

October 13, 2004 - The Wall Street Journal via Dow Jones

## **Health: Latest Hybrid Yoga Encourages Giggling Toward a Higher Plane**

---- By Jennifer Saranow

AT A RECENT MONDAY night yoga session in New York, a dozen enthusiasts took some deep breaths, loosened up their shoulders and entered the lion pose. They put their hands up next to their faces like paws and stuck out their tongues.

Then, attendees began walking around in circles, looking into each other's eyes and roaring "ho ho, hah hah."

"I really call this the new yoga," says Francine Shore, a social worker and one of the four leaders of the 45-minute gathering of New York's Grabba Giraffe Laughter Club. "It's quite exhausting while you do it and quite exhilarating."

There's already yogilates and disco yoga. Now, another yoga hybrid -- "laughter yoga" -- is gaining enthusiasts in the U.S.

Mixing the breathing techniques of traditional yoga with mild stretching and fake laughing exercises, laughter yoga is meant to precipitate real giggles. Proponents say it can help reduce stress and produce other health benefits, such as alleviating asthma.

Research surrounding laughter and health is in its infancy, but there are suggestions that laughter appears to boost components of the immune system, increase pain tolerance and reduce detrimental stress hormones, which may help lessen the risk of heart attacks. Instructors say laughter yoga provides all of those benefits, along with a few others, including alleviating bronchitis and asthma, improving stamina and self-confidence, relieving depression and anxiety, and toning facial muscles.

Most everyone agrees: It can't hurt.

The popularity of laughter yoga comes as yoga in general continues to take off in the U.S. According to a 2003 poll conducted by Harris Interactive for Yoga Journal, a specialty magazine, more than 7% of U.S. adults, or 15 million people, now practice yoga, up 28.5% from the previous year. One in six respondents, representing 35.3 million people, also expressed the intention to try yoga within the next 12 months.

As yoga spreads, experts say a number of hybrids have also sprouted, laughter yoga being just one. Other recent spins on traditional yoga include yo-chi (combining yoga and t'ai chi), yogilates (yoga and Pilates) and yoga spin (a combination of yoga and cycling).

A basic laughter yoga session runs about 30 minutes, costs anywhere from nothing to about \$15, and begins with deep breathing and stretching.

Then participants go through a series of exercises combining some variation of the chant "ho ho, ha ha," movement around the room and eye contact. Take "cellphone

laughter": Users pretend to be talking on a cellphone and then, as they make eye contact with fellow participants, let out an "ah, ha, ha ha."

During "reprimand laughter," participants shake their pointer finger at each other and let out the ha's. Another popular exercise, "why me laughter," consists of putting your arms out your sides in an imploring pose, looking at others and asking "why me? ah, ha, ha, ha." Other exercises include "roller coaster laughter" (arms up), "aloha laughter" ("alo," followed by "ha ha ha") and "penguin laughter" (walk like a penguin).

Each exercise runs for about a minute and is followed by some deep breaths and stretching and then it's on to another pose. According to proponents, the combination of deep breathing, "ho ho, ha ha" mantras and exercises beneficially stimulates the diaphragm, abdominal muscles and lungs and, like other forms of yoga, unites the mind and body. With laughter yoga being one of the freer forms of yoga, anyone can make up their own exercises.

Participants say being in such silly positions and seeing others in them quickly creates real laughter. One rule: Participants are supposed to laugh with each other, not at each other.

"You just see people who are often very straight-laced and serious laughing hysterically and it's such a refreshing image," says Daria Myers, president and general manager of Estee Lauder Cos.' Origins Natural Resources brand, who participated in a laughter yoga session given by the Grabba Giraffe Laughter Club at an Origins sales meeting this spring.

The current laughter yoga movement is the brainchild of Madan Kataria, an Indian physician. In 1995, after reading about the supposed health benefits of laughter, he and four others began meeting daily in a local Bombay park for morning joke telling. After running out of punch lines that weren't dirty or offensive, Dr. Kataria remembers they just looked at each other and began to laugh. It hit on him: It's easy to laugh for no reason when you see others chuckling.

Based on this notion and some research, he developed a blend of yoga breathing and "playful" exercises meant to be practiced in a group. Hence hasya, or laughter, yoga.

"I had also been learning yoga and thought it could be a very good combination and people would take it more seriously," says Dr. Kataria, who estimates there are now more than 2,500 laughter clubs world-wide.

Steve Wilson, a psychologist and humor consultant who learned the technique six years ago in India and founded the World Laughter Tour Inc., says the U.S. now has more than 100 laughter clubs, most of which are free gatherings, rather than studios with fees.

The year-old Grabba Giraffe Laughter Club in New York meets weekly on Monday evenings and recently started giving presentations at companies. Outside of regular yoga schools, there's increasing demand for laughter yoga classes from corporations, such as with Ms. Myers's Origins sales meeting, and associations looking for ways to counter workplace stress, instructors say.

Lisa Wessan, a self-described "Mirth Maven" in New York, says she has given 36 laughter yoga programs at corporations and associations so far this year, compared with just six in 2002.

To be sure, laughter yoga may have only a limited audience. At the Laughing Lotus Yoga Center in New York, the idea never really got rolling. The center started a laughter yoga club four years ago but faded out the endeavor two years ago, replacing it with periodic workshops every few months. "People didn't come back," says Laughing Lotus co-founder Dana Flynn, who blames the plethora of other sources for laughter in the U.S.

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**[INSET BOX] Go Ahead -- Laugh**

As yoga spreads, a number of hybrids mixing yoga techniques with other exercises, certain types of music and just about anything (or nothing) at all have popped up. Here's a smattering of some examples beyond laughter yoga.

Yoga + Tai Chi = Yo-Chi  
Yoga + Pilates = Yogilates  
Yoga + cycling = Yoga spin  
Yoga + kinetics = Yoganetics  
Yoga + boxing = Boga  
Yoga + kickboxing = Yoga kickboxing  
Yoga + disco music = Disco yoga  
Yoga + hip-hop music = Hip-Hop yoga  
Yoga + water = Aqua yoga  
Yoga - clothes = Naked yoga

Sources: International Association of Yoga Therapists; WSJ  
Research

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