



## **Laugh yourself healthy... and that's no joke!**

While fighting a painful and debilitating illness, Norman Cousins, a political journalist, stared death in the face and laughed. Literally. Believing that the success to fighting illness is in human emotions, Cousins developed a recovery program for himself that involved taking large doses of

Vitamin C, adopting a positive attitude and watching funny movies. He soon discovered that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect, allowing him at least a two hour period of pain-free sleep. When the pain returned, he would turn on the comedy and restart the cycle.

Years later, in 1995, Madan Kataria, a medical doctor in Mumbai, India, was writing an article on 'Laughter – The Best Medicine' for a health journal. Inspired by Cousins and the impressive body of research of others indicating the benefits of laughter on the human body and mind, Dr. Kataria was inspired to put the laughter theory to the test.

He created an early morning laughter club (meetings in parks are common in Mumbai) where people could tell jokes or funny stories. The group was a hit of hilarity - growing to 50 members in only two weeks - until the inevitable occurred. The jokes turned sour.

Humor is subjective, repetitive, and at times negative, discriminatory, hurtful. One knock-knock does not fit all doors, and let's face it, it takes a certain flare to deliver a joke well. The club threatened to disband.

This was no laughing matter for Dr. Kataria, He was determined to make the club work, and pleaded for 24 hours to come up with a solution.

In studying the research, he latched onto one pivotal fact: the human body does not differentiate between real and fake laughter. No matter how it is initiated, mirthful laughter produces the same health and wellness benefits. We can't all laugh at the same jokes, but we can all laugh.

And thus began Laughter Yoga (LY), a unique exercise routine which combines voluntary simulated laughter exercises with yogic breathing, clapping and chanting. From its beginnings in a park in Mumbai, this series of exercises, created by Dr.

Kataria and his wife Madhuri (a yogi herself), has developed into a laughter movement that continues to gain momentum across the globe.

There are thousands of different laughter exercises. And new ones are being created every day, limited only by our imagination. These exercises present effective strategies to lighten up by laughing at our worries and stressors. Some favorites are the credit card bill laughter where you laugh at the exorbitant amount due, and, in my opinion, the most important one of all – lightening up and laughing at yourself (no explanation necessary I'm sure).

The idea of fake laughter is foreign to most and awkward to many. People prefer to laugh at humor, at something, anything! But the fascinating part about laughter is its contagiousness. When practicing laughter exercises in a group, the combination of eye contact and childlike playfulness makes laughter contagious and real.

It takes guts to leave your inhibitions at the door and let yourself have fun like children do...but why not? Laughter exercises allow adults (and children) to achieve sustained hearty laughter without involving cognitive thought. It bypasses the intellectual systems that normally make us well-mannered and shy to express our emotions.

The benefits of laughter are huge, and here are just a few: It empties our lungs and bring in oxygenated air; activates our parasympathetic nervous system which provokes a calming effect; boosts the immune system by increasing 'happy hormones' like endorphins, dopamine and serotonin that act as the body's own painkillers and mood busters; decreases stress hormones like cortisol and adrenalin; can lower blood pressure; creates bonds and enhances communication.

"We need to recognize that medication is not the only way to optimize our health status," says Dr. Lee Berk, preventive care specialist and psychoneuroimmunologist at Loma Linda University. "Mirthful laughter is the new kid on the block, joining a healthy balanced diet, plenty of rest, and moderate exercise."

As Dr. Katari teaches: "Don't leave laughter to chance. Make a commitment from within and go for it."

*By Liliana De Leo & Wendy Singer*

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*Liliana, in collaboration with Wendy, will be providing the next Laughter Yoga Leader Certification in Montreal on March 15<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014. For more information, please call 514-575-2033 or visit [www.livinglaughter.ca](http://www.livinglaughter.ca)*