

Essential **key** number 1:

laugh out loud

letting go of sadness

A laugh is a smile that bursts.

- Mary H. Waldrip

Laughter is portable, immediate therapy. I like to think of it as a way of ‘charging up’ the battery of your soul. Of course, laughing can seem like such a stretch, especially for those who find it hard to be happy or those who are experiencing depression. It was in the midst of my own battle with depression while completing a course on wellness that I was taught the amazing benefits of having a good old belly laugh. It seemed obvious at the time, but when I actually tried to recall how many times I had laughed that week I could not think of one.

I started to wonder. **If laughing is so therapeutic, why isn’t everyone doing it?** I realised we get so bogged down in the serious aspects of living that *we forget how to play*. We lose that carefree attitude we had when we were kids, and stop laughing. We are born with the gift of laughter – it’s being serious that we learn.

Despite the huge increase in the standard of living, the world is getting more and more serious. According to a study by German psychologist Michael Titze, in the 1950s people laughed for eighteen minutes a day, but today we laugh no more than six minutes a day. Children can laugh up to four hundred times in a day, but by the time we reach adulthood, that frequency drops to only fifteen times a day.

This is a real worry. **Researchers are telling us that laughter has a positive impact on our physical and mental wellbeing, yet in today’s high-pressure competitive world, our laughter is disappearing fast.** The hearty humor of thirty years ago no longer stirs even the faintest of smiles today.

How long is it since you had a belly laugh, when you laughed so hard you had tears running down your face? Australians were once known as an irreverent lot who made a joke of most things and did not take life too seriously. Perhaps that was part of our Irish heritage. In recent years, you may find it difficult to meet a person who can remember their last good gut-wrenching laugh.

Today, people are sad and lonely. The world is sinking into deep depression due to

isolation and individualism. According to some sources, depression is growing at a fast rate and is almost the number one sickness in the world. Suicide rates are high in Finland and Switzerland and many other affluent countries.

Laughter is a powerful antidote for depression. It creates positive emotions that flow through the body. When we laugh we feel good, release stress, fill our body with all those happy chemicals. Laughter helps us make light of a difficult situation. As you begin to increase the laughter you will start to feel healthier and more relaxed.

Physically, laughter not only provides a massage for the facial muscles, the diaphragm and abdomen, but some have described it as *internal jogging*. Dr William Fry from Stanford University in the United States, claims one minute of laughter is the equivalent of ten minutes on a rowing machine.

All of us feel the magic power of laughter after we have a good belly laugh. Each time we laugh we feel better, our step becomes a little bouncier, and we feel closer to whoever we laughed with. **The world seems brighter and friendlier, and we are able to approach life more positively.**

Laughing and crying are the only healthy convulsions (other than sneezing and orgasms) that humans experience. Perhaps they are our reward for the more complex burdens we carry. Polar opposites, they share the same stress-relieving mission. Laughter makes us feel better by rising above, almost detaching from, that which might otherwise disturb us.

You are never too old to laugh. It is one of the few infectious things that cannot make you sick. So if laughter is so good for you, why leave it to chance?

Laughter really is the best medicine

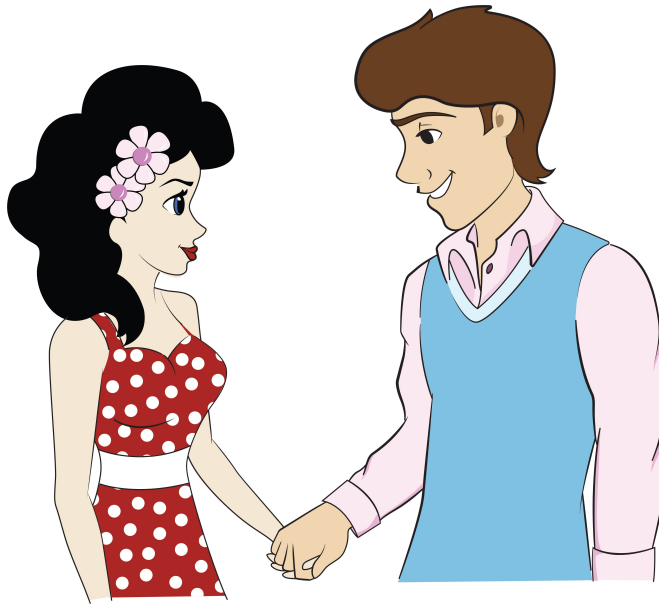
Over the past two decades extensive research has shown that laughter has a positive impact on various systems of the body. It helps remove the negative effects of stress, which is the number one killer today. Depression is among more than seventy illnesses that are stress-related.

When we laugh, especially when we really let ourselves go, our endocrine system releases endorphins and encephalins in the brain. These substances reduce feelings of stress, relax the body and leave behind a sense of euphoria. A good bout of laughter also



reduces the levels of stress hormones epinephrine and cortisol.

Laughter lets in oxygen, which feeds the blood cells and the brain. It produces many feel-good chemicals and helps manage chronic pain and illness. **A good belly laugh helps clean out all the cobwebs of stress that choke up the body, leaving you feeling lighter and refreshed.**



It has been scientifically proved that laughter elevates mood, brings hope, enhances communication and is the master key for maintaining good health. Scientists are convinced that laughter has both preventive and therapeutic value, which is why it not only helps you out of your depression, but helps prevent a relapse of the illness.

Medical research shows that even if you pretend to laugh or act happy, your body produces happy chemicals. According to the principles of NeuroLinguistic Programming (NLP), there is hardly any difference between thinking about doing something and actually doing it. Therefore whatever may be the source of laughter, it leads to the same set of physiological changes in the body.

Laughing has also been found to shorten recovery time after illness, by strengthening the immune system. This is a real bonus, given that depression hacks away at the immune system, making us more prone to other diseases and illnesses. **People who laugh often, almost never get a cough, cold or flu.**

One reason for all these benefits is that laughter puts people in a positive frame of mind and gradually turns them into positive thinkers. One main problem with people who suffer from depression is their constant negative thinking patterns. It's like a broken record player, constantly filling our head with a soundtrack of negativity.

Laughter has benefited many people on heavy anti-depressants. With laughter therapy, those included in the study were able to get better sleep and reduce their depression. Even people with suicidal tendencies were able to start living their lives with more hope.

Hospitals, nursing homes and other institutions now take advantage of humour's therapeutic potential to promote recovery from disease. **Increasing your daily ration of laughs and chuckles can be as important as taking your daily nutritional supplements in keeping your mind and body functioning their**

best.

So, when you are stressed and feeling under pressure, although you may not feel like it, finding a way to laugh is a very smart and easy solution.

Ways to laugh

- Learn to laugh at ridiculous people instead of allowing them to upset you
- Laugh at ridiculous situations instead of letting them stress you
- Come up with ways of making customers or your family laugh
- Have a 'joke a day' that you share with people around you
- Hang out with children – they laugh more
- Put on a comedy DVD or even better, go and see a stand-up comedian

Get into the habit of laughing for five minutes every morning before you leave the house.

Laughter, ultimately, is an expression of happiness and it seems many people these days are not happy with their lives. We cannot depend on a sense of humour to create laughter since humour is a phenomenon of the intellect, the mind. Humour is unique to the individual. If you do wish to use humour to make you laugh, find out what turns you on and seek friends who can share your point of view. But you may find it easier to simply learn the art of Laughter Yoga.

Laughter yoga

The first time I heard of laughter yoga was in an episode of *The Secret Life of Us*. A group of people gathered in a park doing breathing exercises before bursting into fits of laughter. I didn't think much of it at the time, but one afternoon when I was feeling down I remembered what I had seen and decided to investigate.

If you have ever been to a yoga class you will be familiar with stretching, and contorting your body into weird shapes. Well, forget that, there are no 'downward dogs' in this class. **Instead there is lots of giggling, guffawing and whooping it up!**



Our class began with some simple breathing exercises and clapping to stimulate acupressure points. This warm-up exercise is designed to improve blood circulation throughout the body. The idea is to breathe in, and on the out breath you produce sounds of laughter, which stimulate the diaphragm and is good for digestion. It enhances the whole oxygen area, expands your lungs and opens up your chest, producing extra oxygen for your body. I was surprised at how refreshed and energetic it made me feel.

Before long I discovered that anyone can laugh in a group for fifteen to twenty minutes without needing to rely on a great sense of humour. No clown suits or bad jokes necessary! **It is based on the concept 'Laugh for no reason'.**

In these classes, laughter is used as a tool, not an emotion. Simulated laughter soon becomes real laughter when practised in a group. It is infectious. Your body does not know the difference between a real laugh and a fake laugh – so you produce endorphins and serotonin regardless.

Laughter yoga is the brain child of Dr. Madan Kataria, a doctor from Mumbai, India. He is behind the creation of the laughter club movement which now has more than 5000 clubs worldwide. He also proclaimed World Laughter Day, which is held each year in May, and sees thousands of people gathering to laugh out loud. The biggest turnout was in 2000 in Denmark, when 10,000 people attended a laugh-in.

By and large we tend to take life and ourselves far too seriously these days and this reflects itself in far too little laughter. Laughter yoga helps you stay in high spirits when life throws up challenges. Unlike normal yoga classes, laughter yoga is free. To find your nearest club, go to: www.laughteryoga.org

The real magic of joining a laughter group is the friendships you make. Clubs become close-knit communities in which members experience a sense of affiliation and belonging. We will discuss the importance of support groups and having a close circle of friends later.

Laughing in a group can also boost confidence. Many people with depression have difficulty in social settings. Over a period, laughing in a public place with your arms towards the sky removes your inhibitions. You become a more social, unreserved and confident person.

Laughter yoga works in many ways, and has even helped people get off their antidepressant pills in a short period. You do not need to have an extraordinary sense of humour, be a comedian or a great joke teller to laugh, just 'fake it till you make it!'

If you are not laughing at least a couple of times a day that is a sign you are stressed.

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