

One Thousand Laughs

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Ho, Ho, Ho, I Feel Better Already: A Night at the Laughter Club

By Amy Poffenbarger

Every Wednesday evening, roughly a dozen people – usually including a skeptic or two – gather at the Phinney Ridge Community Center in Seattle for a quick workout at a meeting of the Laughter Club, a worldwide therapeutic movement based on the notion that laughter is the best medicine.

“We’ll start this evening with a greeting laugh.” Says Teresa Verde, leader of the club. She shakes the hand of a woman to her right and chuckles. It’s a gentle, inviting laugh, albeit somewhat forced. The woman responds with one of her own. The others follow suit and within seconds, hand-shaking and genuine burst of contagious laughter fill the room. The release of stress seems to explode. “My sides are going to burst!” shouts a woman between guffaws. “My cheekbones!” gasps another.

The Laughter Club was founded by Dr. Madan Kataria, a medical doctor based in Bombay, India. After reading reams of scientific literature citing the benefits of laughter on the mind and body, Kataria established 300 Laughter Clubs across India. The movement has made its way around the globe and is quickly gaining popularity in the U.S. It is based on studies showing that humor and laughter can decrease stress hormones, blood pressure, and heart rate. The result: improved mental sharpness and sleep, and a greater sense of well-being.

Verde interrupts the chortling with a chant that the others mimic: “Ho, Ho, Ha-Ha-Ha.” It’s an exercise called the kapalbhathi – designed to open the lungs in preparation for belly laughing, which Verde initiates by spreading her fingers across her middle and letting a boisterous laugh roll out.

There are thousands of official Laughter Club laughs, but only a handful are tried at each session. At Verde’s meeting we laugh like a Rickety Car, squeal like Giggling Mice, and stretch our mouths in a laugh called The Vowel Movement. In between, the group practices deep breathing as well as neck and shoulder stretches. By the end of the 20-minute session, our minds feel clear and alert, our bodies relaxed. Even the skeptic can’t wait for the next meeting.

For more information about where to find a Laughter Club or how to start one in your area, call 1-800-NOW-LAFF or visit www.worldlaughtertour.com.