**On laughter yoga and committing to laughter**

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Kolkata: 15/04/2018: People enjoying a laughter therapy session in the green premises of Victoria Memorial, Kolkata   | Photo Credit: [K\_R\_DEEPAK](http://www.thehindu.com/profile/photographers/K_R_DEEPAK/)

**Laughter is all in the mind, and the will to break into a chuckle makes it easy for laughter-club members to do so**

Laughter is not just about laughing. It is about cultivating a childlike playfulness within oneself. Once you learn to play, you don’t have to laugh. Laughter will become the natural outcome of your inner child. Though laughing in a group provides a stimulus, childlike behaviour can help adults overcome inhibitions and loosen up. Therefore, laughter clubs incorporate many childlike actions such as producing funny sounds by swivelling the tongue inside the mouth, tapping cheeks filled with air, laughing like a child and talking gibberish.

As adults, very few people can retain the excitement of a child, which is why we continuously remind our members about its importance. Poems have been written about the desire to go back to one’s childhood, but this alone is not enough. Some additional action is necessary. Just as one cannot learn how to swim without getting into the water, one has to behave like a child to be childlike. In laughter yoga, we revisit our childhood and try to carry over that carefree spirit to our daily lives.

**Difference between Being Funny and Having Fun**

An outsider looking at people doing laughter yoga and seeing them laugh for no reason may find it goofy and embarrassing. Most people are shy. They would rather laugh naturally instead of forcing it. If you ask laughter practitioners, they will tell you that they are totally into it and that there is nothing funny about it. According to them, it is all about having fun.

There is a difference between being funny and having fun. When one is being funny, he/she is performing in order to make others laugh. On the other hand, people participating in laughter exercises are not only making others laugh, they are making themselves laugh too.

A laughter session usually involves members playing like children. In fact, laughter is not just about the physical act of laughing; it is about also bringing out the inner child, which allows you to play as a grown-up. Once you learn to be playful, laughter becomes a natural outcome.

**Happiness is…**

About training your body and mind to laugh, until it brings about a change in your life

Did you know that you can actually learn to laugh? Our bodies and minds can be trained to laugh at will. It’s like learning to ride a bicycle which uses muscle memory: once you learn it, you never forget. The NLP theory indicates that repeated bodily behaviour over a period of time leads the mind to generate a predictable response. The body learns to produce a knee-jerk reaction without involving the process of thinking. This is called conditioning.

Russian scientist Ivan Pavlov’s experiment with dogs is a classic example of conditioning. Every time he would give the dogs food, he would ring a bell. After several days of repeating this process, he stopped giving them food and only rang the bell. He found that simply ringing the bell, even in the absence of food, led the dogs to salivate and produce gastric juices. The dogs had developed an association between the ringing of the bell — a sensory experience — and food.

Similarly, the human brain can also be conditioned. With repetitive exercises, the body begins to react out of reflex before the conscious brain can rationalise the response. Throughout our lives, we are conditioned by both positive and negative experiences, which frame our personality.

**NLP Conditioning with Laughter**

When I started laughter yoga clubs in 1995, I did not have a philosophy in mind. It was later that I started looking into the science of NLP and found that the clubs had unconsciously incorporated many of its principles.

Our lives are nothing but a set of conditioned responses, which develop as we grow up under the influence of people and events. For example, if you are expecting stressful phone calls from your workplace, over a period of time even the ringing of the phone can trigger stress. Even if it is someone wanting to share good news with you, your body will be hardwired to getting stressed.

According to the principles of NLP, we can programme the body and mind for both good and bad experiences. This happens constantly in life and is known as conditioning. When we go through negative experiences like anxiety and fear, they are mostly the products of repeated past experiences. Here’s an example: if you are afraid of your boss and he/she calls you to his/her cabin, your mind will immediately switch to negative thoughts. Your first reaction is likely to be, ‘Oh my god! What happened?’

In case you have had several unpleasant experiences with him/her, even the sight of his/her car can elicit a negative bodily reaction. After a while, the conditioning is set so deep that just the sight of a similar car can make you feel anxious.

The body can also be programmed to respond positively. Laughter yoga allows one to cultivate feelings of joy and happiness. Each time we do a particular laughter exercise, we clap and chant ‘ho, ho’ and ‘ha, ha, ha’. We repeat these exercises until these are wired into our nervous systems. You will be surprised to know that once this happens, you can feel happiness and joy just by clapping and chanting ‘ho, ho’ and ‘ha, ha, ha’.

Another exercise we do during laughter yoga sessions is combining breathing and laughter. As part of this, the participants take a long deep breath with the instructor asking them to hold their breath and laugh as they exhale. After doing this repeatedly, laughter comes spontaneously the moment they breathe. I have personally experienced such conditioning. Several years ago, I advised my participants to laugh while taking a shower. I decided to try it out for myself too. I started laughing in the shower every day, and soon this became a trigger for me. Till date, the moment I get into my bathroom I start laughing involuntarily. With laughter yoga, the brain develops new neuronal connections that trigger positive reactions in the body. These reactions lead the mind to experience the emotion of joy, no matter what.

Over time, members of laughter clubs become conditioned to be joyful. Clapping in rhythm, chanting ‘ho, ho’ and ‘ha, ha, ha’ in unison and using positive words like ‘very good’ and ‘yay’ are a few examples of the expressions of joy that are practised at laughter clubs.

*Excerpted from Laughter Yoga: Daily Laughter Practices for Health and Happiness by Dr Madan Kataria, published by Penguin Random House*