

# Laughter is the best medicine

Alex Bernard joins a Laughter Yoga class and discovers the healthy benefits are no joke

I am standing in New Farm Park on a glorious Brisbane winter's morning laughing out loud like a crazy person and it feels great! I am not drunk Dear Reader, nor out of my mind, I am participating in Laughter Yoga - a craze sweeping the world which has a firm hold here in the River City.

American playwright and poet E.E. Cummings once said "the most wasted of a ll days is one without laughter." He was on to something.

People enjoying their coffee and a walk through the park are looking at our group with trepidation and mirth. You can see it all over their faces: "What on earth are those people doing?" If the people in the group are anything to go by, we're doing a lot of really good things for our mind, body and soul. *And* you don't need to claim it on Medicare!

Laughter Yoga was started by Dr Madan Kataria, a medical doctor in Mumbai, in 1995. Dr Kataria had been researching the benefits of laughter on health and wellbeing and was writing an article titled *Laughter - the Best Medicine* for a health journal. In his research he discovered many modern scientific studies that proved the benefits of laughter on the human mind and body.

Dr Kataria went to his local park and managed to persuade four people to join him in starting a "Laughter Club". Today Laughter Yoga is a worldwide phenomenon, with more than 7000 clubs in more than 70 countries, making laughter a truly universal language crossing all

immune system, improves cardiovascular function, reduces the risk of heart disease and it boosts blood flow - lowering blood pressure - amongst many other things.

More importantly for many who participate, it helps manage and overcome depression, develops self-confidence and, for those in my group, has certainly broken social isolation and fostered new friendships.

I'm instructed to take off my sunglasses. Part of Laughter Yoga is to make eye contact with those in the group. There's about 10 of us from all walks of life, laughing our way to better health. It's also physical, there's clapping, holding hands, getting close to people. "It's important to connect," says Laughter Yoga leader Denise Gibbons.

Gibbons is an accountant and financial planner. "I first heard about Laughter Yoga in 2005 and started going because my marriage had just broken up and I was looking for a way to meet people in a fun environment. I also liked the concept of using laughter for no reason as a stress reliever and health tool," she tells me after class.

"The physical health benefits are probably similar to any other exercise program. I've got more energy, lower blood pressure and more physical stamina, but what I really I get out of Laughter Yoga is that now I have more joy in my life."

Gibbons has even continued her laugh sessions on holiday. "I did laugh with a club in Paris when I was on holidays there last



she took it up. "I tend to respond much more positively to events that arise now because I remember to laugh first rather than become frustrated or annoyed.

"I've also met some of my best friends without reference to all the social norms. They became friends because we laughed together. I didn't know where they lived, what they did for a living or, in some cases, it was years before I even knew their last names."

Lynn is another member of the New Farm troupe and another Laughter Yoga leader. She has kind sparkly eyes and I am really buying into the whole "laughter reduces wrinkles" business. I can't believe it when she tells me her age.

She has also been doing Laughter Yoga for six years and she wouldn't go without it.

friend's surprise birthday party and saw the laughing group and I just joined in.

"I'm much more spontaneous now, I feel good so much of the time. The group is great, there's no judgment. We're just looking for the goodness in each other. I'm much more playful now. I don't take on other people's stress or negativity. I can't urge people enough just to give it a go. It'll change your outlook on life and make you feel fantastic."

Denise Gibbons says the reason laughter really is the best medicine is simple. "It's fun! For some reason we think that when we become adults we have to stop having fun. Life is all too serious. For one hour each week, you can go and forget all about that and just be in the moment with happy people."