



Photo: Courtesy of LAUGHTERYOGA.ORG/DR MADAN KATARIA

OUTSIDE IN Laughter club participants laugh on purpose as a physical way to release tension and improve mood. "Don't leave laughter to chance," says Madan Kataria, MD, the movement's founder. "Make a commitment from within and go for it."

"It took me a while to warm up to the idea that laughter therapy does really help," says Nasr, "but the remarkable change in the course of Tanaz's illness made a believer out of me.... I am convinced that laughter yoga was essential to the fact that she has not relapsed in years, despite many social stressors."

Nasr sees laughter as a kind of adjunct tool, an add-on to medication for patients who "need something additional to reach that level of wellness and feel happy, rather than just keep their illness under control."

He adds, "Just as we laugh because we feel happy, we can feel happy because we laugh."

home improvement

Participants in a laughter club meeting progress through various exercises—greeting laughter, hearty laughter, open-mouthed silent laughter and so forth—with each type of laughter sustained for up to a minute. Simulated laughter may erupt into genuine giggles and guffaws, "even if only because of the recognition of how ridiculous it is," says Cook.

If getting out of bed is a challenge, much less getting out of the house, you can find videos of group laughter sessions on YouTube or purchase an instructional DVD.

There's an even easier way to get started, says wellness coach Nira Berry: "Just open your mouth into a wide smile and force the breath out with a 'ho ho ha ha.' Then repeat."

Berry, a breast cancer survivor, says she was "really down" after going through her medical treatment. She discovered laughter exercises on the Internet while researching ways to combat her low mood.

"Sometimes I would just lie in bed and watch my stomach move up and down as I laughed a few times. I noticed that it did make me feel more upbeat and reduced my pain," she recalls.

She expanded her laughter routine to the shower, the car, and eventually to LaughingRx classes she leads in Bethesda, Maryland. She also produced her own DVD, called *Laugh Off Stress*, to reach people who are too depressed to come to a class or don't feel comfortable in a group.

Berry makes a point of laughing as much as possible every day to create a "joy-filled life." Cook also finds he has more joy in his life now, laughing naturally with his wife and friends in a way that wasn't possible when he was depressed.

When necessary, though, Cook practices the laughter techniques on his own—"to relieve anxiety, stimulate energy, or just for fun.... It doesn't take much for a shift in my physiology and temperament to take place." **e**

Lynn Santa Lucia, a freelance writer based in Massachusetts, has 15 years' experience covering wellness, emotional and mental health, fitness and nutrition.

starter kit

Here are some solo exercises that can help get you started:

HAND-ON-BELLY LAUGHTER: Put your hands on your abdomen while sitting or lying down. Feel your belly rise and fall as you utter "ho ho, ha ha" over and over. Start with one-minute sessions and extend a little longer each time you practice.

PILLOW LAUGHTER: Sit on the floor with a pillow on your lap. Take a deep breath and think, "I am going to laugh no matter what it takes." On the exhale, bend over, bury your face in the pillow and laugh.

GRADIENT LAUGHTER: Start by smiling, then release a gentle chuckle. Increase the intensity until you've achieved a hearty laugh. Gradually bring the laugh down to a smile again.

LION LAUGHTER: Thrust out the tongue, widen the eyes, and stretch the hands out like claws while laughing.

SILENT LAUGHTER: Open your mouth wide and laugh without making a sound.

PHONE CALL LAUGHTER: Hold a phone to your ear and pretend someone just told you the funniest joke ever.

TANDEM LAUGHTER: Actually call someone on the phone, and say, "Let's laugh for 2 minutes together." Do it.