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No Sense of Humor Required

New Laughter Yoga club formed in Valley

By SARA PERKINS
The Monitor

McALLEN — You don't need a sense of humor to enjoy the health benefits of laughing, but if you don't have one, you're missing out.

Laughter Yoga, a new worldwide health-and-wellness craze, is funnier than awkward yoga poses, strip-tease aerobics and Tae-Bo all put together — and laughing at it is the entire point.

Laughing-as-group-exercise is a growing movement with its roots in India, where a family practice doctor launched his own movement in 1995. Since then, clubs devoted to laughing at nothing have sprung up around the world.

Proponents of Laughter Yoga claim Dr. Madan Kataria's laughter exercises lower blood pressure, strengthen the immune system, alleviate depression and slow aging.

The phenomenon now has reached the Rio Grande Valley.

T.J. Sethi, an Indian-born former professor at the University of Texas Pan-American and a current graduate student, has convened the area's first laughter club.

Sethi, 52, said he started the club after seeing a story featured on CNN. He laughs sometimes — he and his wife exchange e-mail jokes often — but not as much as he did when he was a child, he said.

"Growing up, we lose the ability to take things lightly," he said. "We take things too seriously, and we don't laugh when we come across a difference of opinion."

Kataria's movement stresses that it is not necessary to be authentically happy or amused to benefit from Laughter Yoga. By the end of a group exercise, many people have become happy, according to his group's Web site, www.laughteryoga.org

"Simulated laughter" — chanting "ho ho ha ha ha" — can quickly become real, infectious laughter in a social setting.

The absurdity of the set-up makes the program work. Faking laughter with total strangers is like falling down in gym class — laughter both expresses your embarrassment and neutralizes it.

Dora Canizales of Edinburg found the Sethis on the Web, where T.J.'s is the first club listed in Texas.

Although embarrassed and hesitant while plowing through the exercises, which include "greeting laughter," "milkshake laughter" and "silent laughter," Canizales agreed to return for its next session.

"It was pretty awkward," she admitted.

"You can really feel it," said T.J.'s wife, S.J. (both use easy-to-pronounce nicknames), as she rubbed her abdomen after a half-hour laughter session at her house last week.

She said laughter yoga has gotten so big in India, no one gives clubs laughing in public a second look.

"It's normal," she said.

Laughing tones facial and abdominal muscles, stimulates blood flow, releases endorphins and lowers stress hormones, according to research cited by laughter enthusiasts.

"You know how people say, 'A merry heart is like medicine to the soul,'" said Joseph McCoy, a McAllen psychologist.

"Physiologically, when we laugh, we tend to release endorphins. The endorphins are our natural antidepressants. They help us to relax."

Endorphin release can counteract the effects on the body of the stress hormone cortisol.

"Stress over time has a lot of deleterious (damaging) effects on us if we don't counteract it," McCoy said.

Laughter yoga generally is done in public places, on beaches and in parks. T.J. said he hopes amused or confused passersby will strike up a conversation about the club.

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"I'm sure they will (find it odd), but they may come and talk to us and ask us what we're doing," Sethi said. "They'll say, 'What are these people doing? Have they gone bonkers or what?'"

Sethi envisions a network of clubs that accommodate the schedules and commutes of all Valley residents who want to participate.

For now, he is seeking a few good laughers — no sense of humor required.

Sebastien Gendry, an enthusiastic convert to the life-changing benefits of Laughter Yoga, agreed.

The founder of the American School of Laughter Yoga in Los Angeles, Gentry said laughing in a group can be embarrassing — but that's the point.

"It puts you into a weak position. It disconnects you from your ego," he said. "It puts you here, now, which is the only place where happiness can exist."

Laughter yoga clubs "have the potential to bring the whole community together," Gentry said by phone. "Anybody can laugh."

IF YOU GO:

The Laughter Club's next meeting is Tuesday at 8 p.m. at the Sethi home in McAllen. For directions, call (956) 687-4061.

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