

That Funny Forgotten Feeling!

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It appears as if Hitler had agreed to share a cab with Churchill to go to the latter's club for a cigar. Frances Doherty explores the unlikely partners - Yoga and Laughter, the simulated belly-jiggling kind.

Finally, things begin to make sense and perhaps this is what the world needs to find the way to peace - if people like Hitler and Churchill could share a cab to go clubbing! That which we can laugh about, we can rise above. Since the day Yoga went funny the equation has changed and the stakes have been notched to new highs. Laughter and Yoga though somewhat like chalk and cheese have found a common vehicle. At the most recent count, there are about 5,000 Laughter Yoga clubs in 40 countries around the globe and the number is still growing. What's the catch? Julie Whithead, a master class presenter for Champneys Health Resorts in the United Kingdom describes her first hand experience of the snowballing laughter yoga effect. "I saw Dr Katarai, founder of the Laughter Club Movement on TV with John Cleese, laughing on a beach in Bombay. I thought what a marvellous way it was to spend your time, making other people laugh and feel happy. When Dr Kataria came to England I signed up for his Laughter Leader Training Course in June 2002 and I have been laughing ever since." Back in 1995 Dr Kataria a family doctor living in Bombay, developed a principle influenced by American journalist Norman Cousins, who claimed that laughter literally was the best medicine. Herald - a long-time sufferer of the crippling spine illness ankylosing spondylitis - believed that through completing ten-minute laughter sessions everyday the pain he experienced was substantially reduced. Kataria began the first laughter club in a local Bombay park, with an intimate group of five. Initially, he used jokes to stimulate his attendees but as the numbers began to rise it became more difficult to collectively amuse the diverse group of personalities. As the numbers grew, the act of comedy became redundant in the world of laughter clubs and the chalk became ham. Complex and even commanding it may be, but the brain cannot distinguish between forced and genuine laughter. Thanks to its lack of discernment, the mind and body can benefit from the experience. It does not care whether you are in the front row of your favorite comedy dub or forcing a stream of ho ho, he he and tickling yourself silly in full view of a public park, and walking in circles at the same time. Medical research suggests that one minute of laughter per day can eradicate the blues. When we laugh feel-good endorphins, our body's natural painkillers. Laughter also boost the immune system by raising the release of infection-fighting T-cells. It also encourages the release of disease fighting proteins - B-cells and Gamma-interferon. At its worst. laughter reduces the release stress hormones. This is definitely one way to try and laugh away hypertension! Laughter Yoga is a therapy of little depth, Neither you nor participating members are expected to be funny. It is an exercise shaped around searching for the inner child in you, of regressing back to your child-like tendencies and embracing a certain uninhibited behaviour. The bottom-line is to look and sound as stupid as possible, a state some find extremely difficult to achieve. Whithead explains. "Charles Schaefer, psychology professor at Fairleigh Dickinson University (New Jersey) conducted experiments on forced laughter and he found that people felt better after one minute's laughter. He concluded that 'once the brain signals the body to laugh the body does not care why. It will release endorphins and relieve stress as a natural psychological response to the physical act of laughing' So the body does not know the difference between fake and real laughter as long as the intention is mirthful you will feel the same psychological response and release stress. Eventually fake laughter becomes genuine and so you shouldn't have to fake it for too long!" If you are struggling to conjure up a mental picture, imagine a scene from Patch Adams with Robin Williams wearing an improvised clown's nose and the mirthful laughter of children with terminal cancer. Not there yet? How about the dosing scene with Williams in mortarboard and 'open-ended' graduation robe? You will be there. Attendees of a laughter dub are invited to join in a series of activities including clapping in rhythm whilst chanting ho ho ha ha ha, deep breathing and simulating specific life instructions, replacing words from negative experiences with forced laughter. Whilst readers may be skeptical about the lack of authenticity associated with forced laughter, do not underestimate the power of imposed foolery as a therapeutic tool. Those who take themselves less seriously are often less prone to stress, depression and have a definite social magnetism and as Whithead rightly expressed. "If you believe, as I do, that what you give out you get back, then if you smile you automatically feel better because smiling sends positive links to the brain you will find that people will smile back at you and the whole energy is lifted and lightened. "Laughing as a group is very uplifting and makes you feel connected to people. I call it 'social glue'. 1£ you have been feeling lonely or isolated, a good laugh in company of like minded people is a real tonic!" Can you think of a more cost effective approach to getting high?