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Is Laughter at the Laughter Clubs' Artificial?

Does Such Laughter Result in Any Benefits?

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Spontaneous vs. Natural Laughter

On March 13, 1995, four persons led by Dr. Madan Kataria got together in Lokhandwala park in Andheri, a suburb of Bombay (India), and started laughing as a group. Thus was born what came to be known and was named the 'Laughter Club', the first of its kind any where in the world.

Group laughter was, of course, taking place earlier in some countries, but this was confined to the four walls of a clinic or a hospital where patients were made to laugh with the help of comedians, clowns, comedy films etc.

Dr. Kataria's novel idea of group laughter in the open, in a public place, by people with no specific health complaints, fascinated various media, and in turn people and the number of 'Laughter clubs' multiplied so rapidly that it has, virtually, become a movement. In little over three years, number of 'Laughter Clubs' has grown from one to more than fifty in the city of Bombay alone and more than one hundred and fifty all over India. Though not confirmed, there are a few abroad also.

What is a 'Laughter Club'?

The word 'Club' in the name is likely to convey an impression that 'Laughter Club' is like any other club as we know it. That is not so. A 'Laughter Club' is nothing more than a group of people who want to laugh together, every morning, in the open, in a public place and do so. It has no formal structure, no office bearers, but just a couple of anchor persons who lead the group in laughter. There is no formal membership, no form to be filled in, no fee and no other fuss. You come and join the group, laugh with them and you are member of, that 'Laughter Club'. As simple as that!

Why the Two Questions in the Title?

I am not only a regular laughter at the Lokhandwala 'Laughter Club' but also have had the good fortune of being with Dr. Kataria, at the starting of some of the other 'Laughter Clubs'. It has been my observation that quite a few people call the laughter at the 'Laughter Clubs' unnatural or artificial. This they do, because they think that the laughter, which results from hearing a joke or by being tickled by some one or by watching some humorous act or situation is natural laughter, and, the laughter at a 'laughter club' being none of these is, therefore, unnatural or artificial.

The words 'unnatural' and 'artificial', somehow create in them some sort of a mental block namely, that the laughter at a 'Laughter Club' being unnatural or artificial cannot be worth participating in and cannot, possibly, result in any benefit.

Consequent to what I have read and have experienced, I am convinced that not only the aforesaid thinking and conclusions incorrect, but also, the incorrect thinking and conclusions are preventing those persons from deriving the various benefits of laughter which, otherwise, they would like to avail of. In my humble effort to clarify the position, I am placing below, my views for their consideration. This I am doing by first posing the two questions as titles of this article, and then answering those questions.

Answers to the two Title Questions

Meaning of the word natural is: pertaining to nature, or produced by or according to nature, or inborn. If we compare flowers grown in gardens or farms with those manufactured in factories, it is very, clear why the former are natural and latter are artificial.

However, the so-called natural laughter (arising from jokes etc.) is neither some thing that pertains to nature, nor is it produced by nature nor is it inborn. Rather, it results from some effort, such as narrating a joke or manual tickling or some gesticulations, on the part of some person. Thus it cannot, possibly, be said to be natural even though it is so called.

Just as the so-called natural laughter is really not natural, similarly, the laughter at the 'Laughter Clubs' is not artificial, because, it is neither hand-made nor factory-made.

God has given man the kind capacity to laugh, which he has not given to any other species. This capacity is inborn as even a newly t born baby is able to laugh. What is, therefore, natural is this capacity to laugh and not any kind of laugher. Had this natural capacity to laugh not been given to us by God, probably, no laughter of any kind whatsoever would exist.

Difference Between the Two Laughters

Though the laughter resulting from a joke etc. and the laughter at the 'Laughter Clubs' are not identical, if we look at them a little closely, we find that there are more of similarities between the two than differences. The difference is in the initial stage of providing stimulus and triggering of laugher. In one case, stimulus is provided and laughter is triggered, not by nature, but by some thing done by a person other than the laugher; in the other, it is by the laughter himself. Being convinced of the many benefits of laughter, a member of a laughter club goes there to derive those benefits. With that stimulus and motivation, triggering of laughter s not at all difficult. The reason is simple.

Mr. Paul Ekman and Mr. Robert Levenson, psychologists from the University of California, have come to the conclusion that the advice, "Put on a nappy face" may, actually, be true. Their research has shown that facial expressions are not only reactions to emotional states but can provoke these states as well. The latter is what happens at the 'Laughter Clubs'.

After the efforts to trigger laughter, in one case made by another person and by the laughter himself in the other, the resulting laughter, in both the cases, is triggered within and also comes from within the laugher. There is nothing to show that source of laughter in the two cases is different. Dealing with the question of source of laughter, Dr. Robert Holden, who conducts laughter clinics in UK and has written the well known book "Laughter - the 'Best Medicine" says in that book:

"The answer is elusive. Even if we could ask the gods where laughter comes from, they would probably just laugh."

There is one . more similarity between the so-called natural laughter or the laughter resulting from jokes etc. and the laughter, at the 'Laughter Clubs'. Both arise from the same capacity - the capacity to laugh given to mankind by God. In the case of a natural flower and an artificial flower, however, the two arise from different capacities. In one, case, it is the natural capacity of seed to get converted into a flower. In the other, it is either, the capacity of the machine or skill of the workman.

Quality of Laughter

At times, it is contended that the quality of laughter in the two cases is different, and, one is more pleasurable than the other. This is also only an impression, and, of course, a wrong one.

The source of laughter in all cases, being the same what, I think, is meant by quality is the intensity of laughter. That, as also the pleasure drawn, cannot, possibly, depend on who or what triggers the laughter but, rather the reaction, that is, how hearty the laughter is, whatever may be the type of laughter. The above is evidenced by the fact that all persons who hear a joke are not amused by it equally, and

therefore, do not laugh with the same intensity. Some laugh heartily, others just smile and some are totally unmoved as they find the joke not at all funny. In the same manner, some members of 'Laughter Club' laugh very heartily, others less heartily and some half-: heartedly.

Types of Laughter

There are various types of laughter such as a smile, hearty laughter, belly laughter, giggles, chortles, chuckles, hoots, cackles, sniggers and guffaws. In his book, Dr. Holden mentions, among others simulated smiles and transcendental chuckling, and, describes these two types as follows:

Simulated Smiles

"Simulated smiling is a joyful version of the popular coping strategy known as "acting as if ", that is, if you want to feel happy, act happy. Don't suppress your sadness; just feel the sadness and act happy anyway. A full session of simulated smiling can last anywhere from three seconds to three minutes. You may even, if you wish, add 'ha, ha, ha' and may be even move on to more orchestrated and elaborate guffaws. Simulated smiles often stimulate the real thing."

Transcendental Chuckling

"This is the silliest of all the creative growth games that we play at the laughter clinic. To perform transcendental chuckling you should, on waking each morning, sit in a cross-legged upright position before a mirror and embark upon two minutes of laughing for no reason whatsoever. Life will never be the same.

Any one who sends a tape of his or her two- minutes unconditional laughter to- the-laughter, clinic receives a certificate of membership to the "Happy Human Being Club."

The aim is to achieve an expression of pure, unblocked joviality that will set you up for a day of joy. To perform this exercise you have to transcend and laugh through some of the self criticism seriousness and unhappy belief system that, so often, get in the way of pure spontaneous joy."

Type of Laughter

It could be said to be both, simulated smiles and transcendental chuckling, but, I think, it is more of the latter. As will be noted, this laughter can be as joyful as any if certain things are transcended and one of the things to be transcended will, in my view, be the impression or the belief that this laughter is not natural and, therefore, can not result in any benefit. The transcending, as mentioned by Dr. Holden, is what Laughter Clubs' members do.

Does Laughter at the 'Laughter Clubs' Result in Any Benefits?

To consider this question, the following scientifically established facts have to be kept in view:-

- a) That laughter gives many benefits.
- b) Even the mere physical act of putting on a happy face gives benefits as it relaxes some of the facial muscles.
- c) Not only emotions create motions, but also motions create emotions, and the act of putting on happy face gets converted into laughter.

The above facts and what has been discussed in earlier paragraphs, I think, leave no doubt. that the answer to the question is: Yes, laughter at the laughter clubs does result in benefits, as much as it does in the case of the laughter resulting from jokes etc., extent of benefits varying, in each case, 'with how hearty the laughter is.'

As mentioned above, to make his laughter joyful, a member of a 'laughter club' has to transcend certain

things which he, obviously, does as he laughs even if others laugh at him or call his laughter unnatural or artificial. Of course, to do the transcending, there has to be motivation. A 'Laughter Club' member has his motivation in his conviction that the laughter gives many benefits and his determination to derive the -maximum possible benefits.

Conclusion

Briefly stated, the answer to the two questions is:

- a) What is natural is the capacity to laugh, given exclusively to the mankind by God, and not any type of laughter.
- b) Neither is the laughter resulting from jokes etc., natural, nor is the laughter at 'Laughter Clubs' artificial. Though the two are not identical, there is more similarity between the two than differences. One is other-person generated, and the other is self-generated. Place of generation, however in both the cases is the same.
- c) Source in the case of both the laughters is the same and the extent of benefits and pleasure drawn from either will vary with how hearty the laughter is.