

Get laughing, get healthy

The simple act of laughing does far more than merely make us feel good. In fact, the next time you have a good belly laugh, consider that what you're actually doing is giving yourself a complete mind and body workout. **David Goding** discovers that laughter may really be the best medicine. Seriously.

Laughing oxygenates the blood, stimulates the metabolism, enhances mood, releases stress, improves relationships and even increases your chances of career success. If you're serious about tapping into the wide range of health benefits offered by laughing, you may like to think about joining a laughter club to learn how to include some laughter therapy – also referred to as laughter yoga – into your day to day life.

"Laughter is so good for you in so many ways," says **Cris Popp**, founder of **Laughter Works**, an organisation that teaches people how to laugh and why they should be laughing on a regular basis.

"When we laugh it causes blood pressure reduction, endorphins to kick in and our T-cell count to go up, just for starters. People who laugh more live longer, are sick less often, have better quality friendships and are generally more content than those who don't laugh very much," claims **Popp**.

Unfortunately, as a society we laugh a lot less than we did 60 years ago and it's not uncommon for many of us to go through an ordinary week with little more than

a barely audible snigger. The good news, is that the skills of laughter can be learned. There doesn't even need to be anything particularly funny to laugh about.

"It doesn't come naturally to some people but it's like learning to bowl or swim – the more you do

"Laughter helps release negative emotions and pent-up tension, particularly anger, anxiety, fear and boredom."

it the more you'll find it easier to do," says **Popp**. "Even if you start by faking it, you'll soon find that you're laughing for real. But even when you're faking it you're getting the benefits."

LEARNING TO LAUGH

The practice of learning to laugh for the therapeutic benefits – as well as for the fun of it – has become an increasingly popular

pursuit practiced in laughter clubs and laughter therapy sessions, in parks, gardens, community centres and workplaces.

Led by an experienced Laughter Yoga instructor, a typical ½ hour session involves groups of people trying out various types of laughs, from belly laughs right through to a high pitched snigger.

“We get people to treat it as an exercise, just like going to the gym, except a lot more enjoyable,” says Popp.

“It’s not all about the humour – surprisingly. It’s about making the sounds and motions of laughter and it gives people a real chance to bond. You find that once you start to hear others laugh it becomes infectious. Often there is nothing particularly funny at all, but by laughing together you are lifting each others spirits.”

THE BENEFITS

For the Mind

Laughing is a very complex brain function that encompasses the entire cerebral cortex, releasing

endorphins, oxygenating blood vessels and relieving stress. Do it enough – even faking it – and you’ll feel all the emotions and sensations associated with genuine happiness, such as euphoria and contentment, as well as an increase

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in overall energy levels.

“Laughter helps release negative emotions and pent-up tension, particularly anger, anxiety, fear and boredom,” says Popp. “It’s great for anything that involves innovation and creativity. Stress and anxiety restrict the mind, while laughter releases it.”

Laughter also provides an important distraction from everyday pressures, providing you with a valuable perspective that allows you to concentrate on the things that really matter in your life.

For the Body

Dr Hunter Adams, portrayed by Robin Williams in the movie ‘Patch Adams’, attempted to change the nature of healthcare with a policy of always putting the patient first. He believed that humour and laughing could heal and dramatically improve the quality of life for those in hospital. And to a large extent he was right.

One of the first discoveries, by laughter therapy pioneer, Norman Cousins, was that ten minutes of belly laughing could relieve pain for up to two hours.

“This occurs because laughter releases two neuropeptides, endorphins and enkephalins – the body’s natural pain-suppressing opioids,” says Popp.

For this reason, laughter has proved to be highly beneficial in helping to manage the pain of arthritis as well as other chronic conditions involving muscular pain. Research suggests that laughter helps increase the number of virus killer cells, activated T cells and B cells as



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well as the important immunity antibody, immunoglobulin A, boosting immunity and speeding up recovery from illness. Laughter is also an excellent aerobic exercise.

"Laughing for 10-15 minutes burns the same amount of calories as you would find in a medium sized chocolate bar," says Popp.

Laughter has also been found to benefit the heart, relaxing the arteries, reducing blood pressure and increasing blood flow for up to 45 minutes, comparable to aerobic exercise.

According to Dr Miller from the University of Maryland, laughing for 15 minutes every day can significantly reduce your chances of suffering a heart attack.

For Relationships

Laughing with another person – your partner, friend or family member – creates a bond of intimacy and trust. As comedian Victor Borge put it, "laughter is the closest distance between two people." It also has the infectious ability to make those around you feel happy.

"When you laugh, you make yourself a bit vulnerable with those you are with and when you make yourself vulnerable it builds trust," says Popp. "We laugh 30 times more in the company of other people. There often doesn't need to be anything funny at all, it's a way of reaching out, breaking down barriers and making each other feel good."

Laughing can also make you appear more attractive and create greater happiness within a relationship. "We tend to think of people who smile and laugh as more attractive, definitely," says Popp. "They are seen as more likeable, desirable and people simply want to spend time with you."

For Success

Laughter is an important part of effective and positive communication and as such can make a big difference to how you are perceived in the workplace as well as your ultimate success.

"We have this misguided belief that unless you appear serious and

stressed then you can't be doing your job well," says Popp. "The opposite is true. People who laugh more are easier to deal with. It enhances communication."

In fact, research conducted by researcher Fabio Sala from the Hay Group's McClelland Centre for Research and Innovation found that people who laughed frequently got paid more than those who laughed infrequently, received bigger bonuses and were thought to be more effective in the workplace.

HOW TO LAUGH MORE OFTEN

- **Practice laughing.** This is the best way to introduce more laughter to your life. Try out different types of laughs and see how good it makes you feel.
- **Seek out things that make you laugh.** Determine what tickles your funny bone and what doesn't.
- **Make a list of what makes you laugh.** Keep 'laughter tools' handy, such as books and movies that regularly make you laugh.
- **Learn to laugh at yourself.** Notice the silly or childish things you do and learn to become playful. It was funny when you were a child, it can be funny now.
- **Socialise with funny people.** Hang out with friends that make you laugh and don't hold back!
- **Join a laughter club.** Have a good laugh while learning about the health benefits of laughing and meeting other people who like to laugh.

A 2007 US study which required participants to laugh for 15 minutes per day for 15 consecutive days found that levels of competency doubled. Interestingly, participants continued to show an improvement for three months after the trial.^{NH}

CONTACTS:

For more information about laughter therapy, including corporate laughter sessions go to www.laughterworks.com.au.

To experience a Laughter Club first hand go to www.laughteryoga-australia.org

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"My dreams and ideals seem so much more obtainable now, I feel I have the tools to deal with anything that comes my way"
– Juliarna

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