

Laughter - the best medicine for stress

JUSTIN SKINNER

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Toronto resident and businesswoman Wendy Woods wants everyone to know that stress relief is a laughing matter.

Woods is a certified laughter leader and delivers laughter yoga classes through her company, Watershed Training Solutions. While the classes are not like a typical yoga session, they allow participants to chuckle, giggle and guffaw away the stresses of daily life.

Laughter yoga originated in 1995, when Dr. Madan Kataria of India found a wealth of medical evidence showing the health benefits of laughter. While his first attempts at starting classes were met with plenty of raised eyebrows, he managed to find a few members willing to give it a try. Once more people started experiencing the benefits of laughing on a regular basis, the practice started picking up steam around the world.

Woods said her own sessions work on the same principle, with the emphasis placed on the laughter itself as opposed to what it is people are laughing at.

"About 80 per cent of what we laugh at is not in response to jokes," she said. "The classes are a series of exercises where we'll start with fake laughter and then natural laughter will kick in after that. When you're in a group and you see other people laughing, it really does kick in."

The key to having a successful laughter yoga workshop is ensuring that people feel comfortable enough to let go of some of their inhibitions, which Woods ensures by keeping the workshops highly interactive and positive.

"It's always laughing with people and never at people," she said. "The goal is to create an atmosphere where people can just let themselves open up and laugh, which takes us all back to a time when life was a bit simpler."

Exercises can be as simple as having the participants introduce themselves and then start in immediately with laughter, whether real or faked. Even sourpusses who are loath to crack a smile can benefit from being around so many others who are smiling and laughing.

Laughter can relieve stress on a psychological level, but it has even more tangible health benefits. Muscles relax, people breathe more deeply and blood vessels dilate, which leads to better blood and oxygen flow and more energy.

"It's been shown that 20 seconds of laughter is roughly equivalent to three minutes of hard rowing, and I know which of those two I would rather do," Woods said.

Woods's foray into laughter yoga was therapeutic for herself, as well. Though she had run several workshops on humour in the workplace, she said she felt a lack of laughter in her life.

"I had a case of taking myself too seriously, as I think a lot of people do," she said. "There have been studies that show that children laugh an average of 400 times a day while adults only laugh 15 times a day. When we go from childhood to adulthood, somewhere along the line we get very, very serious."

While she hosts regular laughter yoga sessions in her Yonge Street and St. Clair Avenue area studio, she has branched out into corporate events, bringing her laughter workshops into offices or to conferences in and around Toronto. In those settings, the workshops can function as an icebreaker or bonding exercise in addition to creating the aforementioned health benefits.



Laughter - the best medicine for stress. Laughter yoga instructor Wendy Woods, left, leads a class with various exercises for participants Catherine Fawcett, Beverley Howell and Gisela McKay at 47 St. Clair Ave. W.

"People are always looking for different ways to reduce stress, and this engages them and brings them together," Woods said. "Employers are becoming more and more focused on making sure their employees have a little fun in addition to all the hard work they do and laughter yoga is one way to go about that that's gaining acceptance in the corporate world."

While laughter yoga is Woods's most popular class, she also offers training in soft skills that help clients excel in the business world, such as productive teamwork, conflict management and networking.

The laughter leader finds the Yonge and St. Clair neighbourhood where she both lives and works ideal both from a personal and professional standpoint.

"It's so close to the TTC, so it's easy and convenient if I have meetings downtown," she said. "And I certainly feel like the neighbourhood's growing, which is nice to see. There are more and more activities going on around here than there were before."

She feeds her creative urges and her love of laughter even further by taking Second City improv classes downtown.

"It's low-fat, legal and yet it's still so much fun," she said.

To learn more about Woods's laughter yoga or other workshops, visit www.watershedtraining.ca.

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