

Laughing for health

Maggie Thompson, or, as she is affectionately known, Merrie Maggie, is a Laughter Yoga Teacher and Laughter Ambassador. Here, Maggie shares her knowledge and experience of Laughter Yoga with Mature Times:

"TO QUOTE American philosopher and psychologist William James *'we don't laugh because we're happy, we're happy because we laugh'.*

We are practically born with the ability to laugh. Laughter, along with smiling, are the first way babies communicate apart from crying.

We all get so excited when a new baby smiles for the first time – it is such an endearing moment. The doting parents continually smile with their baby as soon as it is born and the smile, closely followed by laughter, is the first learned communication.

The feel-good feeling

This shared experience of laughing together connects people and gives them the 'feel-good' feeling from endorphins including dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin (the love hormone).

So why, as we grow older, do we engage in less laughter when we all need it for our health and wellbeing? Think about the last time you had a good long 'belly' laugh. How did it make you feel? Can you remember what sparked it off? Does it make you have a giggle just remembering it? It might have been a comedy show, a joke, a funny film or it



might just have been because you were in the company of friends. We laugh the most when in the company of others – it connects us.

Children very often laugh about nothing at all, just through play and sheer joyfulness. As we get older, people seem to think they need a 'reason' to laugh, such as humour, jokes and comedy. These all ignite laughter but it only lasts for a matter of seconds, or perhaps a minute at a time. Whereas being playful, 'in the moment' can spark more sustained laughter, which brings health benefits. Laughter has long been recognised as being good for our health and can be therapeutic, too.

Small beginnings

Laughter Yoga started in 1995 through an Indian general practitioner, Dr Madan Kataria, specialising in cardiology. He and his wife, who is a yoga teacher, started this activity with

just five people in a Mumbai park and it has now spread around the world.

A combination of laughter exercises with deep breathing in between and childlike playfulness with eye contact, it soon connects everyone in contagious laughter; at these sessions people laugh for no reason, through playfulness.

Taking part in a 30 minute or one hour session can be most invigorating as there is a constant change of air circulating the lungs. We laugh as we breathe out and bring a fresh supply of oxygen into our lungs as we breathe in.

There are many health and wellbeing benefits such as reducing stress, boosting the immune system, managing pain, enhancing mood and connecting people. Laughing regularly, i.e. ten minutes per day, is recommended in order to gain long-term health benefits and to encourage a positive mental attitude.

Many older people suffer from long-term medical conditions and taking Laughter Yoga to them can be extremely uplifting. The whole dynamics of the room in which the session is taking place changes in a matter of minutes as people begin to let go of their inhibitions. They let go of their cares and worries and before they know it, they cannot feel so much pain either."

There are qualified Laughter Yoga Teachers and Leaders across the UK. Many of them run clubs and also sessions for organisations, groups, events and corporate sessions.

There is a Google map of Laughter Club locations that can be seen online at: <https://tinyurl.com/y9uxvgy>

Also, the Laughter Association UK can be found at: www.laughterassociation.co.uk.