

The Best Medicine Is Also a Fun Exercise for Kids

by Julia Fraser, CLL

What do preschoolers do several hundred times a day, but adults typically do less than 15 times a day? The answer is laugh. According to gelotologists, experts in the study of laughter, yukking it up as much as possible has many positive effects on the body. Laughter increases the release of endorphins, "the feel good hormones," while reducing epinephrine and cortisol, the stress hormones. Laughter yoga sessions are a great way to get all the health benefits of laughter and have loads of fun doing it.

The purpose of yoga is to create a mind/ body balance, and laughter yoga shares that goal. Laughter yoga, or hasya yoga, was developed in 1995 by Bombay physician Dr. Madan Kataria. From its humble beginnings in public parks in India, laughter yoga has now gone global and sessions are led by Certified Laughter Leaders in more than 50 countries. Anyone of any age or physical limitation can benefit from laughter yoga. A typical session begins with a simple breathing and stretching routine. Then the Laughter Leader begins a series of laughing exercises like Milkshake Laugh or Lion Laugh. Six to eight laughing exercises make up the bulk of a session, which lasts about 40 minutes. Kids especially enjoy making the funny faces and doing the silly movements that accompany the laughter exercises.

It's not necessary to have a great sense of humor to enjoy laughter yoga. In fact, humor and laughter are not the same thing. Humor is a psychological phenomenon: it varies according to culture, values, tastes, etc. Laughter is a physical act. It is universal and cuts across all barriers. Everybody laughs. And the benefits are the same even if the laughter is not genuine. The body cannot tell the difference between a forced laugh and a real one. However, forced laughter is also contagious and the pretend laughter becomes genuine during the session.

The health benefits of laughter have been studied extensively. "[People] who laugh a lot become less depressed and anxious," says Dr. William Fry, professor emeritus at Stanford

University. Many doctors, including Patch Adams (who was portrayed by Robin Williams in the movie of the same name), agree that laughter reduces pain and speeds the healing process. It also stimulates creativity and problem solving. However, the notion that laughter is good for you is not a new idea. Proverbs 17:22 states: "A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bone."

Laughing in a group is a terrific ice breaker and helps strengthen relationships. Laughter is beneficial to mind, body and spirit. Laughter yoga calms the mind, strengthens the

body and lightens mood.

Laughter helps children cope with anxiety and aids social interaction.

Laughter yoga is nonpolitical, nonreligious, noncompetitive, and nonthreatening. Almost anyone can do it, and those with physical limitations can usually take part in most of the exercises. Laughter yoga also increases morale and productivity in the workplace, and has de-stressed college students in sessions conducted at Rice University. Laughter yoga also feels really good, and it's fun!

To book laughter yoga sessions for your school or youth organization, call 713-

240-3110.

Benefits of laughter yoga for kids

- Boosts self-confidence
- Stimulates creativity and problem solving
- Lessens anxiety and stress
- Strengthens immune system
- Creates mind/body balance
- Massages internal organs
- Builds social bonds

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Think Globally. Laugh Locally.

Julia Fraser is a Certified Laughter Leader and owns Fifteen Minute Break, the Relaxation Organization, which provides stress solutions to business and schools. She also teaches a course in stress management at Rice University. For more information: www.fifteenminutebreak.com or 713-240-3110. 🌸

