

# What's so Funny about Yoga?

## Laughter Yoga First Cracks Us Up, Then Calms Us Down

by Kim Childs



Most yoga classes take place in quiet rooms full of earnest faces in various states of relaxation and concentration. Not so with laughter yoga, an unusual workout for the body, mind and spirit that aims to banish the blues by busting a gut.

Laughter yoga clubs began in 1995 with Dr. Madan Kataria, who started them in his native India because he believed in the health benefits of laughter. At first, his participants simply told jokes. Later, Kataria and his wife, Madhuri, added yoga stretches and breathing techniques. Eventually, he replaced the jokes with exercises designed to elicit laughter without humor. Today, Kataria's students play out these routines all over the world.

"I have a laughter bank of 100 exercises," says Vishwa Prakesh, a student who went on to create his own Yogalaff sessions in New York. A textile designer by trade, Prakesh opens his Manhattan office doors for free every Wednesday night to lure "laughers" with exercises such as clapping and chanting "Ho, ho, ha, ha, ha," until contrived laughter becomes the real thing.

"You have people who come in with grim faces and ask, 'Are you sure I can do this?'" notes Prakesh. "Then you begin to see the sparkle in their eyes, and very soon they are really laughing."

To break the ice in laughter clubs, people may introduce themselves in a comical way and then ask the group to mimic them. That may be followed by "lion laughter", "heartly laughter" and "laugh for no reason" exercises.

Prakesh says he sees that people become more easy-going and less inhibited during his "yoga for the soul" sessions, which don't feature yoga postures, but yield similar health benefits. Laughter yoga proponents report that it increases lung capacity and oxygen, decreases stress hormones, exercises the abdominals, boosts immunity and provides a cardiovascular workout through prolonged, deep belly laughs. Clinical research now backs many of these claims, but those who flock to laughter yoga speak more of the mental benefits than the physical ones.

"The most important benefit is the overall feeling of lightness and the general enjoyment of being," says Elsie Blum, a regular at Yogalaff. "There's a loosening of body tensions, especially the facial muscles. Smiling is more natural."

Ramesh Chandra attends Yogalaff evenings about twice a month. He says that the laughter refreshes his lungs and also helps him to manage tensions outside the club.

"I am now able to laugh more easily in my daily life," says Chandra. "My anger is more in check under trying conditions."

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Both Chandra and Blum maintain that laughter yoga sessions are better than funny movies and comedians when it comes to eliciting joy and release. One reason is the social aspect and the chance to connect with others in ways that transcend language, culture, race, class and ethnicity. Many laughter yoga clubs also become social clubs. In Boston, certified laughter leader Sandra Daitch says that she's forged some great connections this way.

"I find it's really fun to laugh in a group, so having a community of laughers is really great," says Daitch, who occasionally leaves "Laugh-a-gram" voicemail messages for community members in need of cheer. Her mentor, Dr. Kataria, has been a role model for bringing laughter yoga to prisons, orphanages and homes for the disabled.

Daitch observes that laughter clubs can be a refuge and a resource for those struggling with depression and those who feel weighed down by the demands of modern life. Exercises then can be applied to many real-life situations that aren't so funny.

"If you're in traffic, instead of having road rage, just say to yourself 'I'm in a traffic jam, ha, ha!'" advises Daitch. "It can lighten you up!"

Daitch, who is also a massage therapist, says that she modifies the physical aspects of her laughter yoga workshops when she brings them to nursing homes. Of course, those dealing with illnesses and surgeries involving the internal organs should consult a doctor before trying laughter yoga. Otherwise, only those missing a funny bone should stay away.



Vishwa Prakesh  
Laughter  
Ambassador to U.S.

To find a laughter club, laughter yoga professional or nearby training session, visit [LaughterYoga.org](http://LaughterYoga.org).