

A Korean study of laughter therapy, published in *Geriatrics & Gerontology International* in July 2011, found that each eased depressive symptoms and improved sleep in a group of elderly patients. Meanwhile, Iranian researchers who compared group exercise to a program called Laughter Yoga found similar benefits for reducing depression and improving quality of life. That study appeared in the *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* in March 2011.

Many forms of laughter therapy, such as that employed with cancer patients, often sparking laughs from something that isn't even funny. Some therapists try to cultivate a sense of playfulness or in-

tor of my emotional and psychological state—like a kind of barometer. If my capability is low, then I know I need to attend to something or other to regain a more agreeable state."

plus, not instead

Critics emphasize that laughter clubs should not be seen as a substitute for professional care.

"This is not a studied or effective form of 'treatment,'" says Barbara L. Milrod, MD, a psychiatry professor at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City who specializes in anxiety disorders. "Depression is a serious,

It's as we laugh because we feel happy, can **feel happy because we laugh.**"

rate silly antics into sessions.

Laughter Yoga, laughing can be a very physical activity. A typical meeting involves some warm-up clapping, chanting ("Ho ho ha ha ha"), a few breaths with prolonged exhalation, 20 minutes of laughter exercises interspersed with deep breathing and singing, followed by 15 minutes of meditation.

Iranian Cook, 48, was diagnosed with depression in 1997. He benefits from standard treatment, including medication, but gives guided laughter exercises as a kind of complementary therapy.

Cook has led Laughter Yoga sessions in North York, Ontario, since 2005. When he first tried it, he recalls, "the feel-good effects" happened instantly.

"I was invited to laugh for just one minute, and, 'no explanations on the methodology, just laugh or not,' he explains. The release of pent-up energy was instantaneous. After the minute was up, I felt relaxed, calm and peaceful all at the same time."

Now, he says, "I've come to realize that my ability to engage in genuine laughter is a reliable indica-

tor of my emotional and psychological state—like a kind of barometer. If my capability is low, then I know I need to attend to something or other to regain a more agreeable state."

Milrod also warns that someone with a mood disorder who tries group laughter and finds that the chortling doesn't come easily may end up feeling inadequate, which "may contribute to the anxiety or depression they already feel."

When Tanaz decided to attend a Laughter Yoga training in 2004, she says, "Everyone was laughing, but I didn't feel it."

Despite her unremarkable first encounter, she persisted at home by watching videos of groups doing the program. After about a year, she says, "laughter exercises were making a big difference in how I felt—I was more upbeat, more at peace." Her whole outlook on life improved, and in 2006 she founded her own laughter club.

"The most important thing," she adds, "was realizing I still had the capacity for joy."

Tanaz hasn't abandoned medication and other coping strategies, but her doctor gives the laughter routine a lot of credit.

fake it 'til you make it

When it comes to elevating mood, does genuine laughter in response to something funny equal the prompted chuckles of laughter therapy?

Rod A. Martin, PhD, CPsych, a psychology professor at Western University in Ontario and author of *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*, votes no.

"Laughter without mirth is not likely to have much benefit. The emotion of mirth is linked with activation of dopamine in the brain, to produce feelings of pleasure."

Research has shown that the funnier something is to a person, the more strongly the pleasure center part of the brain is activated. In effect, Martin suggests, "mirth is the important element to feeling uplifted, not laughter per se."

Of course, depression tends to put the kibosh on spontaneous mirth. But Madan Kataria, MD, the founder of Laughter Yoga, insists that you don't need joy, jokes, or a sense of humor to laugh. Laughter can come from the body itself instead of the mind, he says, and still produce all the mental and physical benefits of "real" laughter.

Kataria, a family physician in India, launched the first laughter club in 1995. His method includes deep breathing and playful tension-releasing movements, such as arm swinging and rhythmic clapping.

"When your mind is trapped with emotions, your breath gets trapped, too," he says. "By freeing your breath you can free your mind."

Charles Schaefer, PhD, a psychology professor at Fairleigh Dickinson University, argues that the body doesn't know when laughter is fake.

"Once the brain signals the body to laugh, the body doesn't care why," says Schaefer, who has documented that both manufactured laughter and self-imposed smiling enhance mood. "It's going to release endorphins, it's going to relieve stress as a natural physiological response to the physical act of laughing."

"Forced laughter is a powerful way to boost one's mood and psychological

