

BY AMY KEPFERLE

Laughing Matters

The biology of hope

IF YOU'RE unloading your groceries at the Food Co-op on Sunday afternoon and hear guffaws, hoots, chuckles and chortles coming from inside the Connections building, don't be alarmed. The jovial sounds ringing in your ears will be those of the Bellingham Laughter Club (BLC) holding a free public laugh session.

Mary Jensen and Linda Read, the certified "laughter leaders" who'll be schooling folks on the positive side effects of systematic exposure to mirthful laughter, have been meeting monthly with participants of all ages since last September to offer up their services. They're part of a worldwide group of clubs started by psychologist and mental health educator Steve Wilson that brings the "biology of hope" to communities near and far (go to worldlaughtertour.com for the specifics).

"Your body doesn't know the difference between simulated and stimulated laughter," Jensen explains. "They both act as mood regulators and relieve anxiety. The scientific research on laughter is solid: What they know is when you put your face in the position of a smile, it sends messages to the receptors in your brain and creates an anticipation of pleasure."


Jensen, who works in the field of crisis intervention and takes the ills of the world quite seriously, says since she took the two-day training course and started sharing what she found with the community, she's noticed a change in her general outlook on life. "We like to say

it prevents hardening of the attitude," she quips. "The beauty of it is that it's true."

If you'd like to take part, but are worried you'll have to tell jokes or be judged on your quality of mirth, don't worry. The first part of the meeting will give you basic guidelines (and assure you that the BLC isn't religious, political or a cult) and outline the benefits (lower heart rate, improved immune functions, good cardiovascular effects). You'll then warm up for a few minutes before delving into a number of tried-and-true laughter exercises.

Since starting the BLC last year, Jensen and Read have taken their program to retirement homes, grade schools, libraries and beyond. They've laughed with those as young as 10 years old and as old as 83. "Our best laughter ambassador is 80," Jensen says. "When she came to us, she was a recent widow who'd been having trouble sleeping. After the first session, she said she went home and slept for 12 hours. She said it's made her life so much more buoyant."

If you're still feeling self-conscious about taking part in the Laughter Club, get over it. "We're all looking pretty goofy when we're doing our exercises," Jensen reports. "We laugh *with* each other, not *at* each other. I think it helps people." ☺



ATTEND
WHAT: Bellingham Laughter Club
WHEN: 3pm Sun., July 8
WHERE: Co-op Connection Building, 1220 N. Forest St.
COST: Free
INFO: 920-3617 or worldlaughtertour.com

