Laughter Therapy

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Abstract

This is a brief summary of the branch of sound healing known as laughter therapy, and the specific version known as Laughter Yoga as invented by Dr. Madan Kataria in Mumbai in 1995. Laughter Yoga focuses on joyfulness, the aerobic benefits of diaphragm control, and includes 40 basic poses, with all practitioners and laughter yoga clubs encouraged to invent their own to keep the daily practice fresh.

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Introduction

Laughter has been known for thousands of years to have benefits for the body. The ancient civilizations of Egypt, Greece, and Rome, all considered laughter to have incredible health benefits. Hippocrates, around 400 B.C., wrote about how laughter could alleviate symptoms of mental illness.

Vickie Dodd, internationally known pioneer in the field of Sound a Bodywork, said in class at the Globe Institute that all the ancient mystery schools had traditions about laughter. Since laughter works with the diaphragm, it can reach and work with many abdominal organs.

In the Old Testament, Psalm 2:4 says “But the one who rules in heaven laughs”. The Bible predicts that joy is an effective antidote to grief, Psalm 30:11 “You hav turned my mourning into joyful dancing.

You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy."

The Rigveda (10.117.4) mentions "May our laughter be as abundant as the rain."

In the middle ages, laughter was seen as a way to balance the "humors" in the body, and cure many ailments that were caused by imbalanced of the humors.

The french scientist Voltaire, in the 1700's, wrote about the health benefits of laughter. He wrote about laughter's use as a coping mechanism, willingness to laugh at one's self, and as a way to find wisdom and perspective.

One of Voltaire's more famous sayings is:

> "Medicine is the art of entertaining the patient while nature does the healing."[1]

As to laughter, and coping, Voltaire wrote:

> "I always made one prayer to God, a very short one. Here it is: 'O Lord, make our enemies quite ridiculous!' God granted it."[2]

In the late 19th century, "Laughter cure" was popularized in the United States, and some physicians began writing prescriptions for laughter.

In 1979, Norman Cousins wrote about how he began using laughter as a form of therapy to manage his ankylosing spondylitis, a chronic inflammatory and extremely painful arthritic condition. He began watching comedy films and reading humorous books as part of his therapy. He found that his pain was reduced, and he had a better sense of well being. He wrote a book on his experience titled "Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient: Reflections on Healing and Regeneration" (1979). His book led to the mainstreaming of the saying "Laughter is the best medicine".

The American comedian George Carlin in his 1972 album "Class Clown" reminisced on being a class clown and all the ways that class clowns give spice to the classroom and cause laughter through their main job of "ATTRACTING ATTENTION TO MYSELF!"

Here are just a few of George Carlin's saying about laughter:

> "I think I am, therefore, I laugh"[3]

> "My job is to think up stuff and come around and remind you of it. You already knew it, you just forgot to laugh at it, that's all!"[4]

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1 Voltaire, "Letters Concerning the English Nation" ("Lettres Philosophiques)" (1733), Letter XXIII, "On Medicine"
2 Attributed to a letter written by Voltaire to Etienne Noel Damilaville, 1767
3 George Carlin, stand-up special "Jammin' in New York", 1992
4 George Carlin, stand-up "Forgot to Laugh About it" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OW8cDWp51Lc&list=PLt8mGHtV0bBapYjBIhwr62Hm3Qdgxi8Hw&index=1

In his 10th album and fourth HBO special, “Carlin on Campus”, 1984, he expanded on being a class clown and the humorous aspects of suppressed laughter:

> “Welcome to the home of the class clown, the theater of suppressed laughter. When you were in school, did you notice that simply because you weren’t allowed to laugh, it made the laughing that much better. That there was something about trying to hold it in that made you laugh even harder. And it wasn’t just in school, church was the same way. In fact, church was even better because in church, there was the additional possibility of perhaps being stricken dead by an angry God.... Now, class clowns probably had a lot of reasons for doing what they did, but for my part, I always enjoyed getting laughs because usually the person who laughed was the one who got in trouble.”[5]

The State of Laughter Today

According to Shawn Achor, Harvard Positive Psychologist, and author of the book “Happiness Advantage”, found that:

- Children laught around 300 times per day
- Adults laugh an average of 17 times a day

Dr. Kataria in his book “Laughter Yoga”, and in his videos for Laughter Yoga International says there are several reasons adults have lost their laughter:

- they have been socialized to think there needs to be a reason to laugh
- they have too much stress
- they have forgotten to enjoy being childlike

Summary of the benefits of laughter

- Reduced stress
- Improved mood and emotional balance
- It causes release of all of the brain's “happy chemicals”, including oxytocin, serotonin, dopamine, and endorphins
- Enhanced immune function
- Increased energy and focus
- Cardiac and aerobic benefits
- Greater connection with others
- Improves empathy and compassion[6][7]

5 https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/comedy/george-carlin-carlin-campus-1984-full-transcript/
6 Https://www.laughtarian.com
7 Https://www.LaughterAngel.com

The Invention Of Laughter Yoga

Dr. Madan Kataria, MD, tells how in 1995 he was writing his own newsletter on health for distribution in Mumbai. He read a fresh research paper by Dr. Lee Burke, at Loma Linda University, that showed that the body can not tell the difference between laughter caused by comedy, or voluntary laughter, also known as simulated laughter. Either kind of laughter will lead to health benefits.

Dr. Kataria noticed that laughter from comedies and jokes is fleeting, and not often sustained. He found that the best benefits accrue when the laughter is hearty and sustained, and practiced on a daily basis.

Dr. Kataria began the first laughter yoga club in 1995 with his wife and three other individuals, in a public park in Mumbai. They first used jokes, but within days the club deteriorated because the humorousness of the jokes wore out, and some jokes started to be offensive.

What Is Laughter Yoga

Laughter yoga, is a unique wellness routine that combines intentional laughter exercises with yogic breathing, also known as *pranayama,* or *"focus on breathing"*.

Intentional Laughter (AKA "simulated laughter") allows laughter to be done voluntarily, and to be sustained long enough for health benefits to acrue.

Frequently asked question: Why aren't jokes and humor enough?

Laughter from humor and jokes has several challenges:

- It is brief, it is fleeting
- It depends on mood
- The jokes get stale
- Some dont get the joke
- Some jokes can offend some people

Simulated Laughter

Simulated laughter is laughing for no reason. By combining with motions, and child like joy, it becomes fun and easy to sustain.

"To be a happy person, act like a happy person!"

- Dr. Madan Kataria, MD

Laughing for no reason is known as simulated laughter.

In 1995, Dr. Madan Kataria, along with Dr. Lee Burke from Loma Linda University, discovered that the body can not tell if the laughter is faked, or if it is real. If the laughter is sustained, the body will experience significant mental, emotional, and physiological benefits. When you assume a posture of laughing, the body starts adjusting itself into a more joyful state.

Several researchers, including Paul Ekman, William James, and Silvan Tomkins, discovered that bodily expressions and movements can translate into emotional experiences, and that facial expressions and bodily movements play a crucial role in emotional experiences.

Once we learn how to laugh for no reason, we can call upon laughter when we need it. When life is stressful, or when we feel down, or we just need a boost, simulated laughter helps the body adjust itself to a more pleasant emotional state, because "Emotion follows motion."

When individuals are taught how to make the motions of laughter, soon the body quickly follows and experiences a state of joy. As this is practiced day after day so that it becomes a habit, the mind creates new neural pathways that make the state of joy easier to access. Joy is a powerful antidote to every day stress.

How is Laughter Therapy practiced

Dr. Kataria's Laughter Yoga includes 40 basic poses. Unlike many yoga asanas, these poses are very easy to do. They make laughter yoga fun to do.

The poses include specific sounds, specific ways to breath in and out, and hand an arm motions. Some even involve standing. In this way they get the whole body involved in the process. This improves the

benefits to include aerobic benefits.

I believe the repetition in the poses makes them similar to mantras, which are well documented as also leading to the release of the nervous system happy chemicals, and also the body's own pain killing endorphins.

Dr. Kataria says that ten minutes of sustained laughter yoga has benefits similar to a ten minute jog. It is sometimes called “jogging for your internal organs”.

Laughter yoga leaders are encouraged to invent new poses, so that the daily practice stays fun.

Laughter yoga is also typically practiced in a group, all though laughing alone is also emphasized.

Dr. Kataria says that forty days of doing a new practice on a daily basis is needed to make it into a habit.

Why Is Laughter Therapy Best Done in a Group?

Dr. Kataria also relates in his book that mirror neurons were discovered around 1995. Mirror neurons are the neurons that cause us to want to mimic the actions of other humans around us. They are very important for social bonding in our species.

When laughter yoga is performed in a group, laughter is contagious. In the same way that when one person yawns, the rest of the people in the group want to yawn also. In some other species, such as cats, yawning signifies relaxation and trust of the others in the group.

Laughter is rather unique to humans. New research is showing that tickled rodents laugh via hypersonic chirps. Does it signify joy? Laughter certainly does in humans. Just join any group of humans.

And if laugh tracks didn't work, Hollywood wouldn't continue to use them for decades!

While presenting laughter yoga at Farmer's Market, I have found that children are attracted to its childlike joyfulness. I have had surprised parents tell me “My child doesn't normally like strangers, but she is very attracted to you.”

Laughter Therapy Is A Great Complementary Alternative Medicine for Everyone

Laughter, when combined with easy breathing exercises and breath work, and learning to laugh for no reason, allows all seniors to once again experience internal joy, and good exercise.

While walking is a good and gentle exercise, there are many health challenges that seniors have that can make walking difficult or even impossible. But laughter therapy is much more gentle. Caregivers can do laughter therapy with seniors so that they can experience laughter while seated, or even while laying down.

Laughter therapy has been shown to support significantly better cognitive function and less pain. It significantly improves the quality of life in elder care communities. It has been applied as a complimentary intervention since the 1970s.

Laughter Therapy Is Affordable For Everyone

At the Globe Institute, their sound healing certification program requires students to learn music theory. Required viewing in the music theory course, taught by Gerald Savage, is the documentary "Alive Inside"[8] In this video, residents of elder care communities come alive when social worker Dan Cohen plays for the patients music that they loved in their youth. Dan Cohen shows how the music goes into the brain, and connects with memories and emotions, in a way that is last to be affected by dementia and alzheimers.

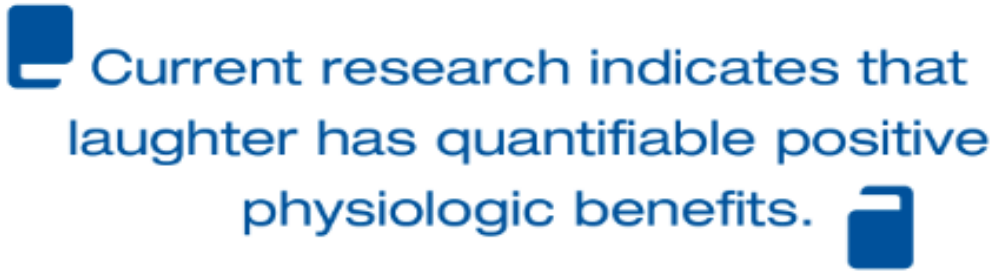
The documentary interviews several elder care community administrators and nurses. The administrators lament that they have no budget to provide $40 iPod nanos to the patients. Nurses complain it is not fair if they can only afford to give the players to two patients and then ten other patients want the players.

Laughter therapy has the benefit of not requiring expensive equipment, or special diagnostics. It does not require insurance approval. That makes it available to all the residents of an elder care community.

8 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPIORV5NekM

Research Papers On Laughter Yoga

Hundreds of medical journal papers are now available that detail the medical benefits of laughter therapy. Here are just a few highlights from my research in the medical journals:



"The Laughter Prescription: A Tool for Lifestyle Medicine - Dexter Louie, BA, Karolina Brook MD, and Elizabeth Frates MD

The effect of laughter therapy on the quality of life of nursing home residents - Nurses can use laughter therapy as an intervention to improve the quality of life of nursing home residents. Nursing administration can make arrangements to use laughter therapy in nursing homes and laughter therapy also can be integrated into nursing education. - Cite: Kuru, N. and Kublay, G., 2017. The effect of laughter therapy on the quality of life of nursing home residents. *Journal of clinical nursing*, *26*(21-22), pp.3354-3362. doi: 10.1111/jocn.13687

Analysis of community based interventions, including laughter therapy and music therapy - Community-Based Interventions in People with Palliative Care Needs: An Integrative Review of Studies from 2017 to 2022
Antonia Vélez-López, Juan Manuel Carmona-Torres, Ángel López-González, José Alberto Laredo-Aguilera, David Callado-Pérez, Joseba Rabanales-Sotos
Healthcare (Basel) 2024 Aug; 12(15): 1477. Published online 2024 Jul 25.
doi: 10.3390/healthcare12151477
PMCID: PMC11311615

Effects of Simulated **Laughter Therapy**Using a Breathing Exercise: A Study on Hospitalized Pulmonary Tuberculosis Patients
Kwang-Sim Jang, Jeong-Eun Oh, Gyeong-Suk Jeon
Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2022 Aug; 19(16): 10191. Published online 2022 Aug 17.
doi: 10.3390/ijerph191610191
PMCID: PMC9408366

Beneficial effect of **laughter therapy** on physiological and psychological function in elders
Yuki Yoshikawa, Etsuko Ohmaki, Hirohisa Kawahata, Yoshihiro Maekawa, Toshio Ogihara, Ryuichi Morishita, Motokuni Aoki

Nurs Open. 2019 Jan; 6(1): 93–99. Published online 2018 Jul 18. doi: 10.1002/nop2.190
PMCID: PMC6279721

"Laughter therapy can benefit health through various mechanisms, including muscular exercise, increased respiration and blood circulation, improvements to digestion, and emotional catharsis [10]. Researchers have since investigated the therapeutic efficacy of this therapy, and reported that it can have positive and quantifiable effects on a variety of medical conditions, such as depression, anxiety, stress, dementia, and pain without deleterious effects on health [11–24]. Furthermore, researchers have also reported that laughter therapy can reduce the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress in cancer patients [25–29]." - The impact of humor therapy on people suffering from depression or anxiety: An integrative literature review
Xuefeng Sun, Jindan Zhang, Yidan Wang, Xiaotu Zhang, Sixuan Li, Zihan Qu, Hongshi Zhang
Brain Behav. 2023 Sep; 13(9): e3108. Published online 2023 Jun 21. doi: 10.1002/brb3.3108
PMCID: PMC10498079

Effects of **laughter therapy** on quality of life in patients with cancer: An open-label, randomized controlled trial
Toshitaka Morishima, Isao Miyashiro, Norimitsu Inoue, Mitsuko Kitasaka, Takashi Akazawa, Akemi Higeno, Atsushi Idota, Akira Sato, Tetsuya Ohira, Masato Sakon, Nariaki Matsuura
PLoS One. 2019; 14(6): e0219065. Published online 2019 Jun 27. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0219065
PMCID: PMC6597115

Yim, J., 2016. Therapeutic benefits of laughter in mental health: a theoretical review. *The Tohoku journal of experimental medicine*, *239*(3), pp.243-249.

The Influence of One-Time Laughter Therapy on Stress Response in the Elderly - Young-Sun Kim, Seong-Sook Jun **J Korean Acad Psychiatr Ment Health Nurs. 2009;18(3):269-277. Published online September 30, 2009**

The Effects of Laughter Therapy on Vital Sign and Emotional State in Homes for the AgedSook Ja Yu[1], Jong Eun Lee[2], Kee Ryung Lee[3]

Laughter and humor as complementary and alternative medicines for dementia patients
Masatoshi Takeda, Ryota Hashimoto, Takashi Kudo, Masayasu Okochi, Shinji Tagami, Takashi Morihara, Golam Sadick, Toshihisa Tanaka
BMC Complement Altern Med. 2010; 10: 28. Published online 2010 Jun 18. doi: 10.1186/1472-6882-10-28
PMCID: PMC2896339

My research on Laughter

I have long been a "Class Clown" in the tradition of George Carlin.[9] I first discovered his albums in 1984 at the "Second Time Around" second hand record store in Dayton Ohio. I memorized many of his routines, and in doing so, his humor became a daily spice I could sprinkle on almost any every day event.

Over 10 years ago I declared my mission to give everyone their third laugh of the day! For some very serious people, that means I have to give them their first two laughs! I am up for the challenge!

I discovered that a useful pattern interrupt, especially on road rage, is to mispronounce vulgar language, and to say the foul word like a cartoon character, for example "ath-hole" Saying it in this way instantly connects my brain with many funny cartoon characters who mispronounced words in a similar way, and my anger is instantly transformed into laughter.

Recently I have found that vigorous simulated laughter is a great substitute for caffeine.[10] I have used it several times instead of a cup of coffee. Because of the vigorous breathing, and physical motions associated with the standard Ho Ho Ho exercise, it

- gets my blood pumping
- improves my mood, which is something that often sags when I am tired
- leaves no chemical residue to disturb my sleep

I read in Carlin's autobiography about how he kept an idea file for all the humor ideas he came up with. It would take a few months for these routines to find their way from his file onto the stage. In the SiriusXM retrospective, "A life lived in comedy", created after his death, his manager Jerry Hamza said that Carlin worked on his idea file with an OCD fervor. When on trips, he would be very gracious with the people who were excited to meet him, but once the plane was in flight, he would always be working on his idea file. George talked about that creation process in several interviews that I have collected.

Over 10 years ago, after reading Carlin's biography, I began keeping an idea file. I find that a particular fertile place to develop humor is in the shower. I also find a great time is upon waking and remembering things that woke me up laughing. After a shower, or a dream, it takes me a while to write down everything. Sometimes I go through the day worrying I forgot one of the ideas. I have coined the term "Post Comedic Stress Disorder" for worrying about if I missed recording a humor idea!

My idea file has grown to over 900 notes. I separate into a different file my notes about other peoples humorous ideas.

Attitude of Laughitude And Gratitude Practices

In thinking about Carlin's quote about "reminding us to laugh", I realized that remembering to laugh at the things in life the first time is similar to how gratitude practices in positive psychology can raise basal optimism scores in pessimists. By learning to look for humor, our brain learns to find humor.

In training with Dr. Kataria, I realized that my daily practices of finding humor, and keeping a journal

9 George Carlin, "Class Clown", 1972

10 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82saGmri1F8

of the ideas, uses similar brain mechanisms as gratitude practices.

I now call this an “Attitude of Laughitude”.

Daily gratitude practices have very solid brain scans and research to support why they work.

One popular practice is the “Three Gratitudes” exercise championed by Shawn Achor, author of “The Happiness Advantage”. Gratitude practices condition the brain to find the thankfulness in all things, and they are proven by brain scans to activate and engage the frontal lobes, and this improves problem solving abilities. Pessimism, and “fight or flight” reactions, according to brain scans, shut down the frontal lobes, and make problem solving more difficult.

Achor found, in testing them with Wall Street financial executives, six months after discontinuing their daily gratitude practices, he could still tell which

I believe that cultivating an attitude of laughitude leads to similar lasting positive brain changes.

Combining Laughter With Sound Healing

I have discovered that sound healing can be combined with sound healing to create a very pleasurable and joyful experience for the listeners. In December 2024, my final semester sound bath project combined sound healing with a laughter yoga inspired meditation, and used laughter yoga to help the listeners come back to being grounded and be activated enough to safely handle their drives home.[11]

Laughter As Front Line Medicine In Elder Care Communities

In August, 2024 I spent a week as a resident of an elder care community. I saw first hand the challenges of the residents and the caregivers. Because my treatment left me feeling fine, I was able to spend a lot of time bringing smiles to the residents and staff members.

As a graduate of their facility, I am looking forward to bring laughter therapy, enhanced by sound healing techniques, back to their community and others.

I established the website https://www.Laughtarian.com to promote my particular brand of laughter therapy where I combine what I am learning from Dr. Kataria with my forty years of study into comedy and humor.

I established https://www.LaughterAngel.com as an outreach to supporters of my mission to teach laughter therapy techniques in elder care facilities, to the residents and the staff.

11 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dn9V_7t3KK0