

My Laughter Story

Born in a small village on the Indo-Pakistan border, I was the youngest of eight children. Hailing from a farming background, my parents never attended school. Being simple village folk, they were engrossed in the daily grind of farm life. None of my siblings were interested in studying, but I was the odd one. It was my mother's dream that I should become a doctor, as one had to travel almost 15 miles to seek any kind of medical help. She hoped I would study medicine and return to the village to help the people. In pursuance of her wish, I went to a boarding school and worked hard to get my medical degree.

After graduation, I went to Mumbai to do my master's in medicine. Completely lured by the glitz and glamour of Mumbai, with its swanky cars and luxurious apartments, I started to harbor dreams of becoming rich and famous. I tried everything in my capacity to reach for the skies but soon realized it was not that simple. My quest did not succeed, and I slumped into a bout of depression. Life

was tough, and it was not easy to make money without any business experience. I was stressed and miserable. At that time, my mother visited Mumbai and was shocked to see my state. She said, “Madan, what is wrong? You don’t look happy, and you don’t laugh and smile like you did in the village.” She was right. Somewhere in the midst of the upward scramble, I had actually lost my laughter.

The transition from an innocent village boy to a city doctor had seriously altered my persona. I knew I was in trouble. Having realized the enormity of the situation, I embarked on a new search—and this time, it was not money. It was to find my laughter—the key to happiness and joy. Not content with being a practicing physician in a suburb in Mumbai, I launched a health magazine, *My Doctor*, to spread more awareness about good health among people. It was in March 1995, while writing an article, *Laughter – The Best Medicine*, for my journal, that I stumbled on a rich repertoire of scientific work done on laughter as a therapy.

On exploring further, I was amazed at the volume of documented studies that described at great length the many proven benefits of laughter on the human mind and body. While going through the scientific literature on the benefits of laughter, I was profoundly inspired by the book *Anatomy of an Illness* written by Norman Cousins, an American journalist, in which he described how he laughed his way back to health from Ankylosing Spondylitis, an incurable disease of the spine. He was taking tons of painkillers every day but, finding no relief, he decided to watch funny movies. He found that 30 minutes of laughter would give him two hours of pain-free sleep.

This set me thinking. Life in Mumbai was stressful, and people hardly laughed. They were forever rushed and hassled to meet their needs and fulfill their dreams. Even I had turned dour and had lost my laughter to the daily rigors of my profession and the added burden of a publication. This was no joke. There was no time to laugh. I believed laughter could improve health and help people cope with the stressors of modern living. I started

joking and laughing with my patients and soon found that they recovered much faster as laughter kept them happy and positive.

The Origin

On March 13, 1995, I got up at 4 a.m. and was pacing up and down in my living room when a sudden idea flashed through my mind: If laughter is so good, why not set up a Laughter Club? I was ecstatic and could hardly wait to implement the concept. Within three hours, I hurried to the public park where I used to go for a morning walk every day. I tried to convince the regular walkers about the importance of laughter and starting a Laughter Club.

The expressions were predictable. They were aghast and actually thought I was crazy. They laughed at the idea and scoffed at the whole concept. But I was unshakable and did not give up. I managed to motivate 4 out of 400 people, and thus was born the first Laughter Club with just 5 people.

We met for half an hour every morning to laugh together, much to the amusement of befuddled

onlookers. In the beginning, the session started with someone telling a joke or narrating a humorous anecdote. Soon people started enjoying the whole exercise and reported feeling much better after a laughter session of 20-30 minutes. Bearing the initial ridicule and criticism, I firmly continued to explain the health benefits of laughter. Gradually, people became a little more receptive and showed a keen interest. Attendance started growing, and there were nearly 55 people by the end of the week. For ten days, the routine continued with much vigor, after which we hit a snag. The stock of good jokes and stories ran out, and negative, hurtful, and naughty jokes started to emerge. Reacting to the offensive jokes, two participants complained that it would be better to close the club than to continue with such jokes.

The Breakthrough

Determined to keep the Laughter Club alive, I asked the club members to give me just a day to resolve the crisis. That night, I was looking for some way to laugh without

jokes. Luckily, I laid my hands on a book called *Emotions and Health*, from the *Prevention Health Care Series* (USA). While reading a chapter on humor and laughter, I was surprised to learn that the body cannot differentiate between real and fake laughter. It revealed that if one cannot laugh, one should pretend to laugh. I also learned that not only laughter but a bodily expression of any motion generates a similar emotion in the mind. This was a breakthrough. I thought, why not use laughter as an exercise? The next morning, I explained this to the group and asked them to try and act out laughter with me for one minute. Though skeptical, they agreed. The results were amazing. For some, acted-out laughter quickly turned into real laughter—this was contagious, and very soon, others followed. Soon, the group was laughing like never before. The hearty laughter that followed persisted for almost ten minutes. Finally, there was laughter, real laughter—with no jokes!

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The Fact That Changed Everything

The fact that one could laugh without an external trigger was a unique feature. However, some people were naturally inhibited, shy, and found it difficult to generate laughter. Since every person has a different psychological makeup, it was harder for some to laugh. My new challenge was how to get these people laughing without any reason. I came up with the idea of warm-up exercises, such as clapping and chanting "Ho Ho Ha Ha Ha." These exercises helped loosen inhibitions and made it easier for people to laugh. Soon, different kinds of laughter exercises were developed, including elements of role-play, childlike playfulness, and other techniques from my days as an amateur dramatic actor. As the concept evolved, I noticed many similarities between laughter and pranayama in yoga. Both were based on the principle of optimal breathing—fundamental to good health.

Together with my wife, Madhuri, we incorporated elements from this ancient form of yogic breathing into laughter. The result was Laughter Yoga or *Hasya Yoga* (as it is known in Sanskrit)—a complete workout for health

and wellness. A physically-oriented technique, it offers multiple health benefits, primarily increasing the supply of oxygen and boosting the immune system. It also energizes and recharges the metabolism. Today, with thousands of Laughter Yoga Clubs worldwide, countless people are benefiting from the enormous advantages of laughter. They are experiencing relief from a variety of stress-related illnesses. The concept has grown on its own strength, and the benefits are undeniable. Truly, laughter is nature's best medicine.

Laughter Yoga Becomes a Global Phenomenon When we started the first Laughter Yoga Club, it became very popular because people experienced many benefits. Everybody felt energized for the rest of the day and slept better at night. Numbers in the park grew, and it caught the attention of a newspaper in Mumbai. The headline read, "*This Club Is No Laughing Matter.*" People began inviting me to different parks, and soon, Laughter Clubs were being established across India. For five years, I traveled the length and breadth of the country to promote and set up these clubs.

In 1999, I was invited to the USA by Steve Wilson, a psychologist from Columbus, Ohio. He believed it was an excellent idea to introduce Laughter Yoga to the American audience. My wife, Madhuri, and I traveled there and visited 14 cities, conducting 23 seminars in six weeks. The concept was received with great enthusiasm.

Following the success in the USA, in 2001, I introduced Laughter Yoga in Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, and Australia. Slowly but steadily, the concept spread to other parts of the world. The growth was organic and based on people's positive experiences. Within five years of that first session in the park, Laughter Yoga had reached more than 120 countries.