

Laughter: It's contagious

By *BETSEY BRUNER*

Arts, Culture & Community Editor

Three women shuffle around the carpet Wednesday afternoon at the Thorpe Park Center, feet out, arms at sides with hands out, laughing and smiling, as they weave around each other.

They are penguins. They are also participants in a new form of hilarious healing, sponsored by the City of Flagstaff Parks & Recreation Department.

The lead penguin is Janet Wilson, a nurse at Flagstaff Medical Center and a Certified Laughter Leader.

Many benefits of laughing

Wilson leads the women in a full-bellied chant, "Ho, ho, ha ha ha," followed by five rhythmic claps.

This is the Laughter Club and Wilson leads the club in twice-weekly sessions at the newly remodeled Thorpe Park Community & Senior Center, which was formerly called the Adult Center.

"Laughter is contagious, can you tell?" Wilson asked the women. "Anytime in the world, your laughter is making a difference."

This is the second visit to the Laughter Club for Nancy Scherer.

"It felt so good and it was a lot of fun," Scherer said about her first class. "I have fibromyalgia and it brought relief from the pain."

Laughter Club fliers say that laughter can decrease stress, increase immunity, increase endorphins, decrease perception of pain and build community.

"Stress today is the number one killer, with more than 80 percent of all illness being stress related..." state the orange fliers, stacked on the front desk at in the lobby. "Scientific studies prove that long and hearty laughter counteracts the poisonous effects of stress and promotes healing."

Laughter strengthens abdominal muscles, gives internal organs a massage and burns calories. Daily laughter for as little as 15 minutes could help a person lose 4.4 pounds a year, according to Laughter Club literature.

"I'm really trying to get something going at the Adult Center, so more people can enjoy the benefits of laughter," said Wilson, 48, who also belly dances and studies painting and African dancing at Coconino Community College.

"I'm halfway to an associates in fun," she said, with a laugh.

LAUGHING UNTIL IT'S REAL

Laughter as therapy has become increasingly popular recently, largely due to the work of Dr. Madan Kataria, founder of the worldwide Laughter Yoga movement. Kataria started the first Laughter Club in

1995 in Mumbai, India.

According to Wikipedia, there are now more than 5,000 Laughter Clubs in 40 countries.

Wilson said the Kataria groups started with jokes, but they soon ran out of jokes.

"Not everyone has the same sense of humor," Wilson explained.

Instead, Kataria developed a technique to get people to laugh, without any reason.

"Your body doesn't know the difference between a fake smile and a real one," Wilson said.

Following Kataria's lead, Wilson uses a series of simple, tension-releasing laughter exercises, combined with gentle yoga-breathing and stretching exercises, rhythmic clapping and simulated laughter.

Simulated laughter soon turns into real laughter.

"The nice thing about this is everyone comes in smiling," said Jean Gearhart, one of the participants in the class. "I like to laugh, so it kind of comes natural for me. I like to have fun. I feel it keeps you younger."

FORGETTING HOW TO LAUGH

For many adults, laughter is a forgotten art.

"You tickle a mammal, and they'll laugh," Wilson said. "Children by the age of 3 months will laugh. Children laugh about 400 times a day. Adults laugh on average 15 times a day. Increasing laughter is hard work. It's something we definitely want to do."

A series of antics kept the laughter going in class.

Participants mimicked trying to start a very old car. They dragged their feet across the carpet and pretended to be giving each other a mild static shock. They rubbed fake towels behind their backs and snapped the towels at each other, all the time laughing.

"People make up their own versions and it's fun doing these in class," Wilson said.

The women maintain eye contact with each other to develop a sense of community and increase what Wilson calls the feel-good hormones.

After 20 minutes of laugh exercises, the class settled into chairs to discuss flexibility, one of the daily practices developed by the World Laughter Tour, whose founder Steve Wilson (not related to Janet) created the CLL training program.

Beneficial practices are assigned to each day of the week: Compliments on Monday, flexibility on Tuesday, gratitude on Wednesday, kindness on Thursday and forgiveness on Friday. Weekends are for chocolate and remembering to eat other favorite foods.

Attendance at Laughter Club sessions varies greatly, but Wilson is not concerned.

"I'll do this with just one person," she said. "I'll do it by myself. I do it with my dogs."

Reporter Betsey Bruner can be reached at 556-2255 or by e-mail at bbruner@azdailysun.com.