

*Battling an illness
or simply coping with the
pressures of daily life
can be overwhelming.
Across the country,
Americans have found an
effective way to cope:*

Laugh Away Stress

BY SALLY STICH

TO ANYONE PASSING THE room where Jenni Reusser and the members of her club meet once a month at the YMCA in Orrville, Ohio, the scene looks and sounds, well, hysterical.

"Time for a vowel movement," Reusser announces to the group, who force themselves to laugh out the five vowels, "A! E!..." The silliness of the exercise sends everyone erupting into belly laughs.

By the time the half-hour session is over, everyone is weak from giggling. But they've had more than just a good time. They've also used laughter to beat stress.

The Orrville YMCA Laughter Club is part of a new movement started by Dr. Steven Wilson, a psychologist in Columbus, Ohio. In July 2000, Wilson and a group of health professionals formed the World Laughter Tour to help others improve their physical and mental health through systematic laughter. Dr. Wilson studied with Dr. Madan Kataria, an Indian physician credited with starting laughter clubs in Bombay in 1995. Today, there are more than 300

clubs across the U.S. and Canada.

Certainly, the idea of laughter as medicine is hardly a new concept. Norman Cousins popularized the movement with his 1979 book, *Anatomy Of An Illness As Perceived By The Patient*. But what makes laughter clubs unique is that they do not rely on humor to elicit yucks. "Humor is subjective," says Wilson, "whereas laughter is universal. Our method is to *simulate* laughter in order to *stimulate* laughter."

For Mindy Saner, a 46-year-old mother of two and a regular at the Orrville YMCA Laughter Club, the benefits have been incredible. "I'm much less self-conscious, less anxious and less intense," she says. "At the end of the first session,

continued



Jenni Reusser leads her Orrville, Ohio, YMCA Laughter Club in a laughing exercise.

The Five Health Benefits of Laughter

Besides being fun, laughter has great health benefits—both mental and physical.

1. Mirthful laughter stimulates a moderate cardiovascular workout.
2. Laughter produces endorphins, counteracting the production of stress hormones, which are linked to depression, tension, fatigue and anger.
3. It appears to optimize the immune system, which helps fight infection.
4. Laughter reduces self-consciousness and boosts self-confidence.
5. It relaxes the muscles and helps fight chronic pain associated with muscle tension.

LAUGHTER CLUBS /continued

I walked out so relaxed I was almost dizzy from too much oxygen."

Besides improving your mental well-being, laughter also can enhance your physical benefits as well. "Mirthful laughter is like taking an internal jog," says Dr. Lee Berk of the Susan Samueli Center at the College of Medicine at the University of California, Irvine. "Your heart rate elevates, blood pressure increases, muscles contract and oxygen levels rise." Done regularly, one can change the area in the brain that releases stress hormones and, in turn, become better conditioned to handle stress.

Laughter also may boost the immune system. In two different studies, Berk discovered that laughter increased the activity of natural "killer" cells, which fight infection. The studies also showed that immunosuppressive hormones, which harm the immune system response, were lower in participants who laughed than in those who did not.

And laughter may help fight heart disease. In a recent study of 300 adults, Dr. Michael Miller, director of the Center for Preventive Cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center, asked each participant how he or she would react to certain social situations, such as having a drink spilled on them. Those with heart disease were 40% less likely to laugh and see humor in those situations than the healthy participants.

Still, if laughter is innate, why do we need "leaders" to show us how to do it? Because somewhere between childhood and adulthood, many of us forget we have a joyful side. "The average child laughs or smiles 400 times a day," notes Berk. "The average adult laughs or smiles 15 times a day." In the midst of growing up, something is lost, but

many of us aren't sure how to reclaim it. Laughter clubs tap into that joy.

And there are many who need help. Laughter clubs have gained the greatest popularity in nursing homes and long-term care facilities. Jacki Kwan, a social worker in Rockville, Md., leads laughter clubs in nursing homes. One

*The average
child laughs
400 times
a day; the
average
adult laughs
15 times
a day. Many
of us forget
our joyful
side on our
way to
becoming
an adult.*

of her success stories is Tina Jasen, 71, a resident of Hebrew Home in Rockville, who has been plagued by multiple sclerosis for the past 34 years. Jasen came to Kwan's first session not knowing what to expect. "I'd been sad for so long because of my lack of mobility," says Jasen. "I'd forgotten I still had a sense of humor. Laughing has helped me cope with my situation. It's also reminded me that I do have things to be thankful for."

Therein lies the key to laughter clubs. Whether someone is battling an illness or just the pressures of everyday life, laughter brings us into the moment, and that is a moment of joy, love and hope. ■

To find a laughter club in your area, go to www.worldlaughterclub.com, or call 1-800-669-5233.

How To Put Laughter Into Your Life

We all can use a little more cheer in our day. Try the following:

- **FORCE YOURSELF TO LAUGH.** Look into the mirror and vow to make the person looking back at you laugh. Even if it's forced, you still get the health benefits.
- **LEARN TO RELAX.** Take a deep breath and say, "I'm calm and relaxed." Breathe out and smile. Within 30 to 60 seconds, you should experience a pleasant feeling.
- **REMEMBER FUNNY MOMENTS.** If there's something that makes you laugh, put it in your environment, so you're reminded regularly of that laughing moment.
- **BE AROUND PEOPLE WHO LAUGH.** Laughter is contagious.
- **MAKE OTHERS LAUGH.** A prop, such as a silly tie, can make others laugh, which, in turn, will make you laugh.
- **LEARN A NEW JOKE.** A quick entry on a search engine, such as www.google.com can locate several Internet joke lists or go to www.humor-matters.com/jokeof.htm on the Web.