

Laugh it out for your health

By Terry Karnes

When I first heard about Laughter Yoga I envisioned students in Sun Salutations giggling to themselves. I was extremely intrigued by how that was even possible. I just knew I was going to have to try it out and the first thing Instructor Leigh Meredith told me is, “It’s not like traditional Hatha Yoga.”

William Fry, M.D., a professor of psychiatry at Stanford University Medical School, is a pioneer on the study of laughter’s health benefits. He noted the average kindergarten student laughs 300 times a day, but adults on average laugh just 17 times a day. Have we just forgotten how to laugh?

“Instead of serious being real, which is what we’re used to, play is very serious,” Meredith says of Laughter Yoga. Using laughter games, it reminds us how to laugh again.

So, what is it?

“We use laughter as gentle cardio exercise,” Meredith says. “The diaphragm contracts and releases when we laugh. It’s like internal jogging for our organs.”

Meredith has been a Laughter Yoga instructor for three years—earning her certification at Yogaville—but Dr. Madan Kataria, a physician from Mumbai, India, launched the first Laughter Club in 1995. Now there are more than 6,000 laughter clubs in about 60 countries, including the Ageless Laughter Club in Charlottesville.

Laughter Yoga combines unconditional laughter with pranayama (yogic breathing). “It’s fun. It’s easy,” Meredith says. “When we laugh the brain releases serotonin, dopamine and endorphins—it calms us down. We’re exploiting our laughter to do as much good as possible for our bodies.”

Meredith says the biggest benefit of Laughter Yoga is that it moves oxygen through the body allowing for a clearer mind and brighter mood.

“It’s easy to drop into deep meditation, you’re already calm,” Meredith says. “It’s the easiest way I’ve found to drop into deep meditation.”

How does it work?

“In Laughter Yoga, nothing is funny at the beginning because you’re laughing in reverse,” Meredith notes. Playing laughter games, the group of about nine ladies at a recent class at the Senior Center gets started with their session. Each woman says her name and laughs then adds something about herself and laughs again. Proving itself as contagious as a yawn, the others join her in laughter.

The class begins with seated laughter games, like laughing without making a sound while looking around the room, and moves into stand-



ing laughter games, such as the Hokey Pokey (using only laughter of course) and keeping their hands at their sides and walking like a penguin might across the room. Meredith notes the games can be adapted physically to meet any need, though.

At the end of each game the class does a cheer: “Very good, very good, yay!” to know the game is finished.

About 45 minutes into the hour-long class the group lays on the floor—heads pointed toward the center—and enters into laughter meditation. Meredith leads them on a five-minute laughter session. After the five minutes is up, the group goes into silent meditation for several minutes before the end of class.

Benefits

Even the medical community has noticed that laughter is good for you—living up to the old saying “Laughter is the best medicine.” According to a 2005 University of Maryland study, laughter—along with an active sense of humor—may help protect people from a heart attack. Another University of Maryland study showed that laughter helps blood vessels function better.

“It isn’t like a magic happy pill,” Meredith says. “You have to adopt it as a practice. When stressful situations come into your life they don’t seem quite as serious. I notice my bleak mood lifts faster; something that used to trigger stress doesn’t automatically; personal relationships are much easier now.”

She adds, “It releases anxiety and stress. It lowers blood pressure.”

Even if you don’t find anything particularly funny, Meredith says, you will still find benefit from Laughter Yoga.

“You can fake laugh, your body won’t know the difference; the benefit is the same,” she says. “Laughter does become more genuine the more often you do it; you become a laughologist—a laughter master.”

The Ageless Laughter Club meets on Sundays from 3-4 p.m. Meredith is hosting a weekend Laughter Yoga retreat in Lexington on Sept. 24-26. More information is available online at www.yogalaughs.com.