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## Love to laugh

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Laugh and the world laughs with you. At least if you're in one of the laughter clubs that are popping up throughout the northwest suburbs.

"There is compelling research on the benefits of laughter to the mind, body and spirit," said Doug Dvorak of Palatine who started the Chicago Live Life Laughing Laughter Club in Palatine. The club is free to anyone who wants to attend the meetings held on the third Wednesday of each month at the Palatine Township Senior Center. During the summer, the club meets outdoors.

Other laughter clubs meet at senior centers in Arlington Heights, Elk Grove Village, Wheeling, Des Plaines, Glenview and Niles.

When Dvorak asks people what brings them to the laughter club, they have told him, "I'm stressed out" or "I have health problems."

Dvorak explored the benefits of laughter therapy as a way to reduce the stress in his own life in 1998 when in the same month he was diagnosed with cancer and his father died unexpectedly.

He learned of Madan Kataria, a doctor in India and student of yoga who believed in the health benefits of laughter and yoga breathing methods. Kataria combined the two activities in laughter yoga and in 1995 started a laughter club in his local park. The clubs became very popular, and thousands are reported to exist worldwide.

Last year, Dvorak invited Kataria, author of "Laugh for No Reason," to Chicago to do presentations on laughter therapy and laughter clubs. Dvorak, who works as a motivational speaker, became certified as a laughter yoga leader in June through the American School of Laughter Yoga.

Laughter clubs encourage people to laugh as an exercise without the impetus of jokes, gags or funny movies. "One of our tag lines is 'we fake it until we make it,'" Dvorak said.

Once one person starts laughing, others are inclined to follow, much like "in a room with 10 people where someone yawns and soon everyone is yawning. The power of laughter is a hundred times more powerful than a yawn," Dvorak said.

Even people who are a little reticent when they first attend a laughter club eventually start to laugh, he said. "It's infectious."

And people who need a walker or a wheelchair can participate. "Laughter can be done from a chair," Dvorak said.

He recommends people "come in with an open mind and try to connect with your childhood, playful sense."

Om Johari, another certified laughter club leader, conducts meetings at several places in the northwest suburbs, including the Elk Grove Village and Wheeling Pavilion senior centers.

"I'm not a joker, a comedian or a clown," Johari told the members of the laughter club held in the Arlington Heights Senior Center.

Johari has the members laugh in different ways, including laughing with their mouths closed; laughing silently but with their mouths wide open; laughing as they bend over extending their arms and moving as though they are bringing a flower to their nose and inhaling through the nose.

Laughter is a great exercise," Johari said. "Whether we do silent or hearty laughter, it's exercise. You use different facial muscles. Exercise and laughter makes you look younger."

It doesn't matter how the laugh is started. Fake laughter is as effective as genuine laughter, Johari said. "The body doesn't know the difference and the health benefits are the same."

"You may be deluged with thoughts, but laughter obviates that almost instantaneously and grounds one," said Charlie Raymo at the laughter club in Arlington Heights last month.

A person can't laugh and worry at the same time, Johari said. "Either you laugh or you think ... that is why laughter is meditation."

Johari demonstrated a laugh with his mouth open and his tongue hanging out.

"That ain't funny," said Tonie Taraszka of Mount Prospect.

"You drip" when trying that, said Raymo, an Arlington Heights resident.

"At our age, it's called drooling," Willa Schaetzlein said.

Schaetzlein, who lives in Rolling Meadows, came to the laughter club meeting because "I knew laughter was good for you." She had a stroke in July and has found the laughter club along with meditation and yoga are good medicine for her.

"I am naturally a person who is happy, but I am laughing more (since joining the club)," Schaetzlein said.

The first time she came, she was embarrassed to laugh when there was nothing funny, but she overcame her reluctance. She noticed another man, however, who couldn't loosen up enough to force a laugh. He attended one session and did not return.

"He was very uncomfortable. He just couldn't relax," Schaetzlein said.

Arthur Lehne, 85, brought a note pad and pencil to write down jokes the first time he attended the laughter club. "I didn't know what to expect."

But Lehne was not disappointed when Johari didn't try to crack the group up with one-liners or knock-knock jokes. "It was a great surprise."

Lehne believes laughter benefits a person physically and emotionally.

"There's no question about it. It relieves you of day-to-day concerns. It helps you unload what worries you. It moves you forward. It exhilarates you."



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