

## No Laughing Matter

### COLLEEN DUNKEL AND THE LAUGHTER YOGA SENSATION

But seriously, folks. What are fourteen women and one brave lone man doing sitting on chairs in a circle looking at each other nervously? An encounter group, maybe? No, we are just anticipating a journey into the unknown, waiting for the secrets of laughter yoga to be revealed. Glowing with enthusiasm and life, laughter yoga instructor Colleen Dunkel greets her group of curious newcomers to this unorthodox yoga hybrid. Colleen easily supplies answers to hesitant first questions like, "Are these clothes okay? I didn't bring anything special to wear," or, "Should I take off my shoes?" grinningly assuring a shy participant, "You can laugh in your regular clothes!" What is laughter yoga and how did it come about? Dr. Madan Kataria, a family physician from Mumbai, India, was the first physician to boldly claim that laughter - even fake laughter, we were later to learn - is beneficial to the health and a curative for a variety of physical and emotional ailments. Unsure as to how to prove his postulate, Dr. Kataria started his own laughter group, which met in a city park. At first, the simple telling jokes induced laughter. It seemed to promise to be great fun as well as beneficial to all. But soon the laughter group's sense of humor descended into the gutter. Jokes of a sexual and even racist nature began to circulate. This was not just alarming to Dr. Kataria. Wives, aunties, sisters and various other relatives and friends raised objections to the nature of the groups humor, and threatened that their loved ones would no longer be permitted to attend. The group was threatened with disbanding. Dr. Kataria promised to come up with a better system to harness the therapeutic powers of laughter. He only had one night to come up with the answer. Arriving home that night, Dr. Kataria hadn't a clue how to solve this dilemma. It was Mrs. Kataria who provided the answer: combine laughter with already familiar yoga and breathing techniques (in a nutshell). So how does laughter yoga function? Needless to say, there was already a lot of nervous giggling and self-conscious side-glances as the session got under way. But Colleen's natural and open way of presenting the exercises, participating herself with infectious enthusiasm and a no-holding-back gusto, soon loosened the laugh muscles of every one of us. There are five simple rules: fake laughing is okay; we make eye contact; we move around; no talking; and anyone experiencing any new pain should sit out a couple rounds. In addition, we signal the end of each exercise by intoning "Ho Ho Ha Ha Ha," while moving about the room making eye contact. And so began each participant's personal journey of discovery in search of their own laughter. "The basic idea is to find your laughter, where it comes from and how it feels when it's coming on," says Dunkel. This is accomplished with a few simple and amusing exercises. In one, the relationship between body language and what we are saying is explored. "That's it everyone! Just let your body go slack and make a really sad face. Good! And while your doing that, say how happy you are, say it out loud!" (Was I the only one thinking, "I have to what? Sheesh, I feel silly.") Her delicate features pulled into dramatic melancholy, she intoned with masterful comic exaggeration, "Wow, I am happy! I am just overjoyed." To round out this exercise, participants were asked to turn it around, making ecstatically

happy faces while lamenting out loud how terribly sad they are. By moving through the group demonstrating each exercises, participating fully, Colleen helped the hesitant let go. Between you and me, it became increasingly difficult not to laugh for real at this point; so infectious is Colleen's enthusiasm. And a real energy began to course through the group through the eye contact and shared experience of acting really silly together and not giving a hoot! It really feels good. With time, everyone was relaxed. Fake laughter often gave way to real, warm hearted laughter in the energy of each brief instance of eye contact. Now we were ready to practice trying not to laugh—a sure-fired way to laughter. "Sometimes you're in a situation where you know you really shouldn't laugh," says Colleen, chortling into her hand. "It just isn't polite! So you just have to get out of the house!" she cried, mimicking throwing open a door to collapse with relief into loud, unbridled laughter. At this stage, the connection between participants was such that we found just looking at each other amusing. For me it was like the feeling I got in primary school when I just didn't dare even to glance at my desk mate, knowing the mere sight of each other would cause us to giggle. So deeply imbedded as our laughter centers may be, Colleen Dunkel is guaranteed to help us find them. Since its inception, laughter yoga has been proven an effective stress fighter. It has been used successfully in corporate settings by UBS, Volvo, and various pharmaceutical companies to combat stress in the workplace. Laughter has even been shown to be anti-aging, aerobic exercise, effective against depression and anxiety, bronchitis and asthma, and pain. Dr. Lee S. Burk, a professor at Loma Linda University in California, has proven that laughter actually increases the number of NK cells, or "killer cells," as well as antibodies in the blood. Increased levels of antibodies have been measured in the mucous of the nose and respiratory passages are seen to increase with the practice of laughter yoga. All this attests to its ability to strengthen the immune system. And please note: Dr. Kataria has declared the first Sunday of May as World Laughter Day. Be sure to check out Colleen's website - [www.mrscrocodile.com](http://www.mrscrocodile.com) - for further info on this and other laughing matters. Contact Colleen Dunkel at: Mrs. Crocodile: Learn, Laugh, Live; English Courses and Laughter Yoga Events; Kannenfeldstrasse 26, 4056 Basel, 078 897 1192; E-mail: [colleen@mrscrocodile.com](mailto:colleen@mrscrocodile.com)

*Lisa Silverstein*

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