

Lawyer Jackie Curran is the first to admit that her 20-year career in litigation and family law didn't provide many light-hearted moments.

"It was very serious; no laughter at all," she says. "But the law can be very restricted in what you do to help people and, eventually, I wanted to help people more." As she played with the idea of bringing something lighter into her life, Jackie's investigations led her to learn about laughter clubs, laughter yoga and the idea that you can laugh your way to a healthier, happier existence. She signed up for a two-hour workshop with Indian Doctor Madan Kataria, founder of what is now an international laughter movement.

"He told us, 'Today you'll laugh like you've never laughed before,'" she says.

While her lawyerly skepticism initially prevailed, exercises such as shaking hands with strangers while silently laughing, looking people in the eye and chuckling and simply laughing for no good reason had her hooked.

"There is nothing inherently funny about laughter yoga, it's purely exercises," she explains. "What is interesting is that as the laughter hits your body, it becomes funny."

Physically, laughter increases our oxygen supply; alleviates pain by releasing endorphins and boosts the production of our natural antidepressant, serotonin. While the body of evidence isn't huge, Doctor Craig Hassed, Senior Lecturer at Monash University's Department of General Practice, says it all points in the same direction:

"Laughter induces the relaxation

response; lowers cortisol levels, blood pressure and heart rate; and boosts immune function," he says.

He adds that while it's undisputed that laughing makes us feel happier, in part because of the link to serotonin, the response can be more than physical: "Laughter changes the way that people relate to each other," he says.

Jackie Curran agrees, and says once she began laughing regularly (solo and at regular laughter club meetings) the effect began to ripple through her life.

"The first thing I noticed was that I was feeling a lot more relaxed and was happier more often than previously," she says. "I started having positive thoughts and feelings most days, whereas before I was stressed, anxious and worried about work."

"Then, I noticed it changed my relationships with friends and family. We were laughing together more and I started taking my self less seriously. Eventually, I found myself becoming more tolerant of other people and I began to listen better and interact differently. If other people were upset or cranky it didn't impact me."

While Jackie's work in the world of laughter now extends to running local laughter workshops and spreading laughter into the corporate world (under the name

The Laughter Lawyer), a growing number of medical practitioners are also taking the health benefits of laughter seriously.

Laughter therapy is commonly used in children's hospitals to alleviate fear in children undergoing serious treatment and researchers from UNSW's Dementia Collaborative Research Centre suspect it may also help us at the other end of our lifecycle. They recently began evaluating the use of humour therapy in residential aged care facilities across Sydney in the hope of increasing residents' quality of life and mood.

Convener of Laughter WA, Grant Stone, doesn't need researchers to convince him that laughter and good health are linked. "I had a stroke nine years ago, so I was looking for ways to be active, exercise and get moving," he says. "I didn't know I needed laughter, I just knew I didn't want to sit still and meditate. I wanted to fortify my system and enjoy myself."

When he discovered Dr Kataria's work, it was the medical solution he was looking for. "After a stroke you need to lower your blood pressure and make your body more peaceful," Grant explains. "Laughter is a natural de-stressor and laughing for 10 minutes does lower your blood pressure. Now I feel good in myself and good about the state of my body. That's what I wanted."

HEALTH AND HAPPINESS MAY
BE JUST A CHUCKLE AWAY.

Laughter

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Grant points out that as adults, we have convinced ourselves laughing often isn't appropriate. "We even have language like 'This is no laughing matter', or 'Wipe that smile off your face'," he says. "What ridiculous statements!

They take away our playfulness and are counter-productive to surviving life as an adult."

Of course, knowing the benefits, we easily laugh on our own. But while our conditioning often guards us against laughing for no reason, or laughing in public, Jackie Curran says it's not the case in every culture. "The Western groups usually meet once a week, but in India people get together *daily* in groups to laugh," she says. "They think it's that important."

If you do want to practise seeing the lighter side of life, laughter clubs are a cheap, easy way to start.

"Clubs provide a very strong sense of community; people find it helps them feel really good," Jackie adds. "If you get a group of people together who are willing to laugh, it doesn't matter if you're in China, France, India or Russia; there is no difference in our ability to use laughter to release grief, stress, or to heal." **GL**

LAUGHTER YOGA

These simple exercises will soon get your laughter juices flowing.

HA HA Stand with your arms on your thighs, then reach your arms tall while emitting a loud "HA HA HA HA". Fold forward and keep laughing "HA HA HA". Up and down for a few minutes, on your own or with others.

THE QUIET CHUCKLE With one or more friends, walk round the room quietly chuckling and looking at each other occasionally. Keep it going, you can put one hand on your belly and another over your mouth for emphasis – it helps!

HAPPY HANDSHAKE In a group, silently laugh and walk around the room (or a park), shaking hands with other members of the group. Look them in the eye as you shake hands. Keep silently laughing the whole time.

LAUGH YOUR WAY TO HEALTH

www.laughteryoga.org —

Laughter yoga founder
Dr Madan Kataria's website.

www.laughterlawyer.com.au —

Workshops with Jackie Curran
www.laughterclubsaustralia.com.au

— Listings of
laughter clubs across
Australia