

The best medicine?

Laughter yoga said to abate sadness

By Cortney Fielding Staff Writer
Pasadena Star-News

Article Launched: 12/15/2006 11:48:29 PM PST

PASADENA - Sebastien Gendry spends his days laughing over nothing at all.

The Pasadena resident downright whoops it up. He claps his hands and bounces up and down like a kid in a candy store - a nonstop grin plastered to his face.

An onlooker might surmise he's lost his mind. Even Gendry admits his actions look both "dorky and silly."

But he insists he's never been better.

Gendry is a leading practitioner in the world of Laugh Yoga, an 11-year-old movement that originated in India and combines the breathing exercises of traditional yoga with, well, laughter.

Using the adage "laughter is the best medicine" as inspiration, proponents say concentrated laughing, often in a group setting, can provide powerful relief for everything from chronic pain and depression to a simple case of the Monday blues.

And Gendry, founder of the American School of Laugh Yoga and president of the Pasadena-based Los Angeles Laughter Club, is among its biggest proponents.

Three years ago the French-born Gendry was living in England and operating a successful multi-marketing company when he realized he was "absolutely miserable" for no good reason.

"I was drowning in my own self-made box of anger and sadness," he said, "and I didn't know why."

Feeling empty and burned-out from long hours in the office, he quit his job and arrived in Pasadena for a yoga training course. He soon fell in love with an instructor, got married, and never looked back.

But something was still missing, he said.

In 2004, Gendry learned of a new exercise where adults could act like children.

"It deeply resonated with something inside," he said. "Adults cannot possibly laugh or smile. I was always trying to be so serious."

After attending a week-long Laugh Yoga training course in Bombay, India, Gendry said he was a changed man.

"It's left me tremendously inspired - it's empowered me," he said.

Today there are more than 300 laughter clubs worldwide.

While not much medical research exists on the benefits of laughter, there is biology to back it up, said Dr. Michael Karp, a professor at USC's School of Medicine.

The act of laughing - whether at something funny or nothing at all - triggers the brain to raise endorphins, chemicals that stimulate feelings of happiness.

"It's definitely pretty well agreed-upon that it can improve your immunity and lower stress levels," he said.

Every Friday, Gendry meets the 10-15 members of the Pasadena group in a local yoga studio. For the next 45 minutes, they perform a routine of laughing, clapping and breathing with no outside stimuli to tickle their funny bones.

Angela Rodriguez, one of Gendry's Friday night regulars, began attending last year after her father's death from cancer left her a self-described "shut-in."

Her father was Rodriguez's last living relative, and the South Pasadena woman became deeply depressed.

After first learning of the club, Rodriguez admits she was skeptical.

"I thought, is this going to be a cult?" she said.

But after a year with the group, Rodriguez has an entirely new outlook on life. She's leaving the house and becoming involved in new activities. Even her father's dog seems to have perked up over the past 12 months.

How else has life changed?

For starters, her friends have given her a new nickname.

"Now they call me the ha-ha lady," she said, "I'm a happy camper."

cortney.fielding@sqvn.com

(626) 578-6300, Ext. 4494