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Reisterstown seniors set to laugh on way to better health

Laugh exercise sessions may bring peace of mind, says visiting laugh leader

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Members of the Reisterstown Senior Center will soon be chuckling and giggling their cares away, thanks to a certified "laughter leader" who is making a stop in town.

Deborah Rawlings, a clinical social worker in Baltimore who now runs "Joy Journey Services," has been hosting laugh sessions in the Baltimore area to promote the health benefits of laughter.

She will be doing a presentation — which may include asking participants to do exercises such as a penguin laugh, a lion laugh and a "hustle-bustle" laugh — in Reisterstown on Jan. 12 and other senior centers throughout the year.

Suzanne Levin, director of the Reisterstown Senior Center, said she heard of Rawlings' work at another center and decided to offer an hour-long, "Laugh, Hon!" trial class.

"I think laughter is a universal language and laughter does make people feel good. Especially in the winter, we are already down a little. I thought this would be great to bring in," said Levin, adding that it is an unusual event for the Reisterstown center, which primarily offers fitness and yoga classes.

"If (the laugh session) works out, we will continue it for four weeks."

Rawlings became certified in 2005 as a "laughter leader" by The World Laughter Tour, Inc., a network of laughter clubs launched by a Columbus, Ohio-based therapist, Steve Wilson.

She heard about the group from her sister-in-law, a laughter leader in Florida.

"My son's father died in October 2004," Rawlings said. "I was already on what I called a 'joy journey' because of the many hardships that I was experiencing."

She said the practice of laughter can be an important part of a person's 'joy journey,' or individual search for happiness.

Besides doing laughter exercises, Rawlings also presents research, touted by The World Laughter Tour, that claims laughter has a number of health benefits, including strengthening the immune system, improving breathing, adjusting blood pressure, burning calories and reducing pain.

The main reward Rawlings thinks people can get from her sessions is peace of mind.

In life, "a lot of things hit you — boom, boom, boom — and then you laugh and it's like, 'Whew! I needed that,'" she said.

Rawlings noted that unlike humor, which is culturally subjective and can even be "toxic and harmful," laughter is simply a biological sound.

"I do not tell jokes at all," she said about her presentations. "People do not just laugh when something is funny.

People laugh to accent conversations. People laugh when they are stressed out."

Her sessions are about learning to laugh, which she said takes practice, just like driving a car. The idea is to "fake it till you make it," she said.

While physical and mental health is its main selling point, the ultimate goal of the laughter movement is

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even more ambitious: world peace.

Most of Rawlings' sessions include a "peace sprinkle," with participants symbolically sending out peace by waving their fingers as though sprinkling water.

"If we smile at each other, most of the time, people will smile back," said Rawlings, who likes to cite a comment by actor Alan Alda:

"People are generally not killing each other when they are laughing together."

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