

The best medicine

A skeptic is introduced to laughter yoga

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I am not in a laughing mood. Instead of chuckling to warm up for my first-ever laughter yoga class, I am chanting a different kind of mantra -one infused with road rage and my favorite four-letter word - that would make most yogis and sailors blush.

Driving to a recent Thursday night meeting of the Davis Hysterical Society, I cut people off, speed, eat fast-food and shop at Wal-Mart. Now, normally, I am a nice person and do none of these things. But today, I am breaking all my own rules and have put myself in a thoroughly foul mood for what is supposed to be an uplifting, lighthearted experience.

Deb Roquet, the society's laughing leader, has her work cut out for her.

Laughter yoga isn't exactly yoga, and it isn't exactly laughter. It doesn't have any modified yogic poses like Downward Laughing Dog, Giggling Lotus or Knee-Slapping Sun Salutation. And the laughing doesn't come from jokes or stories. Rather it's fake, forced laughter - at least at first.

Created in 1995 by an Indian physician named Madan Kataria, laughter yoga maintains that, physiologically, the body can't tell the difference between genuine or simulated laughter, and it will reap the benefits either way. An Americanized version of laughter yoga has been popularized by Steve Wilson's World Laughter Tour, which trains "certified laughter leaders" like Roquet.

According to their literature and research, 20 minutes of laughter every day, instead of the five minutes Americans usually get, relieves stress, boosts the immune system, reverses the effects of aging, provides an aerobic workout and is a natural pain and anxiety killer.

In spite of that research, I enter the new Davis group's weekly meeting with one eyebrow raised, harboring no small amount of skepticism that forced laughter can be fun, much less funny.

So it didn't help that the laughter yoga meeting is held in a room that is not funny at all. In fact, it might be the least funny room in all of Davis. Attached to a pin-drop-quiet public library (where riotous laughter is frowned upon), the community room is painted a depressingly drab blue-gray and has a vaguely patterned carpet of the same color - the kind that can be found in convention halls and Holiday Inn conference rooms, a color only a seagull could appreciate.

A sign on the door to the room attempts to brighten the mood, warning whimsically: "Caution: Adults at Play."

Roquet is setting up for the Hysterical Society's meeting. The mood is lively, thanks to a small boombox playing the sounds of grown men and women laughing, well, hysterically. It's infectious, and I find myself suppressing giggles that seem to come from nowhere. After about 10 minutes, though, when one would think the recorded laughter would become annoying, it gets funnier, if for no other reason than it seems completely absurd to be sitting in a hard plastic chair in an unfunny room listening to people cackling uncontrollably.

But I soon to find out that absurd is the name of the game in laughter yoga.

Roquet welcomes the class, explaining the general concept of the meeting and how she first became involved. When she turned 50, Roquet decided to become a comedian. Unfortunately, she discovered she had really bad timing and an inability to remember things, like punchlines, exemplified tonight as she reads laughter facts off smiley face notecards.

After the brief introduction, we shake hands and laugh while looking each other in the eye. It's a completely disarming experience. For one thing, laughing is an intimate experience, usually shared with friends or at least anonymously in a dim theater. And it feels plain silly to laugh for no reason at all, much less to do it while looking someone directly in the eye. It's the kind of thing that could get you shot in a rough neighborhood or locked up in a nice one.

To the casual observer, we all probably look certifiably insane for the next half-hour or so, yukking it up for no apparent reason other than to yuk it up.

In fact, the meetings are so boisterous that families in the library pause to gawk through the windows, which is one reason why Roquet has since moved the laugh-ins to the International House.

For the next half-hour, Roquet leads us through a series of pantomimes in which we drink milkshakes, burn our tongues on cups of hot chocolate and other silly games while fabricating deep belly laughs. However, I have a hard time engaging because there is this little holier-than-thou journalistic voice in my head deriding me for my participation in such zany exercise. But Roquet assures us that fake laughter almost always produces real laughter.

So I wait.

As the class winds down, Roquet instructs us to do a little dance - a jig, a shuffle, a shimmy, whatever - and laugh. And for some reason, the sight of all of us circling around each other, spinning and dancing without any hint of skill or rhythm, strikes me as absolutely hilarious. So I laugh, hard, though I'm not sure if I'm laughing with my classmates, or at them. Or both. I'm sure I look rather ridiculous, too.

By the end of the class, I'm actually feeling a little better. My stomach muscles ache refreshingly from all the deep belly laughs. Tension, at some point, slid from my shoulders, and I am relaxed, even a little calm. I want to start the class over, knowing what I do now. The trick to enjoying laughter yoga is to strip away all the layers of civility and adult inhibitions and simply be silly, like when I was a kid, spinning in circles in the outfield during little league practice.

But as soon as I leave the room, responsibility hammers me, and I begin to feel embarrassed for even feeling good about such a silly concept: Laughing for no good reason. That's what crazy people do.

On my long drive home, someone swerves in front of me on the freeway. But this time, it isn't anger that burbles to the surface.

I simply hit my brakes ... and laugh.

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The Davis Hysterical Society meets Thursdays at 7 p.m. at the International House, 10 College Park, Davis. For more, visit www.worldlaughtertour.com or www.laughteryoga.com, e-mail droquet@sbcglobal.net or call (530) 400-9310.

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