



Dr. Madan Kataria is a qualified physician, practicing in Bombay (India). He is a pioneer of laughter clubs movement all over the world and has developed a new technique of Laughter Therapy based on yoga. His innovative concept has been widely accepted all over the world and appeared in prestigious publications like Time Magazine, National Geographic, Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, Daily Telegraph (UK) and Colours magazine in Italy. It also flashed on BBC, CNN, NHK (Japan), ABC news (USA) and many other television networks all over the world. Dr. Kataria is a corporate consultant for holistic health and stress management to many national and multinational companies. He has conducted workshops and seminars in USA, Australia, Singapore, Italy and UK.

A well-known speaker, frequently Madan Kataria appears on television, radio for health talk. Dr. Kataria was a master lecturer at the 4th Basel congress "Humor in der Therapie".

Madan Kataria: About Laughter Yoga. Brief history of Laughter Yoga and how it originated

In the early 90's I worked as a registrar in a local hospital in Mumbai, and also wrote papers for medical journals. In this scholarly work I became interested in the growing body of scientific evidence showing that laughter is extremely beneficial to mental and physical health. I decided that more laughter was needed to improve health and cope with the stress of modern living and started a quest to find ways that laughter could be prescribed to patients and people who needed it.

In March 1995, while writing the article "Laughter – The Best Medicine" for a health journal, I discovered many modern scientific studies, which described in depth, the many proven benefits of laughter on the human mind and body. In particular, I was impressed by Norman Cousins' book *Anatomy of an Illness* and the research work by Dr. Lee Berk. Profoundly inspired and being a man of action, I immediately decided to field-test the impact of laughter on himself and others.

Starting with just five people, at 7 am on March 13, 1995, at a public park in his neighborhood in Mumbai, India; I launched the first "Laughter Club". These five founding members laughed together in the park

that day to the amusement of bystanders; and the small group quickly grew to more than 50 participants, within a few days. In the initial meetings, they stood in a circle with one person in the center, to tell a joke or a funny story. Everybody enjoyed and felt good for the rest of the day. However, after two weeks, the Laughter Club hit a snag. The stock of good jokes and stories ran out, and negative, hurtful and naughty jokes started to emerge. Two offended participants complained that it would be better to discontinue the Club than to continue with such jokes. I asked the Club members to give him just one day to develop a “breakthrough” that would resolve the crisis.

That night, I reviewed the research and finally found the answer I was looking for: Our body cannot differentiate between pretend and genuine laughter. Both produced the same “Happy Chemistry”. The next morning I explained this to the group, and asked them to try to act out laughter with me, for one minute. Amid skepticism they agreed to try ... The results were amazing. For some, the make believe laughter quickly turned into real laughter – this was contagious and in no time others followed. Soon the group was laughing like never before. The hearty laughter that followed persisted for almost ten minutes. This breakthrough was the birth of Laughter Yoga.

Realizing that there are ways other than humor to stimulate laughter, I developed a range of laughter exercises including elements of role-play and other techniques from his days as an amateur theater actor. Giving a thought to the importance of childlike playfulness, I developed further techniques to stimulate this within the group.

As Yoga practitioners, I and my wife Madhuri, saw the similarities between laughter and Pranayama exercises, and we incorporated elements from this ancient form of Yoga into Laughter Yoga, including the deep breathing exercises now used between Laughter Exercises, to deepen the impact.



Dr. Kataria laughing together with workers of a Mumbai factory (1999)

What is Laughter Yoga

Laughter Yoga is a unique concept where anyone can laugh for no reason, without relying on humor, jokes or comedy. We initiate laughter as an exercise in a group, but with eye contact and childlike playfulness, it soon turns into real and contagious laughter. The reason we call it Laughter Yoga is because it combines laughter exercises with yoga breathing. This brings more oxygen to the body and the brain which makes one feel more energetic and healthy. The concept of Laughter Yoga is based on a scientific fact that the body cannot differentiate between fake and real laughter if done with willingness. One gets the same physiological and psychological benefits.

Laughter Yoga is fast sweeping the world and today there are thousands of laughter clubs in more than 65 countries. In addition to social laughter clubs, Laughter Yoga is also practiced in companies and corporations, fitness centers, yoga studios, centers for seniors, schools, colleges, universities, physically and mentally challenged and self-help cancer groups.



Concept and philosophy

Laughing for no reason is the core philosophy of Laughter Yoga methods. There are several questions like: Do we need a sense of humor to laugh? How can we laugh when we don't feel like laughing or are not in a good mood? How can we laugh when we have so many problems in life? Why children can laugh 300 to 400 times in a day while adults laugh only 15 times? Can we learn to laugh? I was not aware of these very relevant questions before starting the Laughter Club movement. But as the concept of Laughter Yoga evolved, so did the answers. I started to experience the magic of laughing without a reason, which gradually enabled me to discover five secrets of laughing for no reason which are:

We don't need sense of humor to laugh

What is the relationship between sense of humor and laughter? Is it possible to laugh for no reason? Most people believe that one must have a sense of humor to laugh, but Laughter Yoga has proven otherwise. No one is born with a sense of humor, which is the brain's capacity to perceive, relate, and experience a situation, and judge if the situation is funny or not. We acquire this judgmental skill as our mental abilities develop during mid and late childhood. Sense of humor is a very mental and intellectual phenomenon.

Laughter arising out of humor is conditional. It depends upon the person's intellectual ability, state of mind and level of happiness and life satisfaction. But laughter can be achieved unconditionally. Children laugh without any mental or cognitive ability to aid them in comprehending humor. Most of their laughter is an outcome of playfulness and inherent joyfulness. To develop the ability to laugh joyfully once again, adults must remove layers of inhibition, programming and mental roadblocks created by self, family, and society. Beneath these barriers lies an infinite ability to laugh for no reason.

Teaching an inhibited person to develop sense of humor is like flushing a drain blocked with rocks and rubble. Once the rubble is removed, water will start flowing. Similarly, mental inhibition and shyness is like rubble that blocks our sense of humor. Laughter Yoga facilitates this cleaning process. As years of programming are cleared, natural joyful laughter inside of us is released and begins to flow.

Laughter Yoga techniques are effective even for people who have lost their laughter or have absolutely no sense of humor. People often say, "I am depressed", "I cannot laugh", or "I don't feel like laughing". We tell them, "It doesn't matter. Just bring us your willing body and we will make you laugh."

Once released, natural laughter is hard to stop. Even in a country like India where we don't have a great tradition of humor and comedy, hundreds of thousands of people laugh daily in public parks. People who never smiled now laugh at small things. They have also started telling jokes and acting funny, something they never did before. Playfulness helped to develop their sense of humor and brought more laughter to their lives.

In fact, laughter and humor share a cause-and-effect relationship. They are in unison and cannot be separated. One leads to another. Sometimes humor is the cause, which is more mental and cognitive, while the effect is laughter — more of a physical phenomenon. In Laughter Clubs, laughter is the cause and the effect is humor. I realized that most people

do not identify with a sense of humor. They find it easier to laugh physically in a group. This has led to the growing popularity of Laughter Clubs. So, even if you don't have sense of humor, don't worry. Just join a Laughter Club and you will develop a sense of humor.

Motion Creates Emotion

"How do you laugh when you're in no mood to laugh or don't have any reason to laugh?" The answer is – motion creates emotion!

There is an inherent link between the body and mind. Whatever happens to the mind happens to the body. If you observe sad and depressed people, their bodies are also depressed. They walk slowly, talk slowly and their body movements are sluggish and listless.

The opposite is also true; whatever happens to the body happens to the mind. I remember my father said, "If you're sad, don't sit idle. Keep doing some physical work or go for a walk and jog, you will feel better". And he was right; I always felt better by keeping my body active. This is known as theory of motion creates emotion.

This establishes a two-way link between body and mind. If one changes the quality of thoughts, one can feel a change in body behavior. Conversely, if one can bring a change in body behavior one can experience the change in mental state. Laughter Yoga has the ability to synchronize both body and the mind, maintaining a mutual harmony.

You can laugh even if you are not happy

Laughter Yoga makes a clear distinction between happiness and joyfulness. Happiness is a conditional response. It is dependent on the fulfillment of certain desires of the mind and is related to happenings in the past and the future and hardly ever deals with the present. Do you remember how long you stayed happy after getting that diploma, car, job, or new house that you had worked so long for? The sad fact is that even if the conditions are fulfilled, happiness is often fleeting as it is quickly displaced by new conditions—the idea of forever-moving goalposts.

In contrast, joyfulness is unconditional commitment to be happy for the moment and to have fun despite life's problems. Joyfulness is easily triggered by joyful activities like laughing, dancing, singing and playing. It is purely a physical phenomenon while happiness is a concept of the mind.

When you're joyful, you experience physiological and biochemical changes. The generation of good feelings and a sense of well-being

change your outlook towards life. Laughter Yoga is all about learning to be joyful and you can navigate happiness in a much better way.

Cultivate Childlike Playfulness

Laughter is not about laughing. It is actually about cultivating child-like playfulness. Once you learn to play, you don't have to laugh. Laughter will be the natural outcome of your playful inner child. If you want to get rid of your dependence on jokes and still want to laugh, simply become childlike. In the initial stages of the growth of Laughter Clubs, when we found jokes could not make us laugh much, we forced ourselves to laugh in a group, but many people found it mechanical and got bored with the activity. Though laughing in a group provides a stimulus, a childlike behavior by adults helps them to get over their inhibitions and actually loosen up. Therefore, we incorporate childlike actions in the laughter club like producing funny sounds by swiveling the tongue inside the mouth, tapping air-filled cheeks, laughing like a child and talking Gibberish. We keep reminding our members about the importance of being like a child.

You can train your body and mind to laugh

Did you know that we can actually learn to laugh? Our body and mind can be trained to laugh at will. It's like learning to ride a bicycle. It's muscle memory; once you learn it, you never forget. Repetition is the mother of any skill. By repeating any bodily behavior over a period of time, the mind begins to generate a predictable response. The body learns to produce a knee-jerk reaction without involving the rational brain or the process of thinking. This is called "conditioning". As a classic example of conditioning, famous Russian scientist Pavlov performed an experiment with dogs.

Every time he gave them food, he would ring the bell. After several days of repeating the same process, he stopped giving food and only rang the bell. He found that the ringing the bell, even in the absence of food, produced saliva in the mouth and gastric juice in the stomach. The body of the dogs had developed an association between the ringing of the bell – a physical sensory experience, and the food.

Similarly, the human brain can also be conditioned. With repetitive exercises, the body starts reacting out of reflex before the conscious brain can rationalize and think. Throughout our lives, we are conditioned in both positive and negative ways.

Over time, members of Laughter Clubs become conditioned to be joyful through the bodily experience of doing Laughter Yoga. Clapping in rhythm, chanting “ho ho ha ha” in unison, and positive affirmations like “very good, very good, yay!” are a few examples of expressions of joy practiced repeatedly in Laughter Clubs.

With Laughter Yoga, the brain develops new neuronal connections that produce happy chemistry in the body. These reactions can be triggered simply by laughter exercises, and doing certain actions of the body, which lead the mind to experience the emotion of joy – no matter what.

