

I turned on the radio this morning to hear about yet another sad story about how troubled our world is and I shed a tear as I replay a similar story in my past. I have been the caregiver to a chronically-ill parent ever since I was eight years old. I had to grow up fast and so displayed much honesty and maturity in the classroom. I was the child that behaved herself and studied hard. Perhaps you have a similar story, or perhaps there is something in your life today that is bringing you down. Would you agree that as children we laugh often, but as adults, we seem to laugh less if even at all?

This is where laughter yoga comes in. Laughter yoga is a form of yoga practice that focuses on using breath energy to heal. Breathing techniques in the form of laughter that balance the subtle energy zones in our body called chakras. Physically, training the lungs to step back from our normal breath (shallow and from the chest) is one way to cleanse the lungs that laughter offers.

Different 'laughters' resonate with different chakras. In my laughter sessions, I begin with light stretching and meditation, gently inviting the out-breath and vocalizing a simple 'ha' sound. Then, I demonstrate a transition phrase that is done between each technique to center and neutralize the previous laughter technique. This is what is called 'Ho ho ha ha ha'. Each laugh is demonstrated and we start from the highest chakra to the lowest chakra (from head to feet). It is as if we are washing out any blocked energies down the centre of our body like detergent down a drainpipe.

Blocked energies can manifest into physical distress and illness. This explanation is very common in Traditional Chinese Medicine practices. I like to explain each technique in an open and honest way. The brain doesn't know the difference between fake laughter and real laughter as Dr. Madan Kataria (founder of the Laughter Yoga Institute in 1995) explains. Therefore, to trick the brain, we laugh for at least 30 seconds until our brain gets it. What I mean by that is that the brain gets ready to stimulate the release of more brain chemicals (neurotransmitters) such as endorphins, dopamine, serotonin which are natural pain and pleasure chemicals we have within our brains.

Visualization during a yoga practice is a great way to change the current chemistry of our body. We can either use it to stimulate us or rest (engaging the sympathetic nervous system or parasympathetic nervous system, respectively). It is important to not only be aware of these automatic responses within our body, but also know how to turn



them on and off. Laughter is just one way to do it and we have been familiar with it even before childhood. We can teach ourselves how to connect to our inner child once again, at any age.

There are many physical and mental benefits that laughter yoga offers. It's a natural pain killer, improves breathing, reduces heart disease, decreases stress, and makes you look young. Just think of the grumpy old man analogy (he never laughs). Laughter yoga is also very accessible to many. It is doable by anyone regardless of his or her abilities or disabilities.

Some testimonials witnessed after a session... "I feel a sense of lightness afterwards and a feeling of release of chest, neck and overall tension in my body..." "I feel an emotional release during the laughing and then afterwards a feeling like a weight has been lifted from my chest..." Other simple testimonials come in body language. A transformation from tense posture to a relaxed posture gives the body permission to breathe easy. And, as Dr. Kataria would say, "Fake it until you make it" my friend.

The Early Intervention Program (EIP) invites NSTU members to sign up for our Wellness email list at Be_Well@nstu.ca. Please contact Erin at ekeefe@staff.nstu.ca to provide her with your NSTU email address.

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