



Certified Laughter Leaders' Charter Year - What We Are Learning
By Steve Wilson
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One year ago, when we began training leaders for laughter clubs, we started inviting the world, especially the United States, to join us for the laughter-filled ride of a lifetime. Now that we have completed the charter year of training Certified Laughter Leaders and applying this laughter therapy across a wide variety of populations, we can reflect on what we have learned and respond to some of the questions and curiosity about a global movement that leads to health and peace through laughter. The more we work in the movement, the more insight and awareness keeps being revealed, like peeling back the layers of the proverbial onion. This is the first in a series of papers intended to clarify what is unique about the laughter club method, as well as to indicate how it fits the approaches to therapeutic humor with which we have already become familiar.

Attached is a schematic diagram that we can use to better understand the humor/laughter movement, its various components, and the various 'therapies' and benefits that it claims. For example, the diagram illustrates that there are ways in which laughter and humor are separate and distinct, yet there are also ways in which they overlap or coincide not only with each other but other aspects of the movement. We intend for this tool to help us talk about the movement more clearly in future papers. The diagram is open to improvement and subject to revision.

Is Anything New Under The Laughing Sun?

In the modern era of humor and laughter, laughter clubs around the world represent something new and different. We are now able to bring the world a unique combination of systematic methods and information to improve physical, emotional, and attitudinal health, plus a socially conscious value system. Since 1984, I have been personally and professionally immersed in the healing power of humor and putting humor to work at work, and the more I work with the laughter club method of therapeutic laughter, the more I am convinced that it rightfully constitutes a breakthrough.

Here is just one example. I had often heard it said that laughter and humor could lead to world peace. "Although comedians may occasionally bomb," the saying goes, "it would be better if countries traded comedians instead of bombs." That is a lovely sentiment, but I was never able to pinpoint a systematic method that actually stood a chance of achieving that lofty goal. I found it, finally, when I learned about the theory and philosophy behind laughter clubs as Dr. Kataria conceived them in India.

H.H. the Dalai Lama says, "Once these qualities [love, compassion, altruism] are developed within an individual, he or she is then able to create an atmosphere of peace and harmony. This atmosphere can be expanded and extended from the individual to his family, from the family to the community and eventually to the whole world." The Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, says, "If we are peaceful, if we are happy, we can smile, and everyone in our family, our entire society, will benefit from our peace." These statements embody the same ideas that we

discuss in laughter clubs, where we learn gentle practices for sensible living and the spirit of laughter. The practices allow us to combine the physical act of laughter with emotional balancing, such as to reduce anger, and the development of healthy attitudes, such as non-judgmentalism and gratitude.

In our method of therapeutic laughter these practices –laughter, balance, attitude adjustment-- are repeated so that within each person peaceful emotions gradually replace toxic emotions. Then, when people are under pressure and stress they are less likely to express anger and hate, and more likely to express love, compassion, and laughter. Our work this year has given us a better understanding of the laughter club methods and spirit; we can see clearly how laughter will be an important path to world peace.

Everything Old Is New Again

For many years the so-called humor & laughter movement has been going strong in the United States and around the world. Some would say that the movement is ancient. They cite attempts dating back 5,000 years to promote the positive uses of humor and laughter through Tibetan laughter practices. Others might say that it was actually the publication of Norman Cousins's *Anatomy of an Illness As Perceived by the Patient*, that signaled the onset of the modern era of humor and healing. Regardless of your opinion about when it all started, the laughter club is surely the most recent practical contribution to the humor/laughter movement.

The therapeutic laughter concept adds a new dimension to all the good work and important ideas that we have been teaching up till now. Some of us, and our best friends, have been in the movement for twenty years or more. We come from every walk of life, including speakers, clowns, clergy, educators, stand-up comedians, trainers, writers, consultants, researchers, healthcare professionals, and more. For us, the Laughter Club concept offers something new and different because it allows us to bring new ideas to our audiences, get them actively involved in our programs, and encourage them to take greater responsibility for their own health and well-being.

We have read the books and articles, attended the conferences and workshops, and learned a lot of good ideas and information for helping people bring more humor and laughter into their lives. We have learned from clowns and scholars and even an occasional scholar-clown. We have heard humorists, comedians, actors, ministers, physicians, business people and more, hold forth on the importance of humor and laughter. Although some get carried away with enthusiasm, and the claims get somewhat exaggerated, by and large the information is worthwhile, and many of the presentations are downright hilarious. And still, laughter clubs are different.

What Makes the Methods of Laughter Club Different From Other Humorous And Laughter-Filled Activities and “Therapies”?

- ☺ Laughter Clubs utilize a **systematic activity** approach that is based on a foundation of both **ancient** practices, such as yoga & meditation, and **modern** medical science.
- ☺ Members of Laughter Clubs are engaged as **active and interactive participants**, not as a passive audience being entertained.
- ☺ Laughter Clubs promote laughter as a genuine form of **exercise**.
- ☺ The therapeutic laughter program called the Laughter Club makes the natural and positive power of laughter a **widely accessible health option**, in long-term care for example. It is an activity that is emerging as recognized and valued by professional **Activity Therapists and Recreation Therapists as well as counselors, nurses, social workers, teachers, chaplains, clowns and others**.
- ☺ Most often, the laughter activity takes place in a group that comes together with a common purpose that provides **social support**. Therefore, the method and viewpoint can be applied in communities as a form of **social glue**.
- ☺ In this method, laughter is evoked by “self-starting” instead of relying on humor, jokes or comedy. **One does not need to have a sense of humor nor be in a ‘good mood’ in**

- order to laugh.** In fact, over a period of time, participation in Laughter Clubs appears to have the effect of improving the sense of humor. Even people who claim to be lacking a sense of humor can enjoy and benefit from Laughter Clubs.
- ☺ Laughter Clubs' therapeutic model has a structure that can be learned; leaders can be trained. Leaders demonstrate, motivate, educate, and inspire. Certified Laughter Leaders operate with **ethical guidelines**.
 - ☺ If humor occurs in a laughter club session, it is a spontaneous occurrence within the group, not forced, expected or required. We are in the early stages of understanding what it is that people find funny during these specifically no-joke-telling therapeutic laughter sessions.
 - ☺ Humor is personal and subjective; **laughter is universal**. When jokes are used to evoke laughter, many people don't get the joke, or don't like the joke. Using jokes runs the risk of being offensive or hurtful. Laughter Clubs operate on a value system that minimizes and eliminates the risk.
 - ☺ Humor is difficult to define and "funniness" is almost impossible to measure. However, the physiological changes that accompany laughter are relatively easy to measure, and the **benefits can be observed and studied more readily**.
 - ☺ Unlike comedy routines, Laughter Clubs **can be repeated as often as you like without becoming stale or boring**.
 - ☺ Because we have a common method and shared values, laughter club leaders and members can form a **global network** to share ideas and to give each other encouragement and inspiration. Through the network of leaders and members, the method will **improve continuously**. New exercises are always being invented and we are discovering necessary cultural adaptations, too. The international clearinghouse function of www.worldlaughter.com has been invaluable in this regard.
 - ☺ Laughter Clubs are **open to everyone**; nobody is excluded. Laughter Clubs are non-political, non-religious, non-exploitive.
 - ☺ The systematic therapeutic laughter methods are **adaptable** to all ages, backgrounds, and even adapt to various physical and mental (cognitive) limitations.
 - ☺ Systematic therapeutic laughter methods address body, mind, and spirit.
 - ☺ Through the Spirit of Laughter, participants in Laughter Clubs achieve better balance of emotions, **reduce the negative effects of stress**, release harmful anger and judgmentalism, and find a path to **world peace**.
 - ☺ Because there is a common method, philosophy, and values, Laughter Clubs link members and enthusiasts all around the world. Laughter Clubs promote observances of **World Laughter Day** (the first Sunday in May).
 - ☺ Laughter Clubs are **not limited by language differences**. Laughter has no accent.
 - ☺ Laughter Clubs provide a sense of belonging and of being involved in a **worthwhile cause**.

Our work during this charter year of training people to lead laughter clubs continues to convince us that for the first time we have an economical and highly practical application of theories that are being proved correct every day. It is now indisputable that laughter plays a role in healing, staying healthy, controlling stress reactions, and maintaining emotional balance. And, when enough people have enough of the spirit of laughter, the world will be more peaceful.

In future papers we will report on other new understandings of how this therapeutic laughter is catching on in the United States, and how it is being adapted to other countries since spreading beyond India.

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Steve Wilson serves as Cheerman of the Bored of World Laughter Tour, Inc. Detailed information about the method, resources for therapeutic laughter, and the schedule of training workshops can be found at www.worldlaughter.com, or call 1-800-669-5233 for a free brochure.

The workshop "How To Create Therapeutic Laughter and Laughter Clubs" will be offered at the Marriott Inner Harbor Hotel, immediately following the AATH National Conference in Baltimore,

Maryland, February 3-4. The workshop leads to the Certified Laughter Leader designation. A tuition discount is available to those also attending the AATH conference (\$249.00 instead of the regular rate of \$289.00).

Comprehensive Laughter-Humor Model

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