

## New type of yoga class is one big joke

(<http://www.dailysouthtown.com/lifestyles/263545.2011.IF2.article>)

February 20, 2007

By Steve Metsch Staff writer

"Ha. Ha. Ho. Ho. Ha. Ha. Ho. Ho. Ho."

That chant, accompanied with clapping hands, resounds through a west suburban church on a recent Friday night.

Why would adults do this while playing patty cake?

It's part of laughter yoga, a relatively new stress-relieving therapy that's gaining devotees.

The next meeting of the club nearest the Southland is 7 p.m. Friday at Pilgrim Congregational Church, 460 Lake St., Oak Park. Starting in March, the club will meet at 7 a.m. the first and third Saturday each month.

Laughing on command

It was odd at first for David Kelm, 61, a hair stylist from Maywood, and Sara Stevenson, 52, a computer programmer from Berwyn, to laugh on command.

But both were intrigued, they said.

Kelm has since been trained to instruct laughter yoga classes. He heads the Lite-hearted Laughter Club, and on his particular evening, he and Stevenson are having a blast cracking themselves up.

But neither would agree to be interviewed until this reporter and photographer Brett Roseman went through the motions with them. So, in the interest of getting the story....

Yuk it up

We started with "greeting laughter."

"This is all no conversation," Kelm said. "It's all done with laughter, instead of talking."

Did it feel odd? Sure. But Kelm and Stevenson were soon chuckling with great enthusiasm.

That was followed by the "milkshake laugh," where participants pretend to pour a beverage into a fake glass and start laughing.

"The whole thing is to allow yourself to laugh about anything or nothing," Stevenson said.

"Vowel laughing" had us running through our A's, E's, I's, O's and U's, followed by laughter. Y, apparently, is not an amusing vowel.

After every exercise, we'd go through the aforementioned "ha, ha, ho, ho, ho."

"It breaks the process so we can go into the next exercise. Your hands are covered with pressure points and you stimulate them when you clap, giving yourself positive energy. You give yourself a positive boost," Kelm said.

Stress relief

Laughter Yoga is the brainchild of Dr. Madan Kataria, a family physician from Mumbai, India. The "yoga" part comes from the yoga breathing exercises that are used.

Kataria started the laughter club concept in 1995 as a way to relieve stress. In 1998, on the first Sunday in May, he launched World Laughter Day. By 2000, the event had drawn about 10,000 people in Copenhagen, Denmark, alone.

There are 200 laughter clubs in the United States, and 5,000 clubs in 53 nations. Kataria will offer training for instructors in New York in April and California in May.

Bigger turnouts produce better results, said Sharon Steffensen, editor and publisher of Yoga Chicago.

The Chicago Live Life Laughing Club, for example, attracts 15 to 35 people to meetings held at 7:30 p.m. the third Wednesday each month at the Palatine Township Senior Center, 505 S. Quentin Road, Palatine.

Club director Doug Dvorak, a motivational humorist, had Kataria address the group last year. His appearance sparked interest.

While "it's awkward for many people" at the start, inhibitions soon disappear, Dvorak said.

"As we become adults, we tend to lose our connection with our childlike, playful selves. We get stressed out. Studies have shown children laugh 400 times a day. As adults, we laugh less than 15 times a day," he said.

"Laughter is a great stress reliever" and an exercise tool.

"I'm exhausted afterward because I laugh so hard," Dvorak said. "My stomach muscles hurt, but I certainly feel better. I forget my problems for 45 minutes."

The best medicine?

Steven Sultanoff, a psychologist in Irvine, Calif., and a professor at Pepperdine University, has studied humor for years and is past president of the Association of Applied and Therapeutic Humor.

Sultanoff is familiar with laughter yoga, but questions some claims of boosters.

"It's overrated for the part that is laughter. The idea is if people get together and do any kind of meditative activity, they'll all have physiological benefits. There's no research that shows this works, but it is a fun experience, getting together and having a good time," he said.

Nevertheless, "Laughter feels good and is certainly pleasant," he said. "It can invigorate you and get more oxygen into your blood. The clubs are a support network for people that's fun and playful. There's not much research showing health benefits, but the social part is good."

Be a kid again

Sebastien Gendry, founder of the American School of Laughter Yoga in Los Angeles, said some "may label this idiotic and silly, from an adult's standpoint. But it's playful."

The clubs offer release for busy people, he said.

"We live in a society where adults are not allowed to express intense emotion like anger, sadness or joy. People walk around like pressure cookers, and laughter clubs provide for behavior that's not considered normal but are safe places where you can relieve tension and connect the child, the joy inside," Gendry said.

That works for Kelm and Stevenson, who look rested after a session that included gibberish, motorcycle and lion laughs, and a quiet laughter session while sitting in a circle.

"There are hundreds of ways to laugh," Kelm said.

I did laugh -- several times. Gibberish was fun.

"You're using your left brain too much," said Kelm, deeming me too analytical.

Laughter yoga is not for everyone.

Kelm's daughter deemed it "too self-conscious," he said. Stevenson's husband, though amused, won't attend. She doesn't mind.

"I was the shy, quiet one growing up," she said, "but I love to laugh. It just feels so good."

*For more information, visit [www.laughangeles.com](http://www.laughangeles.com) or [www.laughteryoga.org](http://www.laughteryoga.org).*

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