

# Ha ha yoga

## Groups gather for forced laughter to gain health benefits, and, no joke, they get it

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PASADENA – They are cackling like wild hyenas. It's been 20 minutes of nonstop laughing, which seems a little insane considering no one's cracked a single joke. During Cocktail Laughter, where participants pretend to pour and slug down invisible drinks while yelling "EHHHHHHH? EHHHHHHH?" one "imbiber" hee-haws so hard it's a wonder she doesn't wet her pants.

Every so often, beaming members of the Pasadena Laughter Club rhythmically clap their hands and march about as they briskly shout the mantra: "HO, HO, HAH-HAH-HAH! HO, HO, HAH-HAH-HAH! HO, HO, HAH-HAH-HAH!"

This Friday evening gives new meaning to the term "happy hour." A giddy group of 10 is at the weekly, free Laughter Yoga, a growing global movement that has devotees simulating chuckles and guffaws – which, judging by this laugh riot, can turn real. The theory is that forced laughter (with yogic deep breathing) relieves stress, pumps up disease-fighting hormones, helps people bond with others, and, as a bonus, promotes world peace.



CAROL KRON / Copley News Service  
Lou Arnwine (left) of Brea and her granddaughter Ashley Arnwine of Arlington, Va., shared a laugh class at Yoga Kingdom Sanctuary in Pasadena.

"Even if you don't feel happy, who cares? Fake it!" exclaims laughter leader Sebastien Gendry, 35, in a thick French accent and sporting a T-shirt with the slogan, "I (heart) to laugh for no reason. No joke."

Soon, a 71-year-old grandmother is in stitches during an ad-lib Puking Laughter. Everyone exaggeratedly clutches their stomachs, bends over and pretends to hurl. You had to be there. ... No matter how it looks at first, though, this is not some hairbrained Hollywood-ish fad. The phony laughter phenom was started a decade ago in India by "the Guru of Giggling," physician Madan Kataria, and has since spread through Asia, Europe and North America.

In Philadelphia, a convent of cloistered nuns who learned routines like Cell Phone Laughter (fake laughing while animatedly pretending to speak into a mobile phone) use the techniques among themselves for recreation. At the Pentagon, an Army colonel has spearheaded anxiety-busting laughter clubs for families of soldiers deployed to Iraq.

Miles away in Canton, Ohio, a laughter club of fifth-graders regularly meets with a nursing home's laughter club; even those in wheelchairs move their arms for the hula during Hawaiian Laughter and call out "HO, HO, HO, HO, HO – HAH, HAH, HAH, HAH... HEEEEEE!" (Laughter clubs, whether they call it "laughter yoga" or "laughter therapy," follow the same basic structure of playful "exercises").

In the world of mind-body science, it's no joke, says Dr. Lee Berk, a laughter researcher and professor at Loma Linda

