



# Laugh Yourself Happy

There has been little to laugh about in 2020 with the coronavirus pandemic bringing uncertainty and worry to the fore. Yet laughter is known to be healthful so it is time to bring on a happydemic through laughter yoga.

Words by **Jane Milburn** Images **contributed**

Laughter is often relegated to good times in fun company, yet the ability to laugh easily and frequently is a tremendous resource that can provide a coping strategy to reduce stress and accept things we can't control.

Think back to a time when you had a good laugh and chances are you felt relaxed, uplifted and peaceful. This concurs with mounting science-based evidence that laughter is linked to positive psychological wellbeing, resilience, optimism and satisfaction with life.

And there are very real physical benefits too according to HeatherJoy Campbell who has been creating a happydemic of sorts throughout Queensland in recent years by coaxing out our inner child for physical and mental wellbeing at regular laughter yoga sessions.

HeatherJoy studied the science of happiness through University of California Berkeley and trained in India with physician Dr Madan Kataria who 25 years ago took the old adage that 'laughter is good medicine' a step further to create a wellbeing regimen that does not rely on jokes or humour. Dr Kataria brought together playful clapping, stretching, moving and chanting with laughter sustained for at least 20 minutes, interspersed with slow, deep diaphragmatic breaths.

Until COVID, HeatherJoy was delivering laughter yoga almost exclusively as face-to-face group practice in parks,

at workplaces and conferences. Now these sessions have morphed online and Heather is one of Australia's regular video conference facilitators of laughter yoga.

"Science indicates the brain doesn't differentiate between intentional laughter and the real thing, when done willingly. We make the most of that in laughter yoga. Laughing simply as a physical function means you don't need to be in the mood or have a sense of humour to benefit. Just laugh and within minutes, your body will release a cocktail of happy hormones that wind back worries and cares and reduce stress, with flow-on physical benefits," HeatherJoy said.

Research shows older people who laugh regularly are at less risk of a major cardiovascular event which is believed to be linked to laughter releasing nitric oxide, a chemical that relaxes blood vessels, reduces blood pressure and decreases clotting.

"The evidence is compelling enough for American cardiologist Dr Michael Miller to prescribe 'one good belly laugh a day' for his heart patients," she said.

Similarly, Japanese researchers have found laughter could lower blood glucose in people with type 2 diabetes; lead researcher Dr Keiko Hayashi recommends people with diabetes have a daily dose.

HeatherJoy said laughter yoga helps release a natural painkiller and a number of scientific studies have concluded



that pain thresholds significantly increase when you laugh. Laughter can even improve short-term memory by winding back the stress hormones that impair our ability to learn and remember.

"Laughing is as natural as breathing yet we often don't view it that way," HeatherJoy said.

"Whether it's a chortle, a chuckle, a coo, a gurgle or a full-belly laugh, laughter is part of a baby's experimentation in making sounds and communicating. And once she discovers how to laugh, she laughs 'just because'... because it feels good, it sounds good; it *is* good."

Laughter yoga may be an important response to the pandemic because, just like coronavirus, laughter is highly contagious! So there is no better time to imitate a toddler and laugh at life simply because it makes you feel good to be alive.

Learn more about HeatherJoy's work at thehappydemic.com.au or find your local laughter club in Queensland at laughterclubsqld.com.au and elsewhere in Australia at laughteryoga-australia.org

## TRY THESE at home

### Social distancing laugh

Stand with 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 across the chest to the right shoulder, saying 'Aeeeeee'. Uncurl the right arm so that both arms are full outstretched (which is at least 1.5 metres), tilt your head back and laugh heartily, from the belly. Repeat for the right side.

### Silent laughter

Keep your mouth wide open and laugh without the 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.

### 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 3 times. Now inhale as before but hold a little longer and let the breath out as an explosive laugh.

### Winking meditation

Two people sit opposite one another. Gaze into the others' eyes, lovingly. Then start to wink. One eye closed, then opened; the other eye, closed and opened. At speed. Winking almost always results in laughter.