read in books about these tears (of joy)

and, was now fortunate enough to see them in reality. This is the Laughter Club we are talking about. This is the Laughing Family, the whole world is waiting for. A Laughter Club, in many ways, provides a protective shell, that safeguards our emotional well-being. And, it is because of this emotional well-being, that we can have a physiologically sound system, that would determine our resistance to disease. Laughter Clubs have brought a lot of people together, the consequence being, an awareness that one is not alone with one's problems.

### **HOW LAUGHTER CLUB MEMBERS SOCIALISE**

The process of socializing, starts from the beginning, the day the member joins the Laughter Club. Most Laughter Sessions are held at public parks, beaches and open grounds where people go for their morning walks. In our initial survey, we found that the same people who were laughing together, used to go on morning walks for years but never knew each other. They came closer when they started laughing together. Laughter is a powerful positive emotion, and it changes the electromagnetic fields around your body, and builds a positive aura. Due to laughter in a group, inhibitions are broken down, and a person becomes more receptive. And it is a very happy socializing, that keeps growing, as one laughs more and more. It brings about nearness, companionship and camaraderie, flowering into a kind of social support.

### **CELEBRATIONS**

Laughter Groups have started celebrating different festivals belonging to all communities in their own style. This has helped to bring about communal harmony amongst members. Like this, throughout the year, Club members meet at least once in two months. They sing, they dance and they eat together, without any discrimination between rich and poor.

### **FUN GAMES**

With more than 25,000 members in less than four years, Laughter Clubs are being recognised as a public movement. Though there is no membership fee, we organise seminars, health workshops, Yoga and meditation camps from time to time. Many companies come forward to sponsor these

events, to gain public mileage. Fun games are regularly organized, where members have fun-filled healthy competition with each other, let themselves go, and enjoy the warmth of each other's company.

### **OUTINGS AND PICNICS**

Outings and picnics in a big group have their own fun, especially if participants are all Laughter Club members. Most Clubs organise outings, picnics and excursions, and feel happy together. They sing, dance and play fun games, and have some new idea or another, because there is no dearth of new ideas in such a big group. People have admitted that group picnics are much more enjoyable than family picnics. Another added advantage is gaining massive group discounts. They can have much more for the same amount of money.

All tourist places offer heavy discounts to Laughter Club members, sensing the big potential of regular business from them. The extent of socialising through Laughter Clubs can be gauged by the frequency and extent of participation in the outings. Many groups organise trips for 3-4 days, several times a year.

In between, there are one-day picnics, at least once in two months. Now, the frequency is on the rise, as members are exploring new destinations all over the country. The format for picnics, are being shared by different Club members, to make them more interesting and enjoyable. Through our central body, the Laughter Club International, we are sharing all the good things in life, to keep motivation levels high.

### **HOLIDAY-CUM-LEARNING**

In our new model outings, we are trying to make our holidays more value-based, by adding health-building activities like learning Yoga, meditation, acupressure and different non-drug, alternative healing systems. It is 75 per cent fun and 25 per cent learning. With our ever-expanding network, we are introducing new projects, to add more colour to Laughter Clubs.

### **CELEBRATING BIRTHDAYS**

Many members are senior citizens, and they had long abandoned the idea of celebrating their birthdays. Now, they have suddenly come alive.





A group of ladies laughing their stress away.

There are many members who have celebrated their birthdays for the first time in their lives. Why not be proud of our existence? In Laughter Clubs, birthdays are celebrated in a very simple and affectionate manner. Some do it with the usual song, sung in chorus, and by presenting flowers, others give out special greeting cards made on a computer. In some cases, talented members compose a special poem for the occasion. There is yet another way: To make the member wear a funny cap, and give him a whistle to blow. This is just a beginning, wait and watch for more ideas. You will be surprised at how creative Laughter Club members can become.

#### PROJECT “*CHALO CINEMA*” (GO FOR MOVIES)

On April 1, 1999, we celebrated All Fools Day - the idea was to make fun of yourself and try to laugh at yourself. It was a hilarious function, the details of which are given in another chapter. On that day, we launched yet another social project “*Chalo Cinema*”. The theme of this project is to go out for a movie, in a group. With the advent of television and cable

network, people have forgotten to visit cinema halls that used to provide much-needed outings for many. People have become too lazy to go to a movie alone, or with family, as different members have their own engagements.

#### INTER CLUB EXCHANGE PROGRAMMES

Socialisation is not restricted among the members of a particular Laughter Club, but goes beyond that. While celebrating anniversaries, invitations are extended to other Clubs in town. Representatives of different groups are called and felicitated during the function. Not only that, some groups even go on picnics together. This further strengthens the relationship between the members of various Clubs.

Extending this idea further, we have started Inter-Club Exchange Programmes, under which a group of Laughter Club members (generally 2-10) would visit other cities and the Host Club would arrange to provide them with home-stay on a voluntary basis. The visiting team would have to pay for their travel arrangements. The boarding, lodging and sight-seeing would be looked after by the Host Club. This will provide Laughter Club members from all over the country an opportunity to visit different places and while staying with families, they would understand different cultures. This arrangement is entirely on a mutual basis. The visiting members who enjoy a family stay must reciprocate by hosting people from other cities.

Slowly, when we set up Laughter Clubs all over the world, it will provide an opportunity for the world community to come together and visit different countries in a very economical and interesting way. This project is still in its experimental stages. Some groups have already visited each other with encouraging results. In India, I see very bright prospects, as Indians are very hospitable people. I am sure, we will be successful on an international platform too.

## Laughter Yoga in the Workplace

**T**he growing popularity of Laughter Clubs all over India, and the interest shown by many who have visited these Clubs from all over the world, have made one point very clear - these Clubs are no laughing matter. While tens of thousands are taking to this unique therapy, there are many who wished to join a Laughter Club, but could not do so because of time constraints. Most Clubs start quite early, between 6.30 am and 7 am, and they are held at public parks where people go for a morning walk. This is the time many officegoers cannot come, because they have to leave early for office. Quite a few women cannot participate because they have to send their children to school and their husbands to office.

I was inspired by the idea from some companies in Japan, where it is a regular practice to do some physical exercises in the office premises in the morning, before employees start their work. All the members of the



A laughter session at Glaxo Pharmaceuticals' Thane factory, near Mumbai.

company, from Managing Director to peons, participate. We believe that introducing Laughter Therapy in corporate houses is a very significant and worthwhile idea. It can help to improve inter-personal relationships at all levels in an organization, replacing mutual lack of trust and confidence, with a more positive outlook and a co-operative attitude towards one's colleagues and subordinates. This should, in turn, definitely help to improve the prevalent work environment, and overall performance of an organization.

### FEAR OF INDISCIPLINE

Initially, many people showed interest, but such proposals did not materialise because of some hesitation about anything new being started, and that too, a funny concept. Maybe, they feared that this might be ridiculed, or it may cause indiscipline. I wrote to many companies, corporate houses, medium and small-sized factories. Many bosses thought the workers might not understand the concept well. Many of them, and rightly so, were waiting for its bonafides to be proved. I went on to give seminars and demonstrations in many offices and factories. I found some resistance

from the management, who were not very keen on mixing with their workers, because they feared that the workers might not respect them, or might disobey them, if they laughed together. Usually, they would send their managers to attend the Sessions, and they themselves refused to come out of their cabins. Fortunately, this fear was proved wrong, when we successfully implemented this programme in many factories and offices in Mumbai. Our Laughter Leaders in many countries, are making presentations on Laughter Yoga in companies, organisations and corporations.

### **COSTS RELATED TO STRESS**

Today's business demands have put a tremendous strain on our global workforce. Longer hours coupled with fewer resources, are pushing management and employees to their breaking point. Combined with the need to achieve work-life balance, stress is taking a tremendous financial and personal toll on the business' bottomline:

- ❖ \$300 billion per year or \$7,500 per employee, for related compensation claims (Organizational Science and Human Factors Branch of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health – 2004)
- ❖ 1 million workers went on stress-related disability in 2004
- ❖ Eight of the top 10 prescription drugs marketed today, and 75 per cent of doctor's visits are for stress-related conditions
- ❖ Stress is directly associated with depression, anxiety, asthma, alcohol/drug addictions and other conditions that affect the nervous and immune systems
- ❖ Approximately 100 million Americans suffer from chronic health conditions: Heart disease, diabetes, hypertension and cancer, which are stress-related

Members of the business community (Managers, Sales and Marketing Personnel, Executives, Administrators) are living very stressful lives. It is important to realise that most of our time is spent at the workplace, and the maximum amount of stress is also at the workplace. Most diseases like high blood pressure, heart disease, peptic ulcers, insomnia, depression,

allergies and even cancer, have some relation to stress. This contributes to absenteeism, poor performance and addictions.

### **INCREASING PRODUCTIVITY AND PROFITABILITY THROUGH LAUGHTER YOGA**

This unique concept combines stimulated Laughter Exercises with simple breathing and stretching techniques, which have been scientifically proven to reduce stress, improve stamina, lower blood pressure and increase endorphins. When practiced in a group, Laughter Yoga is a simple and cost-effective method, to reduce and manage stress and anger, improve overall health, inter-personal relationships, confidence, and communication and leadership skills. Healthy and happy employees equate to increased productivity and profitability. When workers feel valued by their employers' trust and loyalty increase, and individual players become extraordinarily committed and highly efficient team members.

The unique features of Laughter Yoga is that it is most economical, less time consuming, scientifically proven method of stress release. It gives instant results and can be practiced by anyone without any preconditions. You don't need to have a great sense of humour or ability to say jokes, or being funny.

### **ADVANTAGES OF LAUGHTER YOGA IN CORPORATE HOUSES**

- ❖ Laughter Yoga increases oxygen levels in the body, and releases endorphins (feel-good hormones) from the brain cells. Daily Laughter Exercise will promote a sense of wellbeing and feeling of freshness throughout the day. Participants learn to wear smiles on their faces.
- ❖ It will help reduce inhibitions, increase self-confidence and develop leadership qualities among participants. Starting the day on a positive note will improve inter-personal relationships, and hence performance. Bosses and subordinates will work with a better frame of mind, rather than fearing each other.
- ❖ Deep breathing and neck-and-shoulder stretching exercises will help remove stiffness and pain resulting from stress and a sedentary lifestyle.



- ❖ Laughter Yoga increases body resistance by stimulating the immune system of the body. Regular Laughing Sessions will significantly reduce the frequency of coughs, colds and throat and chest infections.
- ❖ It will help to control many diseases like high blood pressure, heart disease, irritability, insomnia, anxiety, depression, allergic disorders, asthma, bronchitis, tension and migraine headaches, as well as aches and pains due to arthritis, cervical spondylitis and backache.
- ❖ Laughter Yoga is one of the easiest types of meditation, and promotes instant relaxation. It disconnects your mind from the physical world. While laughing, you cannot think of anything else. In other types of meditation, you need to concentrate a lot, to take your mind away from unwanted thoughts, which is easier said than done.
- ❖ As a group effort, all the Laughter Club members try to identify and remove negative factors like guilt, anger, fear, jealousy and ego, which stop us from laughing. They cultivate the spirit of laughter by following ways and means of sensible living, like paying compliments, the art of forgiveness and understanding human relationships.
- ❖ By holding periodic seminars, we impart practical training to help members, to discover their own sense of humour and celebrate life, in spite of its tough challenges.
- ❖ Through the practice of Yogic Laughter, we want to make people understand that happiness and laughter, are states of mind and should be unconditional, irrespective of the ups and downs of life. If you are in a happy and positive frame of mind you can solve your problems in a much better way. We want to make people believe in the philosophy that motion creates emotion. If you act like a happy man, first thing in the morning, your chemistry will become real.
- ❖ To make people aware of the power of group effort. Anything practiced in a group becomes easier, as compared to trying to do the same thing alone. Not only do we laugh and do stretching exercises together, we are also learning to understand the ways and means of sensible living all together.

- ❖ Every human being has infinite potential to perform and achieve anything he desires, but most of his power lies dormant and untapped. Through Laughter Yoga and Meditation, one can release one's infinite potential and achieve greater heights in life.

### **DREAM OF A “LAUGHING ROOM” IN COMPANIES**

While I was conducting a seminar in Copenhagen, Denmark, for Hewlett Packard, I saw a room called “Smoking Room” and suddenly the idea flashed into my mind that if there can be a smoking room in companies, why not a “Laughing Room” where the employees can go and laugh together for 10-15 minutes, and feel relaxed.

This is a dream I am carrying in my mind, and one day, it is going to be realised. Laughter in the workplace is the only way we can have Laughter Therapy Sessions everyday, or at least five days in a week. Social Laughter Clubs in Western countries laugh once a week, which is good, but not enough. To reap concrete effects of Laughter Therapy quickly, one needs to laugh everyday. The advantage of having a “Laughing Room” in the workplace is that they don't have to specially invite people for a Laughter Session. People are already there in the workplace and it becomes much easier to get the required number of participants for a group Laughter Session.

## Laughing Session with the Blind: a Wonderful Experience

There was a time in the initial two years, when every week some news or the other, about Laughter Clubs used to appear in various newspapers and magazines. For media people, the idea of Laughter Clubs was fascinating. In October 1997, I remember receiving a telephone call from Mr. Dinesh Saryia, requesting me to come to an institute for the blind in Dadar, Mumbai, and demonstrate the Laughter Techniques for 60-80 young girls, most of them were below the age of 12 years. Mr. Saryia told me, “We have heard a lot about your Laughter Clubs, why not make blind people laugh?”

Dinesh must have been around 25-years-old, and his vision was diminishing due to *retinitis pigmentosa*, a disease which gradually leads to blindness. He expressed his desire to meet me in my office and work out the details. I said “Yes” a bit hesitantly, because I was wondering how I would make blind people laugh.

Normally, we laugh in a group, and stimulate each other by looking into each other’s eyes. This is how we are able to convert forced laughter into genuine chuckles. After two days, young Dinesh came to my office with a colleague who was blind too. They spent nearly half-an-hour with me, and one thing that was very peculiar was that, while talking they were smiling all the time, which is very rare in normal individuals. Suddenly, I recalled my visits to blind homes during my college days, when I observed that most blind people have inbuilt smiles on their faces when they talk, for what reason I don’t know. I was also aware of the fact that the blind people become extraordinarily talented in music, weaving skills and other arts. Both the youngsters were very happy, and enthusiastic about our visit to the blind home. I went along with four Laughologists, by local train, and it took us half-an-hour to find the institute in that congested locality.

We were given a warm welcome at the Institute’s Annual Readers’ Day function, where we found many normal young volunteers were committed to helping the blind students. Throughout the year, whenever they got spare time, they would come and read, to blind students. After the initial ceremony, we asked a group of 30-40 blind girls to come out in the open, and experience the joy of Laughing Exercise. Initially, the little girls were hesitant and giggling among themselves, saying, “How can we laugh like that?” At the same time they were amused with the idea of laughing in a group, for no reason. After ten minutes of persuasion, they joined the group of adults, outside in the compound. I was still not sure, whether I would be able to make them laugh.

### THE SOUND OF LAUGHTER IS ALSO CONTAGIOUS

One needs to look at other people to initiate laughter. Eye contact is an important factor in eliciting genuine giggles. But I was proved wrong, when I experimented with that particular group in the Laughter Session.

For the first time, I realised that the sound of laughter, is also infectious. As the Session progressed, the quality of laughter improved. The small little girls were laughing non-stop, and it was, indeed, difficult to stop them. They were laughing heartily, as if they were starved of this natural

gift. So much so, two girls had tears rolling down their cheeks. To my surprise, hesitant looking youngsters were laughing more vibrantly than adults, who also joined the Session. At the end, quiet looking girls suddenly became talkative and asked me, “Uncle, when will you come again to make us laugh?” I did say, I would come back soon, but there was no further response from the organisers. I requested the Principal and authorities of the blind institute, to carry on Laughter Sessions everyday. I was willing to send a few senior members of Laughter Clubs, to train the anchors. But it was not to be. I never got any call from there. To me it seems, those little girls are still waiting for me, and one day I will go there, even if uninvited.

This was a unique experience to remember and I would like to bring smiles and laughter to the faces of millions of blind people all over the world. It may bring a fresh ray of hope to their sight-deprived lives. I am determined to form a Task Force of senior people from Laughter Clubs, who want to do some social work, and who have plenty of time. I need some funds to implement this scheme. I call upon social workers and philanthropists to join hands with me, in this mission.



# Laughter Sessions Among School Children

One thing that always embarrassed me, was people asking me, “Which age group of people come for Laughter Sessions? The answer was: Those who are 40 plus, senior citizens and retired people. Does that give the impression that Laughter Clubs are only meant for the elderly people, who have nothing else to do? Why didn’t youngsters come for Laughter Sessions?

Though school children used to enjoy Laughter Sessions during their vacations, they were not able to come regularly because most Laughter Sessions start quite early between 6.30 am and 7am. This is the time, children have to get to school. College classes too start quite early, and most youngsters are not aware of the benefits of Laughter Therapy. They think that it is more for those who are suffering from some kind of ailment. Moreover, they are interested in heavy workouts like jogging, swimming, gymnastics, cycling and aerobics. Nowadays, many middle-aged



women have started coming as they have found laughter to be very beneficial. Among the participants in many Clubs, were school teachers who kept experimenting with small groups of children in their schools, but nobody came up with a solid proposal. The apprehension about implementing Laughter Exercise could be the fear of the nuisance, children might create during the classes. But if it is projected as an authentic Yogic exercise, and done in a properly structured manner, and executed by popular teachers, it will definitely bring good results.

## THE FIRST PROPOSAL

One fine day, I received a telegram from Mr. Madhukar Parashar, Principal of Progressive English High School, Aurangabad, in Maharashtra State, inviting me to start Yogic Laughter for school children. “I want to see my children smiling when they enter their classes,” said Mr. Parashar. He had read about the Laughter Clubs of Mumbai in several newspapers. The Principal was so keen about laughter, that he introduced a few jokes in the morning after prayers, to make his pupils laugh. He kept calling me over the telephone, and sent me a couple of telegrams, requesting me to

visit his school at the earliest. I distinctly remember the date. It was 21st October 1996, the day I was waiting to start my first session with 300 boys and girls between the ages of 4 and 15, along with about 50 parents and 25 school teachers. Everybody was waiting in suspense, to see what was going to happen in the next hour. I have always loved making children laugh, because it is easy to make them giggle and chuckle. During the demonstration, they were bursting with laughter, and sometimes it was very difficult to stop them. I wanted them to be quiet, before we could demonstrate the next type of Laughter. I requested the Principal and senior teachers to keep them quiet. In my four years of experience, I have observed that when I am with adults, I tell them, “*Come on, Laugh! Laugh!*” and they find it difficult to laugh. But whenever I went to any school for a Laughter Session, I found it difficult to stop the children laughing. They would laugh at any silly thing.

One very striking feature was that younger children, below the age of 6, were less inhibited, and were laughing more vibrantly than their senior schoolmates. Teachers were also enjoying the Session but they too were a bit inhibited. The Head Teacher and the P.T. teacher took the initiative of learning the various techniques so as to continue Laughter Sessions everyday for 5 to 10 minutes after the School Prayers, in the morning. The children were overjoyed, and showed their willingness to laugh everyday.

The very next day, we left Aurangabad, and were kept updated with encouraging reports of Laughter Sessions in the school. Many children wrote me letters requesting me to come again. This was the only school that practiced Laughter everyday. But my joy didn't last long enough. After one year, when I visited Aurangabad for a stress management workshop in an industrial house, I discovered that the Principal Mr. Parashar had had a heart attack a few months previously, and due to his demise the Laughter Sessions had stopped. After that, the caretaker of the school didn't take any initiative to start such Sessions again.

Following that, I must have given demonstrations in more than 25 schools in various cities. The concept was appreciated, but so far, none has implemented it. Maybe, they are waiting for its bonafides to be proved.



A laughter session with disabled children in a school at Perth, Australia.

Maybe, they are afraid of the nuisance the children might create. Meanwhile, many teachers are trying out Laughter Sessions in the classes, in a small way, and finding it very useful in creating a positive mood.

### **WHY CHILDREN OF TODAY NEED TO LAUGH MORE**

a) While children are said to be the ideal models of mirth, too much stress of modern studies, has taken a toll of their laughter, it seems. They are loaded with too much information. The subjects that we were taught in the 10th Standard, poor kids are now forced to study in the 5th Standard. Competition is very tough these days, and to stay in the race they have to cut down on their playtime and attend extra tuitions. Thus, their stress levels are mounting. More and more children are committing suicide because they can't stand the fierce competition. Laughter Sessions everyday will help to reduce these stress levels.

b) Today's children abandon the spirit of fun, play and laughter at an early age. This was very obvious when we had combined Sessions with children from the 1st to 10th Standards. While children below the 3rd and

4th Standards were having a great time, the seniors were a bit more reserved. Daily laughter will help them retain their spirit of laughter and playfulness.

c) Children of today will have to face tough challenges, to survive in this competitive world. If they can be taught to handle their emotions effectively, and learn the ways and means of sensible living through Laughter Therapy, they can live much happier lives.

#### **BENEFITS OF LAUGHTER THERAPY TO CHILDREN**

1. Regular Laughter Sessions will increase oxygen supply to improve their mental functions and academic performance.
2. It will reduce stress during examination time. Before entering the exam hall, they should be made to laugh for 10 minutes to reduce anxiety.
3. Laughter Therapy will increase stamina and breathing capacity, to help them excel in sports activities. It will be very relaxing before competitive sports events.
4. It will increase the level of relaxation, and reduce nervousness and stage fright. It will also help children to be more extroverted and develop self-confidence.
5. They will suffer fewer attacks of coughs, colds, throat and chest infections, as laughter helps to build good immunity against common infections.
6. If Yogic deep breathing is practised in between two types of laughter, it will help them develop mental stability. If cheerfulness becomes a way of life, they will have a positive attitude, even during hard times. Laughter will also help them enhance their creative abilities.

## **Laughter Among Senior Citizens, Prisoners and Disabled Children**

One of the universal laws is that whatever is born, will die one day. Almost every one of us will go through old age. Due to advancements in medical science the average age is going up, and according to some estimates, in the next 30-40 years, the number of older people will outnumber the younger people, especially in developed countries. Due to immense stress and strain during one's younger days, the body starts showing signs of wear and tear, once you cross the age of 60. Many older people live in old age homes, and feel very lonely and depressed. I have visited many such places, and found that they don't laugh and smile much. Suicide rates among the elderly, are also high. Though they live with other elderly people, and there is community feeling, they miss their children and family members very much. They feel very happy when someone visits them. At this age, all they need is to talk to someone, and friends to share their emotions. I believe laughter can



provide them with the much-needed sense of fellowship, and connectedness. As we get older, our capacity to laugh keeps going down. Laughter Exercises can help older people to keep their spirits high, and help them come out of depression. In India, a majority of Laughter Club members are over the age of 50-60 years. They are significantly benefited from Laughter Clubs. In addition to physical exercise, these Clubs have helped them to find much-needed social support. This is very good for their physical, mental and emotional well-being.

### **AEROBIC EXERCISE FOR ELDERLY**

Laughter is also equivalent to aerobic exercise, in terms of cardio-pulmonary endurance. According to Prof. William Fry, 10 minutes of laughter is equivalent to half-an-hour on a rowing machine. In other words, laughter provides exercise to the lungs and circulatory system, to push the heart rate up to a level comparable to any aerobic exercise. This fact is very important for older people, who cannot walk and do not do much physical exercise, because of weak muscles and arthritis problems. Therefore, laughter is an ideal workout for those who have physical limitations.

Elderly people also suffer from aches and pains in the joints, and there is muscular stiffness. Laughter triggers the release of endorphins that act as pain killers. Many elderly people who previously had difficulty in sleeping and needed tranquilisers and sleeping pills, found Laughter Yoga exercises helpful in getting better quality sleep, and many of them stopped needing sleeping pills.

One of the most profound effects of laughter, is on depression. This may be due to biochemical changes occurring within the body, and also due to the social contacts depressed people get from Laughter Clubs members. Laughter Club activities have helped them to become more playful and celebrative.

### **THE DANISH EXPERIENCE**

I visited many old age homes in many countries, but had a unique experience in Copenhagen, Denmark. I was invited to laugh with a group of 70 residents of a senior citizen's home. More than 10 elderly persons



Laughter Club of Surat, India

were on wheel chairs, and could not move much. After the initial briefing, we started with the Laughter Session, and we took all the persons who were on wheelchairs, into the center, and we laughed with them. We greeted them with laughter, shook hands with them, and played with them. Everyone had a good Laughter Session, except those on wheelchairs, who were not participating much, and we thought they may not have liked the idea. To our surprise, when we spoke to them after the Session, they told us that although they were not able to laugh much, they loved being touched and greeted, with laughter. They were keenly looking forward to more Sessions like this, on a regular basis. Many Laughter Leaders go to senior citizens' homes to cheer them up as a part of their social commitment.

We have many reasons to believe that Laughter Yoga is an ideal exercise for elderly people because it is not just physical exercise, but it connects the body, mind and spirit.

- ❖ The exercises are adaptable to all levels and limitations of cognitive, sensory and motor ability.

- ❖ They do not require any ability to tell jokes or perform humourously.
- ❖ They provide physical exercise that involves large and small muscles, and strengthens breathing ability.
- ❖ They reduce suffering and contribute to the restoration of optimal health and independence.
- ❖ They take place in a socially supportive group setting.
- ❖ They transcend most linguistic barriers.
- ❖ They encourage healthy attitudes and peace of mind, such as by paying compliments, and being less angry.
- ❖ They are not passive-receptive, but adapt to all levels of capacity for interaction.
- ❖ They are an inviting, not demanding, activity.
- ❖ They provide a simple, structured, playful routine that is based on sound scientific principles.
- ❖ They lift the spirits of staff and residents, alike.
- ❖ There is some early indication that families prefer placing elder members in facilities that provide Laughter Club programming.
- ❖ We have special training programmes about how to laugh with senior citizens, as the techniques are slightly different than regular Laughter Clubs.

#### **LAUGHTER AMONG POLICE PERSONNEL**

It seems that the simple idea of a Laughter Club, has many applications and it is constantly evolving. With increasing crime, Police personnel are under stress, and the Police Department in India, keeps organising different methods of stress release like Yoga, meditation. During my travels to spread Laughter Clubs, I was invited to conduct a seminar by the Police Academy in Nasik and Baroda, in India. In the beginning, it was very difficult to make policemen laugh in front of their senior officers, but once they started laughing, the ice was broken and the Laughing Session worked well. Initially, it was also hard for policemen to laugh, because

looking serious and tough, is part of their job description. I could see the visible relaxation on their faces after the Session. A senior Police Officer in Baroda (Gujarat), Mr. Keshav Kumar, took the initiative of introducing Laughter Therapy among police officers, before the allocation of their duties, in the morning. It has also been introduced in the Police Academy in Ahmedabad, as a part of their Training Drill, once a week.

#### **LAUGHTER AMONG PRISONERS**

Two years ago, John Cleese, the famous English actor, came to Mumbai, to make a documentary film titled ‘‘Human Face’’ and the Laughter Clubs of India were part of the series. During John’s visit I took him to many Laughter Clubs, factories and finally to Arthur Road Prison, for a Laughter Session. Laughter among prisoners was a humbling experience. I obtained permission to hold a Laughter Session among undertrials, from the police authorities. One hour before the Laughter Session, I went into the overcrowded Prison premises, to build a rapport with them, and asked if they would like to laugh with me. I explained the concept to them and 70-80 prisoners opted to join the Laughter Session.

I was not too sure whether they would laugh or not, because they looked very sad, angry and depressed. Some of them had mask-like faces. Along with my Laughter Leaders, I started with different Laughter Exercises, and after initial hesitation, they opened up, and laughed uproariously, as if all their anger was transformed into laughter. At the end of the Session, everybody seemed happy, and asked when they would laugh like this again. Some of the Police Officers who were watching the proceedings, asked me to hold a Laughter Session for Police Officers too, as they also face stress.

I spoke to many prisoners after the Laughter Session, and I could feel that they had a lot of anger and depression. If these negative emotions are not removed, they will resort to crime again, when they are released from jail. Now, I have written to the Home Ministry, to ask for permission to hold regular Laughter Sessions, among long-term convicted prisoners. I remember having trained a young man from Chicago, USA who was working with prisoners, and he too was optimistic about a Laughter Project, in prison.

Laughter can certainly help in resolving the negative emotions in criminals, and putting them into a positive frame of mind. This is my dream project, and I am sure I will soon gain permission for such an initiative in India, and the day is not far off, when this idea will be implemented worldwide.

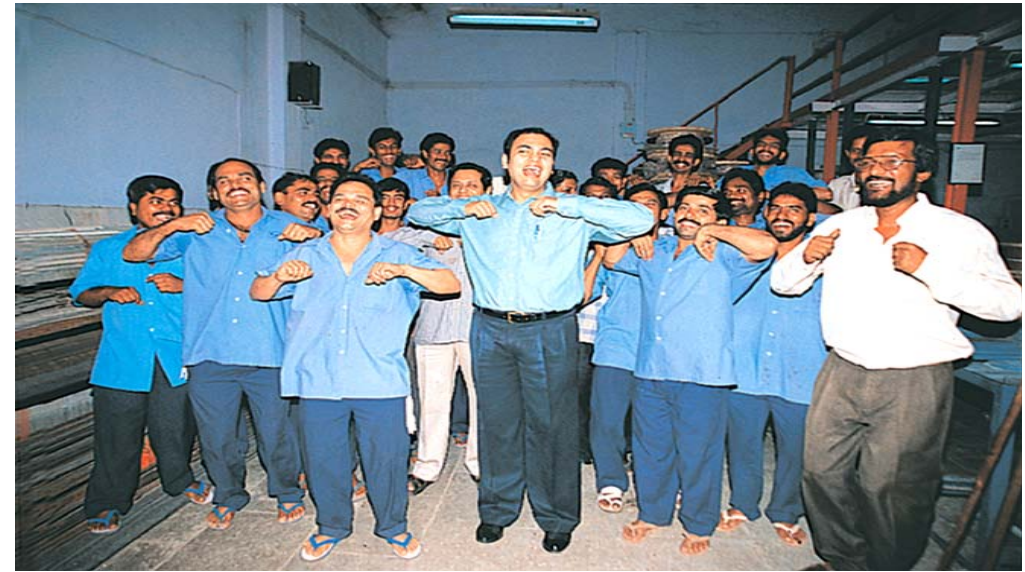
### **MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED**

The city of Bangalore also known as Silicon Valley of India, has the distinction of having more than 70 Laughter Clubs. One of these Laughter Clubs is at the institute for mentally and physically challenged children. One of the teachers there, named Mythali, is a Laughter Club member. One day, she tried out a Laughter Session with special children, and found them more cheerful throughout the day.

From that day onwards, she introduced Laughter Yoga exercise in their curriculum. Their physiotherapist told us that many children who did not respond to their commands earlier, responded spontaneously now, and they do their exercises with great interest. This has helped to improve their physical and mental well-being.

In Perth, Australia, I had a similar experience, when I conducted a Laughter Aession with physically and mentally challenged children.





Laughter in the Workplace: 35 factory workers start the day with laughter.



Members of an IT company (Lanbit Computers) laughing their way to success in Mumbai.





Women Power in Laughter Clubs: More than 70 per cent members are women.  
God only knows why!



Laugh your Cancer Away: Laughter helps to fight cancer by strengthening the immune system  
and putting a person in a positive mental state.



A Laughing Competition in progress in Copenhagen, Denmark.  
Jan Thygesen Poulsen and Dr. Kataria look on.



A Laughter Workshop at Hamburg, Germany.





Laughter Happy-demic: World Laughter Day 1999 celebrations in Mumbai, India.



A Laughter Club in action at Zurich, Switzerland.



World Laughter Day 2001 celebrations in Copenhagen, Denmark. More than 6000 people gathered together, and had a Laughter Session and prayed for World Peace.



Laughter Session in progress at Brussels in Belgium.





London Laughter Club, UK.



Dr. Kataria conducts a Laughter Session in Singapore.



Dr. Kataria with Tony Buzan at the Singapore Learning Festival.



A Laughter Session in progress at the Humour Conference in Stuttgart, Germany.





Corinne Cosseron (South France) along with Marc De Wilde leading a Laughter Session in Frontignan.



Dr. Madan Kataria and Madhuri Kataria at a Laughter Rally in Ahmedabad, India.



A group of Certified Laughter Leaders in Copenhagen, Denmark.



Laughter Yoga is a combination of Yoga breathing with Laughter.





The Laughter Club of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.



Happy Laughter Leaders after the training in Tel Aviv, Israel.



A Laughter Session with a Japanese delegation.



Laughter Club of Hollister, California, USA.





Laughter Yoga with senior citizens in Vernon, Canada.



Laughter Yoga Session in progress in Chandigarh, India.



Daniel Kiefer leading Laughter Session at an old age home in Soultz, France.



One-meter Laughter in progress at Copenhagen, Denmark.





Laughter Yoga Session in Budapest, Hungary.



Laughter Session in Sydney, Australia



Laughter Yoga Session in Madrid, Spain.



Laughter Session in Zurich, Switzerland.

## “Woman Power” in Laughter Clubs

I have always held women in high esteem, as far as health is concerned. Man is supposed to be stronger than woman in many ways, but when it comes to health and stress management, women are far ahead of their male counterparts. Women have always been more concerned about the health of their families, and they are always in the forefront whenever any health-building activity is considered. One of the unique features of Laughter Clubs is the enthusiastic participation of the fairer sex. In a conservative country like India, it requires a lot of courage for a woman to come out in a public place and laugh aloud, for no reason. This is due to the age old social setup.

In the beginning, when we started the first Laughter Club in Mumbai, we had only two women, as others were not sure of what exactly would



Argument laughter is very popular among women all over the world!

happen, and how useful these funny proceedings would be. Initially, many women used to watch from a distance and get amused, but they didn't have the courage to join the group, as they were waiting for more women to join. Slowly, over a period of time, when we learnt to laugh without jokes, and the word started spreading about the breathing and stretching exercises based on Yoga, more and more women started participating. Most participants are aged 40-50 plus, as younger women have to send their children to school and their husbands to office, in the morning. But during vacations, they used to come along with their children and enjoyed the fun. Many regretted their non-availability in the mornings.

After working hard in their kitchen, and the chores of running a household, our Laughter Clubs provided a new platform for them to give vent to their bottled-up emotions. I must admit, that the presence of more and more women, provided authenticity to our Movement. People in India believe that if there are women in Laughter Clubs, there must be something good about the Clubs, otherwise they would not endorse them so enthusiastically.



### **MORE DEVOTED**

In my experience, when it comes to laughing with no reason, it was much easier to make women laugh, than men. Even the infectiousness of laughter is much better in them. I do not understand the reason for this. Maybe they are less logic-oriented than men. They operate more out of devotion. That is the reason why more women are found at spiritual discourses and religious activities.

### **MORE FUN-LOVING**

It may be due to their long association with children, while bringing them up, that women are more fun-loving. While playing fun games, they are more absorbed, and they don't look as if they are doing them just to kill time. Recently, we launched a new project '*Chalo Cinema*' (Go for movies), because going to a cinema hall in a group, has its own charm. We advised all Club members to go for a movie, drama or to circus, at least once in two months. The project took off very well, and again, the women were more enthusiastic.

### **ALL WOMEN CLUB**

There were 30-40 per cent of women in all the Laughter Clubs for a year or so. After that, there were some dropouts among men, because of their other commitments, but the attendance of women started growing. In many Clubs, women outnumber men. They seem more committed and their dropout rate is much lower. At many places there are 100 per cent women only Clubs!

My joy knew no bounds when I was informed that there was a 'Women Only Club' going very strong in one of the suburbs in Mumbai, where they laugh at 6 pm every evening for half-an-hour. Surprisingly, there were 60-70 women gathered in the compound of a building and laughing out loud. Normally, we don't suggest that people start a Laughter Club in a building compound, because even if one person complains about noise pollution, the Club will land up in trouble.

A confident group leader told me that there is no chance of any complaint, because members from each and every house come down to



Laughter Session in a Public Park in Wiesbaden, Germany

participate in the Laughter Sessions. Seeing is believing. I went there and found amazing enthusiasm. A majority of members were working women. They come back home at 5.30 pm and start their guffaws at 6 pm. I never expected this to happen, but I was truly happy to see this development.

### **LAUGHTER KITTY**

Many women who could not join Laughter Clubs in the morning because of their household commitments, requested me to start an evening Laughter Club and on 18th July 2004 we started with the new concept of a Laughter Kitty. It was very successful, because, in addition to Laughter Yoga exercises, we could do Laughter Meditation, followed by fun games and dancing. The most important aspect about the Laughter Kitty is that the members are discussing and sharing their experiences of life. All these things were not possible in public park Laughter Clubs. In Mumbai, the Laughter Kitty concept is becoming very popular, and we are getting many requests to open such evening Laughter Clubs.

# Special Projects in Laughter Clubs

## PROJECT “PHONE A FRIEND” (LEARNING THROUGH LAUGHTER)

From 1st September 2001 to 10th October 2001 (40 days), Laughter Lovers all over the world, participated in a unique project “*Phone a Friend*” to re-establish connections with those who used to be very close and made some difference to their lives, but due to various reasons had lost touch. An appeal was sent out to Laughter Club members to call up their near and dear ones to say hello and ask about their welfare. The idea was to express love and gratitude and to remind them that the old good days were not forgotten.

## GUIDELINES FOR PROJECT “PHONE A FRIEND”

Scan through your memory, old telephone diaries and visiting cards and look for your loved ones under the following categories.

a). Your present friends, colleagues and acquaintances to whom you have not talked for months together.

b). People from the localities where you used to live earlier in the same city as well as in other cities and in other countries. Call up your old business colleagues, friends from previous jobs and from old neighbourhoods.

c). Your childhood friends, school mates, college friends, school teachers, professors and your well wishers. It might be a big challenge to find the contact members of those whose whereabouts are not known to you. For example I found a school teacher of mine with great difficulty but the experience was humbling. She cried for joy. I can't explain my feelings about what such a phone call can do to the heart!

d). Anyone you know who is very old and lonely, people from lower socio-economic strata who have served you and worked for you. If phone numbers are not available, please write a postcard or letter.

## THE PHILOSOPHY

**UNCONDITIONAL LOVE :** There is a normal human tendency of “Out of Sight - Out of Mind” but we laughter lovers will not let this happen. The purpose behind the “*Phone a Friend*” project is to find the deeper meaning of laughter, that is, the spirit of laughter, which says - Laughter is not all about making oneself happy but making others happy too. Our objective is to develop unconditional love for others without any selfish motive. Most of our actions are directed towards an I, MY, ME agenda that leads to EGOISM, which is the basic cause of unhappiness. “Phone a Friend” is one step forward to look beyond oneself and open one's heart to those who might need love and compassion. Remember, one phone call might give someone a moment of joy and lift his or her spirits from despair. We have already conducted trial studies in Mumbai, India. It was a humbling and soul-nourishing experience. Many cried for joy and surprise, while others grieved to find that their loved ones were no more in this world.

## 40-DAY FORMULA

The philosophy behind the 40-day formula is that any pursuit or good deed repeated 40 times, becomes ingrained. Otherwise it is likely to be forgotten or remains mere knowledge. It does not become manifest in

your life. This will further strengthen our belief that anything which is done as a group efforts is manifested with greater ease. There are so many virtues we wish to implement in our lives but this doesn't happen for lack of persistent effort at an individual level. Repetition of any act becomes easy if undertaken in a group because each one keeps motivating the others. A Laughter Club is an excellent platform for group learning. "Let us All Unite and Get Happy" - that the real meaning of LAUGH.

### **“NEIGHBOURS DAY” - JULY 1, EVERY YEAR**

We, the Laughter Club members, have found a new meaning of laughter, which is known as the “Spirit of Laughter”. Laughter is not just amusement and entertainment, nor it is only giggling and chuckling - it is the way in which we relate to others and how we react to the behaviour and attitude of others. Yet another brilliant idea came from my friend B.K. Satyanarayan, the founder of the Bangalore Laughter Clubs (India). Every year, the first day of July is celebrated as ‘Neighbours’ Day’. On this occasion Laughter Clubs members all over the world invite their immediate next door neighbours or any one staying in their neighbourhoods for a cup of tea/coffee, lunch, dinner or outing, depending upon mutual convenience, to show solidarity and commitment towards improving neighbourly relationships.

### **THE PHILOSOPHY**

Much of our laughter and happiness depends upon the relationships we have with people around us, like our friends, relatives and especially neighbours. Your neighbours can play an important role in the well-being of your family, as they are available 24 hours next door. Friends and relatives may take a while to reach you in an emergency.

A friendly and positive neighbour can enhance one's sense of security and family well-being, while a hostile and negative neighbour can be a source of stress, emotional turbulence, anger, irritation, jealousy and criticism. Let us make a new beginning and make a commitment to establish and nurture this beautiful relationship based on mutual need. Keep the following points in mind while dealing with your neighbours.

1. We need their help and moral support in an hour of emergency like a fire, mishap, theft, robbery, gas leakage, medical emergency or death in the family.
2. We need their help for looking after old parents, children, pets or plants, while we are away for a few hours or even for a few days, of course on mutual understanding.
3. We need their assistance during ceremonies like marriages, birthdays, religious and social functions.
4. We need to share our moments of success and achievement.
5. They help receive or re-direct important letters and documents when one is away for a long time or changes one's house or office.

### **HOW TO BUILD UP A RAPPORT WITH YOUR NEIGHBOURS**

1. Always be ready to help your neighbour as your help is like an insurance for you to get your neighbour's help and support when you are in need.
2. Remember the birthdays of your neighbours, especially their children, and also their wedding anniversaries. Make it a point to greet them personally. Send them flowers or a greeting card.
3. Periodically send small gifts or sweets to make them feel special.
4. Be liberal in paying compliments about their houses, their children, their successes and their achievements.
5. Express gratitude even if they do you a small favour.
6. Deliver letters and documents promptly, when wrongly delivered at your address.
7. Be careful about playing loud music during parties and celebrations. If possible make them a part of the festivity and they won't complain.
8. Avoid littering in a common passage and open places that might cause inconvenience to your neighbours.
9. Children, when they play together in a neighbourhood, can create a strong bond between the families and at the same time can create misunderstandings when they fight. So, be careful and compassionate when handling fights among children. Give suggestions and avoid blaming.



# World Laughter Day: World Peace Through Laughter

**T**oday, we need to laugh more than ever before, as we are facing the threat of international terrorism. More and more countries are acquiring nuclear capabilities. Having nuclear bombs is not a guarantee of peace, as thought by many top leaders of the world. Why is there so much unrest in the world these days?

## INNER WAR

The ultimate objective of Laughter Yoga Club Movement is to bring world peace through laughter. How can we bring peace through laughter? The logic is very simple. The war in the external world, is a reflection of the inner war, which is going on in the minds of the people all over the world. The reason why we are not laughing enough today, is because we have not understood the real meaning of laughter. Laughter is not just amusement, entertainment and fun; as a matter of fact, laughter is an expression of inner happiness, which can come only when we understand

the purpose of life. The real purpose of life is that every human being has a unique talent to contribute and give to this world, and not focusing more on what we can take, or achieve from this world. Another reason why we are not laughing more, is that we have learnt to laugh only when there is a success and achievement, but we have not learnt to laugh and celebrate our mistakes, failures and difficulties, from which we can learn a lot. Laughter is a positive energy. Laughter Yoga exercises will bring good health and well-being, while inner spirit of laughter will help us understand the deeper meaning of life. By understanding the ways and means of sensible living, through Laughter Clubs, we can bring peace within us, and inner peace will bring peace in the outer world.

## POSITIVE VIBRATIONS

Laughter is a powerful positive emotion. It creates a positive aura around individuals. When a group of individuals laugh together, it creates a collective community aura. Electromagnetic waves from a group of individuals, who are laughing everyday, form a protective envelope around that area to protect it from evil forces. Similarly, in the olden days, people believed that one saintly person was enough to protect the entire village. If these Laughter Groups multiply all over the country, it will change the aura of the entire nation. Similarly, having Laughter Clubs all over the world, can build up a global consciousness of friendship.

## THE WORLD LAUGHTER DAY - WHEN?

To spread the message of world peace through Laughter Clubs all over the world, we have decided to celebrate World Laughter Day on the **first Sunday of every May**, when thousands of people would gather to laugh together at a public place or a stadium. Earlier, we started with the second Sunday of every January as World Laughter Day, but in the Western countries, it is too cold in the month of January and we cannot have many people come out in the open, to celebrate and create awareness, about the message of world peace through laughter.

## THE WHOLE WORLD IS A FAMILY

Through the Laughter Club Movement, we are creating a community of



Appreciation Laughter at Laughter Club in Chandigarh, India

like-minded people, who believe unconditional love, laughter and joy. It is very difficult to unite the whole world at the political level, or through religion. Our past experience has shown that religion and politics can never unite the world. People who run the governments, might not have political will to bring closer the whole world, because this is not in their interest, if people live in peace.

I strongly believe that world peace can happen at the grass-root level. If people from all over the world come together to have a common shared vision of love, compassion, appreciation and forgiveness, then it is possible to create an international community. Laughter is an universal language, which has the potential to unite humanity, without a particular religion. Laughter is a neo-religion that can establish a common link between various religions, and create a new world order.

### THE FORMAT

The usual format of WLD celebration is, gathering of Laughter Club members and wellwishers, at important landmark places of the cities like

big squares, stadium, public parks or auditoriums etc. After gathering, a Peace March is taken out, by walking a few kilometres on the main thoroughfares of the city, carrying banners and placards, with slogans of *“World Peace through Laughter”*, *“The Whole World is an Extended Family”*, *“Laugh for Life”*, *“Love & Laughter”*, *“Laughter has No Language”*, *“HO, HO, HA, HA, HA”*, *“Laugh & Make Others Laugh”*, *“Laughter: A Positive Energy”*, *“Join Laughter Club - It’s FREE”*, *“I Love to Laugh”*. During the Peace March, we will chant *“Ho, Ho, Ha, Ha, Ha”* while clapping and dancing. After walking some distance, the procession stops for a while to do one or two Laughter Yoga exercises (for example: Milkshake, Mobile, Lion, One Meter, Greeting Laughter.).

At the end of the Peace March, a big gathering will take place around a stage or a platform, from where the Laughter Leaders will conduct a brief 10-minute Laughter Session, followed by a message from Dr Kataria, to be read out, and prayer for World Peace. After the Laughter Session, all members will participate in Silent Prayer for World Peace, by closing eyes and praying for one minute. The meeting would end by music, dancing, singing and celebrations.

### FIRST WORLD LAUGHTER DAY

The 11th day of January, 1998, went down in history, when more than 12,700 members from Laughter Clubs all over India, and a few invitees from other countries, assembled and laughed together at the Race Course Grounds, in Mahalaxmi, Mumbai, to tell the entire world that we need to take laughter seriously. The enthusiastic participation by thousands of members has proved that these Laughter Clubs are not a laughing matter. The Grounds that are usually filled with the sound of galloping, the groans of many losers and the laughter of a few winners, perhaps for the first time, reverberated with laughter and happiness. To participate in the celebrations, members of various Clubs, along with their near and dear ones, arrived at Worli Seaface, overlooking the vast expanse of the Arabian Sea. The participants dressed in white, wearing Laughter Logo caps, and holding colourful banners, were bubbling with energy, with smiles on their faces. Placards read *“World Peace Thru’ Laughter”*, *“Join a Laughter Club, It’s Free”*, *“I am a Laughter Club Member,”* etc.





# Scientific Research on Laughter and Humour

**L**aughter is as old as mankind itself, and its benefits have been felt for centuries. Everybody understands that laughter is beneficial and relaxing. But, it is only recently, that the scientific basis for the benefits of laughter has been established. This chapter analyses the scientific principles of the medical benefits of laughter and humour, on the basis of research work done by many scientists all over the world, and some of the clinical data gathered from Laughter Clubs in India and other countries, who practise Laughter Yoga.

## LAUGHTER AS AN EUSTRESS OR STRESS BUSTER

Hans Selye described laughter as a form of Eustress. This means that it is a positive, life-enhancing type of stress. Laughter has a built-in balancing mechanism that encourages the two-step action of stimulation and relaxation, due to the release of the chemicals adrenaline and noradrena-

line. This produces a feeling of wellbeing, by relieving the minor stresses and strains of daily life. Laughter reduces anxiety, tension and depression. Thus, it helps in mitigating several serious diseases such as hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, in which anxiety and tension are predisposing factors. Kay Herth (*American Journal of Nursing* 1984) has documented reduction of hypertension after Laughter Therapy. Many of our members have reaped the beneficial effects of laughter in reducing hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, anxiety, insomnia, etc.

## LAUGHTER AND HEALING

Laughter releases catecholamines, together with adrenaline and noradrenaline. This enhances blood flow, reduces inflammation, speeds up the healing process and heightens the overall arousal of the body. Thus, it would help in mitigating arthritis, spondylitis, myofascitis and other such inflammatory diseases.

## LAUGHTER AS AN ANALGESIC

Laughter releases two neuropeptides like Endorphins and Enkephalins. These are opioids, which are the body's natural pain suppressing agents. The ability of laughter to release muscle tension, and to soothe the sympathetic nervous system, also helps to control pain, as does increased circulation. Thus, laughter has a multi-pronged approach for the relief of pain, in conditions such as arthritis, spondylitis, etc.

This is aptly demonstrated by the famous article of Norman Cousins (*New England Journal of Medicine*, Dec. 1976), where he documents that 10 minutes of laughter had an analgesic effect for 2 hours, in his personal problem of severe ankylosing spondylitis. Cogan *et al* (*Journal of Behavioural Medicine*, 1987) demonstrated by clinical experiments, that discomfort thresholds were higher in subjects after bouts of laughter. Some (21%) of our members with painful orthopaedic conditions have obtained relief.

## LAUGHTER AND IMMUNITY

Lee S. Berk (*Clinical Research* 1989) found that laughter may attenuate some stress-related hormones and modify Natural Killer Cell activity, resulting in immunomodulation. Labott also supports Berk's findings (*Jour-*



Lion Laughter has helped many women remove their inhibitions and find their sense of humour.

*nal of Behavioural Medicine*, 1990) and concludes that, laughter results in improved immunity. In a study at Canada's University of Waterloo (*Well Being Journal*), it was well documented that laughter increases the levels of immunoglobulin IgA and IgG. Norman Cousins (*Prevention* March 1988) also states that laughter serves as a blocking agent against disease.

Thus, laughter, by improving body immunity, can mitigate a host of chronic diseases such as bronchitis, the common cold, rheumatoid arthritis, allergies, etc. Improving immunity may also be a supplementary measure in the control of AIDS. Some (12.9%) of our members recorded improvements in chronic diseases such as bronchitis, common cold, etc.

### CANCER AND LAUGHTER

In Berk and Tan's (1996) experiment concerning the laughter-immune connection, they used a few healthy fasting males who volunteered for the experiment, and had them view a funny one-hour video film. They took blood samples of their interferon-gamma (IFN) before, during and after they had watched the film. They obtained significant results that showed

increased activity in IFN, after watching the funny video, which lasted till the following day. IFN activates the CT-Cells, B-Cells immunoglobulins and Natural Killer (NK) Cells.

This could be very important research for cancer, since laughter also fights against tumour cells. Laughter's ability to be a pain reliever, and its ability to fight tumour cells, have added an exciting new area in cancer research. In our Laughter Clubs, there are many cancer patients who are leading much healthier lives due to a positive attitude towards life. This makes us believe that laughter can be used as a preventive measure against cancer.

### LAUGHTER AS AN AEROBIC EXERCISE

Dr. W. Fry states that laughter is a good aerobic exercise. He says that 100 laughs a day are equal to 10 minutes of rowing or jogging. Lloyd (*Journal of General Psychology*, 1938) showed that laughter is a combination of deep inhalation and full exhalation, inspiring excellent ventilation, wonderful rest and profound release. Thus, laughter increases the lungs' vital capacity and oxygenation. We measured the lung's vital capacity (peak flow rate) of our members, using a Spirometer. The peak flow rate was lower than normal in 13%, (<300l/m.), it was normal in 67% (300-500 l/m.) and high in 20% (>500l/m.). This would benefit patients with pulmonary diseases such as bronchitis, bronchial asthma, bronchiectasis. Some (7.8%) of our members have gained relief from such lung diseases.

### RECENT RESEARCH ON LAUGHTER FROM MARYLAND UNIVERSITY

In the month of March 2005, a report appeared on national television CTV, Canada, which reported Dr. Michael Miller's research on laughter. It reported that laughter appears to cause the tissue that forms the inner lining of blood vessels, the endothelium, to dilate or expand, in order to increase blood flow, the researchers at the University of Maryland School of Medicine in Baltimore found. Emotionally-wrenching movies that produced mental stress, on the other hand, caused vasoconstriction – tightening of the blood vessels, which reduces blood flow. The researchers say

the findings suggest that laughter may do your cardiovascular system some good while mental stress will slow down blood flow. “Given the results of our study, it is conceivable that laughing may be important to maintain a healthy endothelium, and reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease,” says study leader Dr. Michael Miller, Director of Preventive Cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center. “At the very least, laughter offsets the impact of mental stress, which is harmful to the endothelium.” The beneficial changes that laughter brought were similar to the benefit seen with aerobic activity, says Dr. Miller. “We don’t recommend that you laugh and not exercise, but we do recommend that you try to laugh on a regular basis. “Thirty minutes of exercise three times a week, and 15 minutes of laughter on a daily basis is probably good for the vascular system.”

The study looked at 20 volunteers who had normal blood pressure, cholesterol and blood glucose levels. Each volunteer was shown a 15-minute segment of a movie – either a comedy, or a drama. The drama was the opening scene of “*Saving Private Ryan*”, while the comedy was “*King Pin*.” Forty-eight hours later, they were shown the other movie. Brachial artery flow was reduced in 14 of the 20 volunteers following the movie clip that caused mental stress. In contrast, beneficial blood vessel relaxation, or vasodilation, was increased in 19 of the 20 volunteers after they watched the comedy. Overall, average blood flow increased 22 per cent during laughter, and decreased 35 per cent during mental stress. The blood vessel changes lasted for at least 30 to 45 minutes after the volunteers watched a movie.

## RESEARCH SURVEY IN INDIA

In India, laughter has been in use as a therapeutic exercise and research interest has gradually increased, focussing on this aspect. A few survey studies conducted by Sheetal Agarwal, highlight the perceived therapeutic effects of Laughter Yoga.

Due to several limitations, other more sophisticated forms of research, such as experimental research, have not been conducted. But an adequate consolation is that we are moving towards accumulating more and more scientific evidence, that validates the use of laughter as an effective form of therapy.

Here are some of the physiological parameters of the research survey.

Parameter	% of Survey Population	% Who Perceive Improvement
Regular Walkers	97.56	86.25
Diabetes	13.4	9
Blood pressure	31.7	26.9
Respiratory problems	17.0	14.2
Heart disease	7.3	33.3
Quality of sleep	57.3	65.8

It is important to note that a significant percentage of people suffering from heart disease perceived betterment after joining Laughter Clubs, especially pertaining to a reduction in chest pains.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL MEASURES :

Coping better with anxiety and feelings of depression	19.5 %
Coping better with stress	69.5 %
Increased social interaction	74.39 %
Noticeable change in mood and attitude	79.6 %

With reference to psychological measures, the data available suggests a comparatively greater perceived effect. This is very evident in terms of participants of Laughter Therapy finding themselves coping better with stress. Though it has to be further studied as to how Laughter Therapy affects the individual’s appraisal process in terms of a stressful situation, in a way that enables him to deal with stress more effectively. Also, it will be interesting to study the kinds of stresses for which Laughter Therapy is found most effective.

The results also suggest an increase in the participants’ level of social interaction. This, in more ways than one, provides for the psychological well-being of the individual. Participants of Laughter Therapy also find a marked change in their moods, as well as an attitudinal change. Finding





Mr. P. T. Hinduja receiving the 'Best Laughing Man' Award in 1998.

themselves to be more positive in their outlook, is a common experience for many of them, shown as a high percentage 79.26%, in the study. 98.7% of the participants find the format of Laughter Therapy adequate, in terms of time and the structure of exercises. Hence, it can be concluded that though much more structured procedures of research need to be implemented to assess the effects of Laughter Therapy, this study is a stepping-stone in unravelling the basic effects, perceived by the patients.

### SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH ON LAUGHTER YOGA

So far, all the scientific research conducted for the past 25 years, was by using humour model. The researchers induced laughter, by showing some humorous videos, or some kind of mental process, which lead to laughter, and then physiological and biochemical changes were measured. People always questioned the efficacy of Laughter Yoga exercises, as they were self-induced, and not the outcome of any humorous interaction. My experience with Laughter Clubs worldwide taught me that people were definitely deriving health benefits from Laughter Yoga exercises. There was

no scientific proof I could offer them, to satisfy the logical-minded people, especially in the West. I had no problems in India, as more than 100,000 people laughed every morning, without asking me for any proof, but when it came to the West, everybody asked, do you have the data?

Finally, in 2003-04, the first authentic research was completed by Dr. Ilona Papousek from the University of Graz in early fall 2004. According to the news release by *Ananova - March 2004*, a new study shows that laughter really is the best therapy for stroke patients, according to scientists. The research, conducted at Graz University in Austria, showed that Laughter Therapy helped people recovering from strokes lower their blood pressure. Thirty patients in the study were split up into two groups. One group took part in regular "Laughter Yoga" sessions, over a six-week period, while the other practiced movement exercises only. This Laughter Therapy combines Laughing Techniques with breathing exercises, and patients involved in the test took part in three half-hour weekly sessions.

Psychologist Ilona Papousek, who headed the research, said, "This is the first study that shows that laughter has an effect on blood pressure. Blood pressure levels remained roughly the same in the Movement Group, but dropped significantly in the Laughter Group. Physical exercises were similar in both groups, meaning we can ascribe the positive effects to the Laughter Training. The mood improved in both groups, but more noticeably so, in the Laughter Group. Participants also said they felt "more awake" and "less stressed". Papousek added: "The feeling of happiness caused by the laughing, the distraction and improvements to the person's mood in the long run, can help improve the quality of life for patients as well as healthy individuals." The research being done by Dr. Ilona Papousek is not yet published, but we hope it might get published very soon, and we will make the results available to our readers through the website.

### LAUGHTER YOGA STUDIES IN DENMARK

A study was conducted at a computer company where Mr. Thomas Flindt led a session of Laughter Yoga, in the beginning of the day, throughout the month of May 2004. The study was made using an AIR-PAS (Artificial Intelligence Respiratory-Psychophysiological Analysis System), developed

by Mr. Bo von Scheele, Ph.D., the Psychophysiological Institute at Karolinska Institute Stockholm, Sweden, and conducted by Mr. Anders Lonedal.

The test group of four persons were randomly selected. The group was tested with the AIR-PAS at the start of the project, and consequently at the end of the same project. This project shows clearly, the effect that a regular practise of Laughter Yoga, has on the stress levels. On an individual level, the results are remarkable. The body stress levels are significantly reduced. The AIR-PAS test contributes also as an awareness raiser, that is, the individual becomes aware about how the body and mind interact. The importance of a correct breathing behaviour is also highlighted. During a Laughter Session, breathing exercises are frequently used, and the laughter itself has a positive influence on the movement of the diaphragm, as well as the levels of stress hormones in the body. The laughter brings us back to the now. Since the results at group level (the group is only four persons! But ALL four persons have a reduced stress-level, thanks to the project), and even more so, on an individual level, indicate good and even remarkable results, the investigation will continue. Important to state is also the participants' subjective analyses of the project, and the general feeling of well-being that will remain in the company, for a long time. The results from this project confirm a study carried out on ten Laughter Yoga instructors in April 2004.

# How Can You Start a Laughter Club in Your Area?

**LAUGHTER CLUB INTERNATIONAL:** The Laughter Club International (LCI) is a worldwide organisation, registered under the Societies Registration Act 1860. It also has a Public Trust exemption from tax under section 80G. It is non-political, non-religious, non-profit organisation.

## **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

❖ Our aim is to create awareness of this new yogic technique of Laughter all over India and other parts of the world, by setting up more Laughter Clubs and imparting practical training in various techniques of laughter. Thus, we can help to cultivate the Spirit of Laughter by understanding ways and means of sensible living and putting them into practice through laughter.

❖ Our aim is to set up a team of doctors from various specialities and systems of medicine to conduct scientific studies and research work as to how laughter can affect the physical, mental, social and spiritual well being of the participants.

❖ Our aim is to publish journals and set up libraries of books, video cassettes, DVDs, CDs and other information on Laughter Yoga.

❖ Our aim is to bring people of various countries together and promote everlasting peace through laughter.

**What's Free:** Laughter Yoga Clubs are Social Clubs that are free for all everywhere in the world. We do not charge any membership fee anywhere. However, members of the club should share expenses towards hiring of venue or any equipment hire.

**What's Fee Based?** : Outside of the laughter Clubs, any Training/ Coaching that is conducted by Laughter Leaders or Laughter Teachers for personal and business development are chargeable as per the skills, abilities and reputation of the teachers. Members are however under no obligation to attend such Sessions, and may do so only when convinced of their value.

**No Control on Laughter Clubs No Posts, No Hierarchy :** All Laughter Clubs are individual entities and are free functioning units. They are not under the control of any other organization of a group or an institution anywhere in the world. Though there are no Rules and Regulation that oversee the conduct of Laughter Clubs, we do offer guidelines for functioning. The Laughter Yoga Movement recognizes no hierarchy, positions or titles. The only classifications we recognize are Certified Laughter Yoga Leaders and Anchor Persons of a particular club and Certified Laughter Yoga Teachers.

**REGISTRATION OF YOUR CLUB:** The registration of Laughter Club is FREE all over the world. You can download and fill up the form online from our website **[www.laughteryoga.org](http://www.laughteryoga.org)**. However, affiliation to Laughter Club International can be done by paying a small fee. The details you can find on our website.

## **BENEFITS OF AFFILIATION TO LAUGHTER CLUB INTERNATIONAL**

International networking, with other laughter clubs all over the world, participation at national and international conferences at special prices,





One of the outstanding features of the Laughter Clubs in India is that they are very punctual about time. People set their watches by Laughter Clubs!

discounted prices for laughter yoga club collateral, option to participate in the inter club exchange programmes.

### **STARTING A LAUGHTER CLUB IN INDIA**

In India most Laughter Clubs function on an everyday basis and the members meet at public parks where people go for a morning walk. If you want to start a Laughter Club, find a place in your locality where people can assemble early in the morning when they go for a walk. It can be either a public park, an open ground, or a beach. The advantage of selecting such a place is that you can combine laughter therapy sessions with your morning walk. The chosen place should not be in the immediate vicinity of residential complexes so as to prevent any disturbance to others. In areas where weather conditions are not favourable throughout the year, it is not possible to have laughter sessions round the year. Under such circumstances these sessions can be held during yoga classes, at health clubs or at aerobic centres, where laughter can be a value addition to the ongoing activities.

The Laughter Club International will organise a team of experts who will come to your area for a lecture and demonstration of various techniques of yogic laughter. They will also train your anchor persons who will be conducting laughter sessions everyday. The expenses for conveyance, boarding and lodging of the team of experts will be borne by the organising group. If you can't afford the expenses of the team, you can approach social organisations like the Rotary or Lions, or corporate houses and philanthropists to sponsor the event in the public interest. From time to time the Laughter Club International and Dr. Kataria School of Laughter Yoga keep organising Laughter Leader training programmes all over the world. For training schedules you can keep checking at our website [www.laughteryoga.org](http://www.laughteryoga.org)

**In Western Countries** The concept of Laughter Clubs is slightly different in Western countries where club members like to meet for 2 hours every weekend or fortnightly. They laugh together for 30 minutes along with breathing and stretching exercises, followed by laughter meditation for another 30 minutes. After that there are humour activities, fun games, brain storming on psychological and philosophical aspects of laughter and dancing with music. This is known as a social Laughter Club. It operates on a no profit basis and all the expenses of the venue, food and drinks are shared by the members. The frequency of such laughter meetings can be increased or decreased according to the convenience of the group.

You need to be trained as a laughter leader to start a laughter club. We organise workshops and training programmes from time to time in Europe, America and Canada. By training yourself as a laughter leader you can do laughter seminars for companies and corporations on stress management through laughter and humour. Also, laughter yoga concept can be value added to those who are professional speakers, motivational speakers and trainers.

**LAUGHTER YOGA IN THE WORKPLACE :** There are many people who can't get up early in the morning and others who have to rush to their workplaces. They may not be able to attend laughter sessions. The ideal alternative for such people would be to have Laughter Sessions at their offices, or factories, provided the management is convinced about the benefits of the concept.

## Role of the Laughter Leader in a Laughter Club

One of the absolute requirements of running a successful Laughter Club is having an anchor person or Laughter Leader. There can be more than one Laughter Leader in a group. His job is not to crack jokes and make people laugh, nor is he supposed to do any mimicry or funny actions. His main purpose is to initiate the different stages of laughter, breathing exercises and stretching exercises. He is like a trigger, who laughs more easily and infectiously than others. His job is to motivate others to drop their inhibitions and be more playful, so that stimulated laughter can be converted into genuine peals of hilarity. A humble nature, good self-confidence, proper eye contact and a vibrant voice to give commands to initiate laughter are some of basic qualities he or she must have.

### PROPER TRAINING

Even with all the inbuilt qualities of a good leader, the Laughter Leader needs proper training to conduct a laughter session. Since yogic laughter is a new concept, a proper understanding of the subject is very necessary. Books, literature and instructional videos are available at the headquarters of the Laughter Club International. It is better to go through them before starting a Laughter Club. Being a new concept, people might ask many questions which need to be answered. On behalf of the Laughter Club International we keep holding Laughter Leader training programmes from time to time. For training laughter leaders all over the world we have set up an institution 'Dr. Kataria School of Laughter Yoga' which will hold training programmes from time to time in various countries. For details about training programmes one can visit our website [www.laughteryoga.org](http://www.laughteryoga.org).

**IMPORTANT :** At the time of opening a new Laughter Club, a proper Laughter Leader should be selected. He/she should be very regular and should be able to conduct the session from the very next day. Many clubs do not take off well because of the selection of the wrong Laughter Leader.

### HOW TO GIVE A COMMAND

The most important skill of an Laughter Leader in a laughter session is to give commands to participants to initiate different types of laughter and other exercises. The basic purpose of giving a command is to make all the members of the group laugh at the same time. This helps to build up a good tempo of laughter and creates a good effect which stimulates others to laugh. In contrast, if different group members laugh with different tones and timings, it will not elicit a satisfactory response. The response of the group will depend upon the proper commands and energy levels of the leader. Therefore, a leader should always be swift and full of energy. His voice should be audible and clear.

A typical laughter command is given by saying One....Two.... Three or One... Two.... Start... It should be delivered slowly, loudly and building towards a crescendo, that is, with gradually increasing volume. For example you should say one in a normal tone, two should be little louder and

t...h....r....eeeeee.... should be said with such gusto that all the members are stimulated to laugh at the same time, which has a good effect. To initiate deep breathing, all the participants should start at the same time because the timing of inspiration, holding the breath and expiration has to be monitored according to yogic principles. So, it is important to have all the members start at the same time. Therefore, to initiate deep breathing the command should be: Now we'll take a deep breath.... Ready.... Start....! The word 'start' should be said a little louder.

For stretching exercises, the commands are a little different. Normally, we do five rounds of each stretching exercise of the neck and shoulders. First one must name the exercise and then say one..... (slowly).....two....., three....., four..... and five. Members should be asked to do the exercise slowly and at the end of the range of movement a pleasurable stretch should be maintained and then they come back to the starting position. The Laughter Leader himself should do it slowly to demonstrate the speed of the movement. If necessary, the proper execution of exercises should be demonstrated from time to time for the benefit of new members. Instructing and correcting members during the session should be avoided. It might waste time and may cause embarrassment to the participant.

### **FORMATTING THE GROUP**

Since *Hasya Yoga* (Laughter Yoga) is a dynamic exercise, what is very important, is how to make the group members stand and at what distance from each other. Mostly people prefer to stand in a circle format with the Laughter Leader in the middle. In this format the leader should keep turning around so as to keep eye contact with all the members. If the anchor is not turning in a circle, people standing behind him feel ignored or less motivated. Sometimes introvert and shy members would like to stand behind to evade the public eye. This will create hurdles in removing their inhibitions and in the proper execution of various laughter exercises. Another effective format is a semicircle, where the Laughter Leader stands at one end and maintains eye contact with all the members.



The employees of Electrical Products of India (EPI) start their day with laughter.

### **DISTANCE BETWEEN MEMBERS**

This distance between members is very important. While doing stretching exercises more distance is needed so that members do not touch each other with stretched arms. But, if the distance between the members is too much it will not allow proper eye contact between participants in order to convert stimulated laughter into genuine giggles. Secondly, while laughing one should not be self-conscious about maintaining a distance from others. Look into another member's eyes and laugh. Then one should move on to other members to share the laugh.

Therefore, according to the new model of a laughter therapy session, all the exercises along with deep breathing are done at the beginning of the session. This also allows more and more members who are a few minutes late to join in. Also, stretching exercises make participants more relaxed and less inhibited to do laughing exercises. Therefore, it is allright to maintain a distance between members initially, while doing exercises, but when starting with the first laughter exercise, the anchor should call all the members a little closer. Try to make it like a random group. There is no



need to stand in a queue during a laughter session. In fact, members should be instructed to keep moving and changing their places, going up to different members and laughing with them. Standing steady in one particular place is a sign of inhibition and rigidity, which will affect the quality of laughter. The varying distances and movements will help to bring in more playfulness, which in turn will help to make the laughter session more spontaneous and enjoyable.

At the end of the session, the group members are asked to come still closer to do gradient laughter and to shout the laughter slogans. Gradient laughter is a most enjoyable and powerful type of laughter. It is much closer to spontaneous and meditative laughter. It can only be performed well if members are asked to come closer.

### **MOTIVATION LEVELS**

To make people laugh without jokes is no laughing matter. It needs both skill and motivation levels to make a laughter session truly enjoyable. In addition to giving proper commands, the Laughter Leader should be a good motivator. He should be able to inspire others to keep their spirits high. Therefore, the Laughter Leader himself should be dynamic and full of energy. To keep spirits high one should remember the philosophy of 'Motion creates Emotion'. If you act like an energetic man you will become one over a period of time. With the repetitive actions of acting happy and energetic, it will become a part of your nature after sometime. Therefore, just as charity starts from home, likewise to motivate others, get motivated yourself first.

To motivate others, the Laughter Leader should move around in the circle going up to different members and making hand gestures as if saying "Come on", "Come out". Also he should verbalise encouraging words like "Wonderful", "Very good", "First Class" etc. In between the laughter exercises he must say, "Relax! Relax!" to make people more comfortable. Lastly, to keep the self-interest motive intact, there must be continual innovations and introducing of new items as per the recommendations of our central research team. One should be open to introducing new things in place of less interesting old actions. Therefore, the anchors should

stay in touch with the Laughter Club International headquarters through correspondence, telephone, fax, e-mail etc.

### **DISCIPLINE IN A LAUGHTER CLUB**

One of the features of a successful Laughter Leader is being able to maintain discipline about timings and duration of laughter sessions. The entire session should be short and sweet, not lasting for more than 20-25 minutes. One of the hallmarks of a Laughter Club is that it starts sharp on time. Even if there are very few people the clapping and Ho Ho Ha Ha must start without waiting for other members to arrive. Now, people set their watches at the onset of a laughter session. There are many reasons for this punctuality, one of them being that many members have to go to work. The Laughter Leader can't afford to be late and he has to reach five minutes earlier than the scheduled time of a laughter session.

The word discipline does not mean regimentation or bossing. One of the beauties of a Laughter Club is that there are no compulsions or strict rules that one has to come everyday, or one has to reach on time. It is up to the member to decide whether he wants to come everyday, or twice a week, or occasionally as and when he wishes to do so. But if the laughter session is being introduced by an organisation then their rules have to be followed. Normally, in public parks we leave it entirely up to the members' discretion as to how many times they want to attend. Our simple logic is, if the sessions are good and enjoyable why should people miss them?

The idea of maintaining discipline is to maintain orderliness, togetherness and harmony. We favour administration with love and not with force. Even if some member tries to disturb the harmony of the club he should be gently spoken to after the session is over. The anchor should avoid scolding or shouting at him in front of everybody during the session. In spite of the best efforts, if some member hampers the smooth functioning of the club, the anchor is fully authorised to ban the offender's entry, not by law but by the consensus of the existing members of the group.

### **TRAINING CO-ANCHORS**

Laughter must go on 30 days in a month, 365 days in a year. In case the main anchor is not available, there should be a couple of co-anchors who

should be able to run the show effectively. In my experience, the best leaders are those who glorify others and get their recognition. Some anchors have the tendency to lead the show all by themselves, not allowing others to come forward and conduct the session.

If you find that new anchors are able to conduct the whole session effectively, start slowly by asking them to conduct exercises and deep breathing first and then go on to different laughter exercises. Another good idea is to conduct the entire session jointly by dividing various sets of laughter commands. And by doing so, you can always ask new people to come forward and start by giving one particular command first.

This will create very good harmony among the members and help more and more people achieve self-confidence. The Laughter Club of Mulund has created more than 30 anchors in a group of 80-100 members. More and more women should be encouraged to anchor the proceedings. This will remove stage fright and fear of public speaking and develop self-confidence. Allowing others to be anchors will help them to transform their personalities from introverts to extroverts. There are hundreds of such examples in Laughter Clubs, where some people who could not speak even a word in public earlier, now effectively anchor laughter sessions.

### **KEEP RELIGION AND POLITICS AWAY**

We are dreaming of a unified world and of bringing about world peace through Laughter. On the basis of any religion we can never unite the world and bring communal harmony. Laughter belongs to everyone and it has the potential to become a common link between people of all religions, castes, creeds, colours, the rich and poor, boss and subordinate. Different religions may help to achieve spiritual enlightenment through different religious practices, but laughter is one of the easiest and most acceptable forms of spirituality. We are taking the best of the wisdom from all religions and implementing it practically in Laughter Clubs to achieve health and happiness.

Laughter sessions are held early in the morning and that is the time people go to religious places and say prayers. In Laughter Clubs due to



Laughter meditation in progress during one of the training workshops held in Paris

the beliefs of anchor persons, some prayers and chanting of religious hymns were introduced. Though it was liked by many members, this was harming the secular format of Laughter Clubs. This platform is open to all communities. However broad-minded a person may be, still you can't make him accept anything based on a particular religion. Prayers might not elicit the same devotion in the mind of a person belonging to another religion. Therefore, it is the duty of an Laughter Leader not to undertake any prayers or let anybody belonging to a particular religion take advantage of Laughter Clubs. In many clubs which had already started prayers I had to put in very hard efforts to convince them to stop. I told them, prayer is a very personal thing and it should be done in a private place or a religious institution. Prayers are never said casually in a public place. I further told them that religion had always divided people and had sparked off communal violence all over the world.

### **ORGANISING FUN GAMES, PICNICS, HEALTH CAMPS**

In addition to laughter sessions in the mornings, most clubs are now organising outings, picnics and health camps. The expenses involved in

these activities can be contributory. Family members, friends and relatives of regular member may be invited for such occasions. This is one way of marketing laughter and increasing the membership of your club. If the gatherings on such occasions are good, you can approach local banks, popular stores, companies or business houses to sponsor such events by putting up their banners to cover a part of the expenses.

### **ASSIST IN RESEARCH**

From time to time we will be conducting medical research to evaluate the health benefits of laughter therapy. Anchor persons can help the research team in interviewing club members and getting the research proforma filled in. Even if some tests are be conducted, they will be entirely sponsored by the central body, the Laughter Club International.

### **IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Laughter Leader will act as a bridge between club members and the Laughter Club International. From time to time we will keep sending mailers about various activities, research findings, new developments and different projects to bring good health and happiness to members. We will also send information about various national and international conferences on laughter and humour. With the help of behaviour scientists from all over the world, we will help Laughter Club members to overcome negative emotions like fear, anger, guilt, jealousy etc. At present we have designated Monday as 'Compliment Day' and Friday as 'Forgiveness Day' to help members bring about inner happiness. Anchor persons will keep making announcements to implement these programmes. If necessary, copies can be made and distributed among the members.

### **HEALTH WATCH**

Anchors will keep a watch on various club members asking them about their welfare from time to time. Once a fortnight, an announcement should be made to inform the members about who should not participate in laughter sessions. For example, any one having angina problem (chest pain), hernia, glaucoma, cough with sputum for more than 10 days, acute viral infections (cold, flu), uterovaginal prolapse and slipped disc problems



Birmingham Laughter Club, UK.

with back pain, should consult their doctors before attending a laughter session. If any person feels any discomfort during a session he should consult his doctor before joining the next session. Any elderly person with complaints of giddiness should get himself checked by his doctor. For hygienic reasons, a pack of tissues should be kept in case someone gets phlegm while laughing. Members should be discouraged from spitting in the open. Anchors will also keep a watch on those members who are over-exerting during the session.

### **IRREGULARITIES AND CHANGE OF FORMAT**

With the growing popularity of the laughter movement, many groups have started laughter sessions on their own, without proper training. This might cause some harm as the sessions should be monitored by medical experts. We also encourage the clubs to keep experimenting with new ideas to create playfulness and fun in Laughter Clubs. But some leaders try to change the existing laughter exercises according to their own judgement. If the main exercises are not standardised, it becomes difficult to do medical research to evaluate which particular exercise is more beneficial



and which is less so. It has also been observed that according to the liking of some anchors, various types of new exercises are introduced which significantly reduce the duration of laughter exercises, as the total duration of the whole session is 20-25 minutes.

If a particular group wants to introduce more exercises or other items, they should be done before the scheduled time or after the laughter session is over. Extra exercises should not be a compulsion for all the members. If certain types of laughter or exercises are liked by a particular group other than the standard format, they should not exceed 5 minutes.

### **WELCOME NEW MEMBERS**

It is a tradition in many clubs to call first-time visitors into the center and give them welcome laughter. Similarly, if a member of any other club from the same city or from outstation happens to visit your club, he must be acknowledged and honoured. This will motivate many new members to join your club.

### **ATTENDING SEMINARS AND CONFERENCES**

Periodically we will hold seminars and conferences to share new ideas from experts on laughter and humour and behaviour scientists from around the world. The leaders and co-anchors must attend these sessions to gain new insights and implement innovative concepts. During health workshops and yoga and meditation camps, anchor persons must take the opportunity to call a few members forward to share their experiences with Laughter Therapy.

### **HEALTH CAUTIONS FOR ANCHOR PERSONS**

One of most important precautions every leader must take is not to overstrain the voice. In order to motivate the group members, leaders have to make extra efforts which can sometimes put an unnecessary strain on the body. Most vulnerable are the vocal cords which may develop nodules, which may lead to permanent hoarseness. Utmost care should be taken not to put extra strain on any part of the body while giving demonstrations/commands during laughter sessions.

# Laughter Workshops and Training Programmes

**S**ince we started the Laughter Clubs initiative, there has been an ever-increasing demand for opening more Laughter Clubs worldover. I get letters, faxes and e-mails, inviting me to conduct workshops and training programmes in different parts of the world. Since this a new concept of group laughter without reason, it requires a basic understanding of the philosophy, and the acquiring of skills, to learn different stimulated kinds of laughter. We need an anchor person (a Laughter Leader) who leads the group of people through different Laughter Yoga exercises, along with Yogic breathing. Most importantly, such leaders need to learn the right skills to conduct Laughter Meditation. To promote the new concept of Laughter Yoga, we offer following types of seminars and workshops around the world, conducted by trained Laughter Yoga teachers and leaders.

## PUBLIC AWARENESS SEMINARS

Public awareness seminars are of 1-2 hours duration, and provide basic understanding of the Laughter Yoga concept, along with one Laughter Session experience. This type of seminar can be organised just before the weekend two-day Laughter Workshop, which is usually organised on Saturdays and Sundays. The objective of short seminars, is to enhance public awareness about the concept, as well as, to provide access to the media, for reporting such activities in newspapers, magazines and over television networks.

## WEEKEND CERTIFIED LAUGHTER YOGA LEADER TRAINING

These are experimental workshops for people who desire to start Laughter Clubs, and for anyone who wants to add more Laughter, Humour and Fun to their Lives. This programme also adds value to Alternative Therapists, Recreation, Activity, Occupational Therapists, Nurses, Social Workers, Counsellors, Health Care Workers, Professional Speakers.

**WHAT YOU WILL LEARN:** During this course, you will learn the skills of various stimulated Laughter Exercises developed by Dr. Kataria, (video presentation) and Laughter Meditation. Why We Need to Laugh More Today, Scientific Research on Laughter and its Effects on Human Physiology, Biochemistry and Behaviour, Essential Link between Yoga and Laughter, Health Benefits of Laughter Therapy - Physical, Mental, Social and Spiritual, How to Create a Laughter Group at Workplace, Inner Spirit of Laughter — The Effective Tools of Sensible Living, that will help to create harmonious relationship. Dr. Kataria and many Certified Laughter Yoga Teachers conduct these training programmes all over the world.

## SEVEN-DAY TEACHERS TRAINING BY DR. MADAN KATARIA

This is an advanced course to train the Laughter Yoga Teachers who can run their own courses to train Laughter Yoga Leaders. This course is very exhaustive, and touches upon the spiritual depths of laughter, along with physical training, and Dr. Madan Kataria conducts the courses all over the world.



Milkshake Laughter

### WHAT YOU WILL GET AND LEARN:

Your trainer is Dr Madan Kataria, the Founder and Originator of the Laughter Yoga Movement, worldwide. You will become a Certified Laughter Yoga Teacher directly from the source.

After this training, you will be authorised to train the Laughter Yoga Leaders, who want to add more Laughter, Humour and Fun to their Life, Who would like to start a Laughter Club, Alternative Therapist and Healers, Recreation Activity facilitators, Yoga / Tai-chi / physical fitness trainers, Occupational Therapists, Psychologist & Psychotherapist, Nurses, Social Workers, Counselors, Health Care Workers, Professional Speakers, HR Trainers, Clowns and Comedians.

You will also be trained to do Laughter Yoga seminars, workshops for corporates, companies, hospitals, old age homes, prisons, disabled children, blind schools etc.

During the course, you will learn how to lead a group of people through stimulated Laughter Yoga techniques developed by Dr Kataria, and skills

of converting stimulated laughter into real infectious and spontaneous laughter without using jokes, comedy or any humour. An opportunity will be given to you to lead the Laughter Sessions during practice sessions.

You will also learn a powerful technique of real and deeper “Laughter Meditation”, when you don’t have to make any effort to laugh, and the laughter flows out of you like a fountain. This is a very profound experience, and you will feel the laughter coming out of your heart and soul, without using a single joke.

There will be a deeper understanding of - Why we don’t need a reason to laugh, Why it is necessary to have a sense of humour to laugh, Do we need to be happy in order to laugh, The difference between Happiness and Joyfulness, Finding your inner fun child and getting more laughter in your laugh by cultivating playfulness, The theory of Motion creates Emotion (How can we influence our mind through the body), Humour Active Techniques like different types of Gibberish talk, Whiff-Piff technique and many fun games, Learning to laugh at your own self, playing with silliness, How to laugh alone by yourself.

**HOW TO START A LAUGHTER CLUB:** Organization skills, Marketing and Advertising skills, Creating a core group and Leadership skills, Communication skills.

**HOW TO USE LAUGHTER YOGA SKILLS FOR:** Elderly people, Physically challenged children - Blinds, Deaf and Mute children and Prisoners.

**TOOLS OF INNER SPIRIT OF LAUGHTER:** These tools are derived from the knowledge based on the Western psychoanalytical methods, as well as the Eastern spiritual disciplines. They will help you to keep your spirits alive when life throws up challenges. They will enhance your ability to laugh and smile, when dealing with negative situation, negative and difficult people. They include: How human mind works? What is the meaning and purpose of life? Understanding laws of the universe, which govern our lives? Understanding negative emotions like anger, fear and cultivating positive attitudes like appreciation, forgiveness, service and devotion; Yoga breathing and easy meditation for spiritual development.



## LAUGHTER YOGA SPIRITUAL RETREATS

In August 2005, we are introducing the Spiritual Aspect of Laughter Yoga for the first time. This is the result of my 10 years' of experience with Laughter Yoga Movement. I would like to share with my trainers, how I used the spiritual energy to spread the Laughter Clubs Movement, worldwide.

This one-week journey will make you experience how to get in touch with higher powers and cosmic intelligence in a non-religious way. You will learn a variety of meditations and visualization techniques, along with breathing exercises from Yoga (*Pranayamas*). We will meditate everyday in the morning, so that one gets enough time to learn these spiritual practices.

You will learn to get in touch with all the range of negative emotions (anger, fear, sadness, grip, guilt, jealousy, hatred) and positive strengths like kindness, compassion, empathy, forgiveness, appreciation and gratitude. The most important feature would be, 'We all will stay with laughter and still get in touch with anger, fear and sadness'.

There will be dialogue programmes about understanding Universal Laws, which govern our life and learning, to align ourselves to flow with these laws, and work with effortless ease, to achieve maximum in our life. This is based on the spiritual knowledge of the East, and they are drawn from Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism, Law of Karma, Vedanta and Yoga.

You will also learn Western techniques of NLP, creative visualization to programme your brain for what you wish to achieve in life. There will be talent nites, musical programmes, singing and dancing, along with fun games.

If you wish to organise such workshops or training programmes, please contact us at the following address:

**Dr. Kataria School of Laughter Yoga**

Tel: 022-2631 6426 / 2632 4293 Fax: 022-2632 0945,

Email: [laugh@laughteryoga.org](mailto:laugh@laughteryoga.org) Website: [www.laughteryoga.org](http://www.laughteryoga.org)

## Laughter Clubs in Major Cities of India

### MUMBAI

Mr. B.P. Hirani  
**Jogger's Park Laughter Club, Bandra (W)**  
Tel: 022-26558844/26558811  
Subhash Khambhati  
**Laughter Club of Juhu Beach**  
Tel (R): 2621 2551/26211450  
Mr. G.P. Shethia  
**Laughter Club Hanging Garden**  
Tel: 56057767(R), 56359977(O)

Mr. Mohit Kapoor  
**Worli Seaface Laughter Club**  
Tel: 2422 8895  
Girdhar Peshawaria,  
**Laughter Club of Gateway of India**  
Tel: 2284 0238

Atmaram Torne  
**Goregaon Laughter Club**  
Tel: 28412125

### PUNE

Mr. V. L. Kate  
**Laughter Club of Pune**  
Tel: 020-2445 3356

### NASIK

S. R. Jain  
**Anand Hasya Club**  
Tel: 2461977

Dr. Sushama R. Dugad  
**Saraswati Hasya Club**  
Tel: 2579078(R), 2573376(C)

### NAGPUR

Kishore Thutheja  
**Eastern Sport Club**  
Tel: 2768510, 2773390

S.K. Srivastava  
**Laughter Club of Nagpur**  
Tel: 0712- 2595629 (R)

### KOLHAPUR

Adv. Shri. Arvind C. Shah  
**Ruikar Colony Hasya Yoga Club**  
Tel: 0231-537717/536816  
Dr. D.C. Shah  
**Trymboli Hasya-yog Club**  
Tel: 2653545(C), 2659055(R)

### AHMEDABAD

Mahendra C Shah  
**Ahmedabad Laughter Club**  
Tel: 2661 15 16

### SURAT

Mr. Kamlesh I Masalawala  
**Kavi Kalapi Laughing Club**  
Tel: 2424611 (R) 2456486 (S)

### GANDHINAGAR

Prof. Ravinder J Dave  
**Laughter Club of Gandhi Nagar**  
Tel: (02712) 26755

### BARODA

Prof. R. P. Gupta  
**Laughter Clubs of Baroda**  
Tel: 0265-431170

### KOLKATA & WEST BENGAL

S.K. Mall  
**Kolkatta Laughter Clubs**  
Tel: 22699730/22687572  
Res: 23597278

Mrs. Bela Datta  
**P P K Laughing Institute**  
Tel: (033)-23556230

### HYDERABAD

Shirin Panjwani  
**ABC Laughing Club**  
Tel.: 2475 5000 / 2475 4537

### INDORE

S.K. Matlani  
**Indore Hasya Yog Maha Sangh**  
Tel: 2466456/457/458

### RAIPUR

Mr. Mukund Rathod  
**Hasya Yoga Centre**  
Tel: (0771) 2228688, 2630948

### BANGALORE

Mr. Satyanarayan - IRSE  
**Laughter Clubs of Bangalore**  
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### HUBLI

Mr. K. R. Vaishyar  
**Hudha Nagu Ogguta Laughter Club**  
Tel: 0836 - 2247691

### CHENNAI

Mr. Gautam Khariwal  
**Laughter Club of Marina Beach**  
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E-mail: [khariwals@eth.net](mailto:khariwals@eth.net)

### NEW DELHI

Dr. Umesh Sahgal  
**North Delhi Laughter Club**  
Tel: (011) 27217164, 27455657  
Mr. R.C. Gupta  
**Laughter Club of Noida**  
Tel: 91-4582254, 91-4582715

(For complete list of Laughter Club in India, visit [www.laughteryoga.org](http://www.laughteryoga.org))

## International Laughter Clubs

### NORTH AMERICAN LAUGHTER CLUBS

Sebastien Gendry (LA)  
E-mail:  
info@laughteryoga.us  
Tel.: (626) 755 5999  
www.laughteryoga.us

Arya Pathria (CA)  
Tel/Fax: (408)-926-3307  
laughaway@yahoo.com  
www.laughaway.com

### GREENFIELD, Massachusetts

The Laughin' Laugh-In Club  
Chairperson: Violet Walker,  
violet\_walker@shaysnet.com

Jeffrey Briar  
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Tel: 92651 1962

Sue Ann M Ansari  
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Lynn Caesar  
**Arlington Laughter Club**  
Tel: 781-641-1353  
p.lynn11@verizon.net

### CANADIAN LAUGHTER CLUBS

**Quebec & Montreal**  
Club de Rire international du Québec  
Contact : Michel Abitbol  
Tel: 514-733-2402  
michel@clubderirequebec.com

Linda Leclerc  
**Québec Laughter Club**  
Tel: 819-669-8564

**Toronto**  
Shiv Sud  
Tel: 416-466-7005  
shiv.sud@sympatico.ca

**Vancouver**  
Allan O'Meara  
Tel: 604-734-4025 &  
604-733-4077  
humorbeing@shaw.ca  
www.LaughterYoga.ca

**Yellowknife**  
Lone Sorensen  
glowing@borealis-coop.nt.ca

### BELGIUM

Jean Claude (Brussels)  
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www.clubderire.be

Kunti and Raymond  
**Weelde Laughter Club**  
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### GERMANY

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### Wiesbaden

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**Siracusan Laughter Club**  
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**Région AQUITAINE**  
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**Le Club de Rire de GRADIGNAN**  
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**Région BOURGOGNE**  
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"Le Point

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**Le Club de Rire de BAILLEAU-LE-PIN**  
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framboise@club-internet.fr

**Le Club de Rire de PARIS 5e**  
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**Le Club de Rire de PARIS 9e**  
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06.81.04.44.38 ou  
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**Le Club de Rire de PARIS 10e**  
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**Le Club de Rire de PARIS 12e**  
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Tel: 06.13.55.71.50 ou  
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**Le Club de Rire de VINCENNES**  
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**Club de Rire d'ENGHIEN**  
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**Le Club de Rire de FRONTIGNAN**  
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Tel: 06.15.31.28.65  
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**Le club du rire de LAMBERSART**  
Jacques SION -  
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**Le Club de Rire de HAUTRAGE (Belgique)**  
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*(For complete list of  
International Laughter Clubs,  
visit [www.laughteryoga.org](http://www.laughteryoga.org))*



10,000 people gathered in Copenhagen, Denmark, to celebrate World Laughter Day in 2000, at Town Hall Square, creating a Guinness Book record.

