

# (Re)learning lessons from the playground for health



*Heather Joy – and yes, that is the name given to her at birth! – is a professional laughter wellness practitioner and one of a handful of Certified Laughter Yoga Teachers in Australia personally trained by the founder of Laughter Yoga, Dr Madan Kataria. Her working life in media and organisational communications has been ruled by deadlines and headlines. Stress has been ever-present. Heather Joy deals with it differently now, thanks to laughter yoga, a unique combination of slow yogic breathing, gentle stretches and simulated laughter exercises. Heather Joy has been engaged to facilitate laughter yoga sessions and conference workshops, present public forums and train laughter yoga leaders throughout Queensland. Her mission is to spread the happydemic of wellness through laughter, seriously – and she still makes time for her weekly volunteer 'giveback' through her local laughter club.*

The World Health Organization has described stress as the epidemic of the 21st century. It's a major workplace issue and, despite the joyful sound of children's laughter, early childhood educators are far from immune. Indeed occupational stress in teaching has been reported as endemic and cross-cultural since the 1980s<sup>1</sup> with a concerning annual exit rate of around 5.7% from the profession in Australia. Australian Bureau of Statistics figures suggest 53% of people who hold a teaching degree are not working in education and that one in five education graduates don't even register as teachers on graduating.<sup>2</sup>

As teachers, you know that student wellbeing is strongly linked to learning; when engaged and satisfied, children learn well and behave well.<sup>3</sup> It stands to reason that part of that satisfaction and engagement comes from teacher continuity – having a teacher who knows the children, who creates a positive learning environment for them and feels good in themselves.

Exercise is known to help relieve stress. One of the more recent regimens, creating a 'happydemic' in its growth worldwide, is laughter yoga (LY). Developed by Indian physician Dr Madan Kataria and his yogi wife in 1995, LY blends the calming restorative breath of yoga with playful exercises that stimulate intentional laughter, without humour, jokes or comedy.<sup>4</sup>

While LY shows positive results on student behaviour and learning anecdotally, this paper suggests

that early childhood teachers can benefit from taking some lessons from the playground on childlike playfulness – acknowledging also that Australian children are losing natural playfulness sooner with dire consequences.<sup>5</sup>

## **'I'm stressed: I have nothing to laugh about'**

Along the way to 'growing up', many people get swept up in the seriousness of life and become conditioned to think that laughter only relates to something that is funny or humorous.

In truth, laughter is as natural as breathing; a universal form of communication. Small children laugh often, hundreds of times a day and mostly when they play. Their laughter is a physical act, without intellectualisation. LY trains you to laugh 'on demand' by coaxing the inner child 'out' through playful exercises. In the meantime,

<sup>1</sup>Borg, M & Riding, R 1991, 'Occupational stress and satisfaction in teaching', *British Education Research Journal*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 263-281.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-02-04/why-do-teachers-leave/8234054>

<sup>3</sup> Noble, T, McGrath, H, Roffney, S & Rowling, L 2008 *A scoping study of student wellbeing*, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup><https://laughteryoga.org/about-laughter-yoga/>

<sup>5</sup>Mindframe says one in seven children aged four to 17 have a diagnosed mental health or behavioural problem. Mindframe provides access to up-to-date, evidence-based information to support the reporting, portrayal and communication about suicide and mental illness. See more at: <http://www.mindframe-media.info/home#sthash.MSxFdBUUpdpu>

the adage 'fake it 'til you make it' applies as the body cannot discern the difference between 'real' laughter and 'intentional' laughter, *if done willingly*.

While natural laughter lasts for a few seconds here and there, belly laughing for at least ten to 15 minutes continuously, and regularly, has been scientifically proven to reap health benefits

including an improved immune system and blood pressure, lighter and brighter mood, less stress, and clearer and more creative thinking. This is in part due to a hormonal reaction taking place in the body, complemented by deep slow yogic breaths that calm while replenishing the body with heightened levels of oxygen-rich air.

Once relearned, laughter comes more readily and often not dissimilar to riding a bicycle.

## Stress-less lessons from the playground

Small children in the playground regularly clap with delight, jump and dance, smile and laugh. Laughter yoga often incorporates clapping, chanting, movement and smiles too.

Clapping, striking the full palms with moderate force, produces sound waves that we intuit as joyful. The clapping motion also activates acupressure points and increases energy levels. LY clapping has rhythm – most commonly 1-2, 1-2-3.

Just as children jump and dance in delight, we can move while clapping: try swaying from side to side to start, moving feet as well.

Add a laughing chant: ho-ho, ha-ha-ha. These exhalation sounds come from the belly, stimulating diaphragmatic breathing, nature's calming force.

Children's early attempts to talk are babble. In LY, we can talk 'gibberish', a blurting out of sounds without meaning. This can be a playful exercise practised with others as though in conversation or a private means of 'playing back' negative or unhelpful self-thoughts in a way that makes them laughable.

LY's laughter exercises include yogic based, values-based (to help 'reprogram' a more positive mindset) and playful laughter exercises that tap into imagination and creativity.

Children thrive on praise. Adults need it too. Try a popular LY chant to acknowledge little successes through the day: **Very good** (clap), **very good** (clap), **YAY** (lifting arms high in the air thumbs up with child-like exuberance).





## Heather Joy's favourite laugh alone exercises

The following are a few personal favourites used daily to kick start my morning practice.

### Rise and smile

Stand tall with legs about shoulder distance apart. As you take a deep breath in, raise your right arm, fist clenched, above your head and stretch as much as you can towards your left. Exhale "haaaaa" through your mouth with a smile as you unclench the fist. Close your mouth and fist on the inhale and repeat three times. Then change sides and repeat as before.

### Smiling shrug

As you take a deep long slow breath in through your nose, lift your shoulders in an exaggerated shrug. Exhale through the mouth with a strong "Haaaa", allowing the shoulders to drop. Repeat a few times.

### One metre laugh

Stand, feet slightly apart, both hands stretched out to the left. Slide the fingers of the right hand over the left arm to the elbow while saying 'Aeeeeeeee'. Continue sliding the fingers to your left shoulder then across the chest to the right shoulder, repeating 'Aeeeeee' at each point. Uncurl the right arm so that both arms are fully outstretched, tilt your head back and laugh heartily, from the belly. Repeat for the right side.

### Calcutta laugh

An original of Dr Kataria's: both hands splayed, push down as you chant 'ho,ho'; then push out in front with 'ha, ha'. Continue for a minute or more, becoming more rapid then slow down. You can do this seated or move to this.

### Silent laughter

Keep your mouth wide open and laugh without sound. Imagine you

are in a library or church, where it would be really inappropriate to burst out laughing. Try with your mouth closed too. This exercise really engages the diaphragm.

### Tidal breath

Hold your arms out in front, at shoulder height, palms up. As you breathe in slow and deep, feeling your belly extend, draw your arms in towards your chest. Imagine you are dragging that breath in with your hands and lungs. Hold the breath for as long as is comfortable. As you exhale, extend your arms in front as though you are physically releasing the breath. Repeat slowly three times. Now inhale as before but hold your breath until you feel you will burst – and let it out as an explosive laugh.

'Very good, very good, Yay' is regularly repeated through the day when 'challenges' are overcome.