



PHOTOGRAPHS: ALEXANDRA MURPHY

Laugh? I feel better already

As gloom dominates the news, the best remedy could be a good giggle—and it's also good for your health. **Alex Murphy** on the rise of the laughter club

In tears, doubled up and unable to breathe with cramping tummy and aching facial muscles, a good bout of laughter can be painful one. But we love it. It's addictive and research shows it's good for us. So why don't we laugh more often than we do?

As stress, anxiety and tension increase, mirth wanes and it becomes more difficult to find things funny. But help is out there. Through laughter-yoga clubs, clown work-

shops and comedy courses, funny seminars, self-help humour books and laughing tapes, we can discover what kind of humour we respond to best. Everybody is different. Joke-telling, clowning around, comical entertainment and laughter exercises are just a few of the methods that can lead us back to laughter enlightenment again.

The health and social benefits of laughter sparked the interest of Dr Madan Kataria in Mumbai, India.

He believes that there are two kinds of laughter: humour, which requires certain intellectual and communication skills not available to everybody; and inner laughter, which is more emotional, childlike and accessible to all. "Children don't have a great sense of humour," he says, "they don't need jokes to laugh. They laugh because they feel like it."

Based on this idea of inner laughter, Kataria developed his philosophies and exercises of laughter-yoga and meditation. "Seeking to connect the outer more physical act of laughter with the inner more emotional one," he says. "This is the philosophy of laughter-yoga."

A successful laughter club requires group effort. There is a lot of body language and eye contact done in the laughter exercises, which is important for removing mental blocks and social inhibitions. It may not be everybody's idea of a good guffaw, but laughter is certainly infectious and tends to spread rapidly with eye contact.

Julie Whitehead, a yoga teacher,

hosts a laughter club on Clapham Common every month. She stresses that people who turn up to the session, must come willing to laugh. "Unless that openness and receptiveness is there from the start," she says, "it won't work for them." Following Kataria's philosophies, she tells everyone to, "Fake it, fake it, until you make it." Our body doesn't know the difference between real and fake laughter, providing one does it convincingly. Our bodies, not sensing the difference, still release the same healthy chemicals.

Kataria incorporates a variant of

"We each have our own level of stupidity. It just depends on how deeply buried it is and having permission to express it"

deep yoga breathing exercises (pranayama) into laughter yoga. It provides a meditative aspect and gets more oxygen into the lungs. "Deep breathing and hearty laughter help increase the supply of oxygen to the body," says Kataria. This "internal jogging" is also good for the abdomen and intestines, except for those who are pregnant or have physical conditions such as haemorrhoids, hernias or high blood pressure. A good laugh can indeed be strenuous physical activity.

The laughter clubs therefore always begin with a warm-up – stretching exercises interspersed with deep breathing. Stretching arms up to the sky (similar to yoga's talasana) relieves the body of inhibitions and clapping with "ho-ho ha-ha" chanting gets the blood circulating. "This is the laughter club trademark," says Whitehead. "Clapping has positive connotations and motion creates emotion. By moving around and chanting, it loosens people up and establishes eye contact which is very important for group confidence and openness."

The mirth makers... practising the animal laugh at the laughter club in Clapham, south London

The group then progress to more vigorous laughter exercises. The milkshake laugh, the mobile phone laugh and the more daring animal exercises such as the simba laugh, which involves sticking your tongue out in someone's face. "The session builds up to a point where people feel comfortable being silly," says Whitehead. "Breaking social codes of behaviour, as with the simba laugh, is not easy for some people."

Bob Pearce teaches clowning workshops in London and he thinks everybody is funny. "We each have our own level of stupidity," he says, "it just depends on how deeply buried it is and about having permission to express it." He feels that society doesn't allow us to express playfulness, stupidity, or crazy behaviour unless we're drunk. But it could also have something to do with our lack of confidence. Nobody likes being called a clown or a fool, unless in jest and under the appropriate playful conditions.

Pearce believes that clowning is more of an "inner thing" and not so much about externals and funny props. "It is not about people finding their clown persona and latching on to it," he says. "Clowning is not about playing a character. It is about being exposed, dropping the social mask and entering into a clown state of madness and playfulness." On a scientific level, when we laugh we enter a positive emotional condition that is the opposite of distress, what scientists call eustress.

Scientific and psychological research reveals that in either emotional state chemical changes take place in the body which effect our behaviour. Distress increases the amount of the stress hormones cortisol and beta-endorphins, whereas eustress helps to boost the immune system by increasing levels of antibody immunoglobins.

Dr Lee S Berk is a researcher in psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) at Loma Linda University, California. He is involved in producing scientific evidence of these happy hormones, something Dr Kataria has been following since he began developing his laughter-yoga philosophy.

PNI states that the immune system is directly related to the brain and is therefore affected by emotions. Backing up this eustress theory, Berk refers to psychological studies where brain activity was mapped during joke-telling. Researchers discovered that it was not just a portion of the

brain that responded, but that the whole cerebral cortex was involved during laughter.

Berk conducted his own scientific research into the connection between the laughing brain and the immune system. Blood tests were carried out on selected control groups before and after a mirth-making activity, such as watching a funny film. The results saw an increase in the numbers of natural killer cells (NK cells) which are important for the immune system. "Everyday, cells in our body undergo a lot of change, creating potential carcinogenic cells," says Berk. "NK cells destroy these aberrant cells and are therefore significant in terms of immunosurveillance."

The late Norman Cousins funded much of Berk's scientific research. Cousins is reputed to be the man who instigated laughter-health research, through his 1979 book, *Anatomy of an Illness*. His personal experience has become a popular case study used by researchers to highlight that laughter has healing benefits.

In 1964, Cousins was diagnosed with ankylosing spondylitis, a collagen illness that attacks the connective spinal tissue. For treatment, he was given up to 26 aspirins a day, sleeping pills and codeine to ease the pain. He discovered that by giving himself a daily 10-minute dose of belly-aching laughter, he was able to achieve a few hours of pain-free sleep. Watching Marx Brothers films and reading humorous stories stimulated his laughter.

Some reports state that a good laugh releases endorphins in the brain, the body's natural painkiller. They have the same effect on us as opiates do in numbing pain. Cousins was able to cut out all painkillers eventually reversing his illness. His claim that laughter had greatly aided his recovery through pain relief was criticised by medical experts. They were yet to be convinced of laughter having a direct effect on healing.

Even Berk, whose research benefited most from Cousins' claim, initially had doubts that his findings would be medically accepted. "If you'd told me 10 years ago that medical organisations would today be accepting papers on this," he says, "I would've said you're crazy. It's not possible. That doesn't mean that a doctor is going to tell you to take two aspirins and watch Laurel and Hardy," Berk says. "But the reality is that now there's a real science to the health benefits of laughter. And it's as real as taking a drug."

● **World Laughter Day** is on Sunday May 4. It will be celebrated on Clapham Common, south London, for the first time as part of a global event for world peace, health and happiness. Visit www.laughteryoga.co.uk for more information.

● For information on finding a **local laughter club** contact Julie Whitehead on 020-7733 2389, londonlaughter@aol.com or www.laughteryoga.co.uk

● **Dr Kataria** will be holding a "Power of Laughter" workshop in London on June 21-22. Visit www.laughteryoga.co.uk for more information.

● For information on **laughter-yoga** see Dr Kataria's website: www.laughteryoga.org or laughter@bom3.vsnl.net.in

● For information on **clown workshops** contact Bob Pearce on 07905 038 881

Dear doctor



Dr Ann Robinson Too young for prostate cancer at 43?

Prostate fears

I'm a worried man of 43. Recently, I had a urine infection which cleared up with a course of antibiotics. My GP took a blood test which included a PSA test to check my prostate. I have just been told it is four. The GP wants to refer me to a specialist to check for prostate cancer. I have no symptoms but am anxious and upset. Can you reassure me?

A Don't panic. It's a shame you had the PSA tested while you had a urine infection. PSA (prostate specific antigen) is a chemical produced by the prostate that rises whenever the gland is upset. As it sits just under the bladder, urine infections can have a knock-on effect and cause the PSA to rise. Infections, inflammation and cancer can cause a high PSA. Even enthusiastic sex and jiggling around on a bicycle seat are said to affect your PSA. Levels rise as you age because the prostate tends to grow. In your 40s, PSAs should certainly be less than 2.5, and consistently higher values do need to be checked out.

In the unlikely event that you do have cancer, you will be pleased to have had it detected promptly. Evidence is growing that 90% of prostate cancer treated at an early stage, results in cure.

Horse whispers

My 10-year-old spends her weekends at a stables. I have read that Glanders is a dangerous disease that can be caught from horses. Is it a risk to her?

A Glanders has featured in the lists of potential bioterrorism weapons. Anyone who enjoys being frightened may peruse the excellent Public Health Laboratory Service website for details of these potentially fatal, contagious, untreatable infectious agents. The last case of Glanders in the UK was in 1928 so your daughter isn't at risk in the stables. There are still cases in SE Asia and the Middle East. Humans can catch Glanders from an infected animal if they have large cuts which the bacteria can get into. It's fatal to humans in 90% of cases. www.phls.co.uk

Cheeky GP

I am a 51-year-old woman whose periods are now three to six monthly. My doctor says this is normal. However, when I asked if we could stop contraception, he just grinned and asked if I thought I would conceive at my age. I find this answer unsatisfactory.

A The usual advice is that women who want to avoid pregnancy should use contraception for a year after the last period if you are over 50. Under 50, you should use contraception for two more years to be safe.

seem to be developing jowls. I am planning to start a general exercise programme to get fit but was wondering if you could suggest anything specific?

A A sagging jaw is the product of gravity and genes. Facial exercises to tone the muscles of the neck may make your jawline look better and there are some lovely ones on the website below. Cosmetic surgery is a more drastic measure – few of us would go that far. <http://www.women-fitness.net/beauty/skin/facial.htm>

These answers are intended to be as accurate and full as possible, but should never be used as a substitute for visiting a doctor and seeking medical help. If you have a question for Dr Robinson, email drann@dircon.co.uk or write to her c/o The Health Editor, The Guardian, 119 Farringdon Road, London EC1R 3ER. She regrets that she cannot enter into personal correspondence.

NOW AVAILABLE 

The latest tablet treatment for erectile dysfunction, launched this month.

For advice and a full range of prescription only treatments from WellCare's specially trained GPs

Call 0808 100 3133
Harley Street London & Nationwide (Est 1979)
Friendly confidential service. No GP referral required

WellCare (head office)
7 Monmouth Place BATH BA1 2AU www.wellcare.co.uk

One mind.
One body.
One a day.



Gerimax is a blend of vitamins, minerals and GGE, the active substance from the fabled ginseng root. Some experts believe that, if you lead an active, hectic life with only time for rushed meals, ginseng may help maintain concentration, reaction time and endurance. The one a day tablets cost £7.95 for a months supply, from most Boots stores and health food shops. www.wassen.com

Ladies, are you tired of bed stripping in the middle of the night?

You need the sheet protector that goes on top of your bottom sheet, stops wetness from seeping into the sheet and mattress. No ties, no plastic. Comfortable to use and easy to machine wash. Soft quilted cotton/poly surface, absorbent inner layer and 100% waterproof barrier with non-slip backing. Replace with a fresh one in seconds (approx 30" x 33"). Also suitable for children.

Single size (approx 30" x 33") £19 each - buy 2 for £34 & save £4
Double size (approx 52" x 34") £39 each - buy 2 for £74 & save £4

Post: WellCare 7 Monmouth Place Bath BA1 2AU
Call free: 0808 100 3133 mon/fri 8.30am to 4.45pm
Please make cheques or postal orders payable to "WellCare". Full money back guarantee if returned unopened within 28 days.