

## HEALTH/Laughter yoga boosts physical, mental well-being

# Laugh! It's good for ya

Need to get serious about your health? Laugh more!

Laughter's forced breathing can actually improve your health.

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Hundreds of studies show how laughter affects us physically: Laughter enriches the blood with oxygen, reduces stress hormones, improves the immune system, boosts endorphins (the feel-good hormones), and lowers blood pressure. It decreases depression, anxiety and psychosomatic disorders and internally massages the digestive tract, improving digestion. It even burns calories. But more important, it feels so good to laugh. And we don't need studies to tell us that.

However, don't despair if you lack a good sense of humour. You don't need one to be happy and to laugh. And you don't need a reason to laugh, says Carol Ann Shannon, a laughter yoga instructor in White Rock.

Laughter yoga is a new form of activity where participants laugh for absolutely no reason. Dr. Madan Kataria developed it in India in 1995. It combines the deep breathing of yoga with stretching and laughter. You have fun, learn to control stress and boost your health all at the same time.

"If you're not happy by nature, you can fake it!" says Shannon, "The body doesn't know the difference between real and false laughter. So we use fake laughter to stimulate real laughter."

You can fool your body into releasing endorphins just by changing your posture and using your muscles to form a smile and to laugh. From a learned, habitual response, the body will think it's "happy" and facilitate the chemical and hormonal stimulation you experience when you really are happy.

Laughter yoga can benefit anyone's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being. Classes are suited to all ages and designed for any fitness level – and you don't need to be coordinated to laugh and move at the same time.

"We're not laughing the whole time," explains Shannon, "but we're always having fun. We do things like stick our tongues out and make a lot of noise. It really releases any inhibitions," says Shannon, "It trains us to become less rigid, more forgiving."

And laughing is infectious. As a child, did you ever play the game of staring into each other's eyes and trying not to laugh? Not possible. "Laughing and smiling truly are contagious – you really don't need a reason to do it. And it's a universal language too," says Shannon.

"World peace, one smile at a time," she quotes "laughter" mentor Dr. Kataria.

There are now thousands of laughter clubs worldwide. Shannon is introducing

her club to corporations, families and parenting programs, as well as women's and community centres. There's a particular interest among seniors' groups. "In a care home, seniors tend to keep to themselves. This is a wonderful way to involve them. They start to smile again and put playfulness back in their lives," Shannon says. Staff in the homes tell her residents become easier to get along with and more calm.

Even those who object to adults being "childish" will accept being playful in the context of laughter yoga, she says.

"We all have a sense of play within us especially when we're with people we are comfortable with," says Shannon, "And laughter helps put us at ease so that we become comfortable around others."

The results are lots of fun in a class setting. And with all those endorphins circulating, who can be sad? Certainly for those who are depressed, laughter yoga can be very helpful, says Shannon.

Shannon has practiced yoga and meditation since 1970, and her husband enjoys it with her (they met on a meditation retreat). However, she only added laughter to her yoga about a year ago. Her teacher was Allan O'Meara, of Vancouver. The founder of laughter yoga himself, Dr. Kataria, named him Canada's Laughter Ambassador.

O'Meara runs one of the oldest clubs in Canada, and offers training sessions for instructors. Shannon jokes she's grateful for her "insane time" with O'Meara, who helped put laughter into her classes and her lifestyle. She says it helped a busy mother of two (now adult) children enhance the quality of her life.

"When I'm stuck in traffic, it doesn't bother me now," says Shannon, "I'm more understanding and patient. You learn to see yourself and the world differently and even judgments just slip away."

Shannon and her yoga partner Nicole Worden offer their Laughter Yoga Club at the Evergreen Childcare Centre at 1185 Centre St., White Rock every Tuesday, 7-8 p.m. (\$5 drop-in). Classes are also available for those 50-plus at the Kent Street Activity Centre in White Rock (register at 604-541-2231). For info about laughter yoga contact Carol Ann Shannon, 604-536-9049 [mylaughingmatters@hotmail.com](mailto:mylaughingmatters@hotmail.com) or Nicole Worden 604-961-4211, [lafunnygirl@hotmail.com](mailto:lafunnygirl@hotmail.com).

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