

## Laughter Yoga: Benefits of Mixing Laughter and Yoga

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### DESCRIPTION

In most medical practices, there is the complaint that it is too difficult to set a time aside for yoga and a good laugh. Those that do, obtain definite benefit. Yoga, for instance, has been shown to improve depression. Yoga and humor both increase oxytocin, the cuddle hormone, which is now being tied to diverse benefits such as enhancing immune responses as well as improving cognition deficits in schizophrenia. Now there is even evidence that there is a link between our gut microbes and oxytocin, with each enhancing each other. Living a non-stressful life helps to promote beneficial gut microbes which then can stimulate the oxytocin to generate a state of positive homeostasis on the body which in turn gives a "Nurturing" feedback to maintain the beneficial bacteria. The gut to oxytocin relationship was proven to be via the vagus nerve in elegant experiments in mice using *Lactobacillus reuteri*. Oxytocin and the gut microbes need to act in unison in order to see the maximum benefit, here in wound healing. The cycle is interrupted when we are under stress or eating unhealthily. The implication is that we need to see that our beneficial bacteria receive beneficial probiotics so that they are able to send positive oxytocin stimulating signals via the vagus nerve. In order to offset the negative influences of stress on the gut bacteria, we need to cultivate oxytocin promoting interventions that can result in a positive oxytocin feedback to these bacteria. Humor and yoga can both do so, especially when they meet as in laughter yoga. First, a clarification of how humor can be expressed. Humor can be spontaneous or shared. The expressions of humor run the gamut from verbal reactions of pleasure, smiling and finally to laughter. A smile is either non-Duchene or Duchene. A simple, non-Duchene smile is when the muscles tense at both ends of the mouth (zygomatic major muscle) as well as the rest of the mouth muscles. At the moment that the corners of the eyes squint (tensing the orbicularis oculi muscle), we have a Duchene smile. Here we see the famous crow's feet that Botox can eliminate, resulting in the inability to express a true Duchene smile and seeming very stiff and almost fake.

True laughter involves the Duchene smile and reflects that true emotions are being expressed. This Duchene laughter is the one associated with the emotional benefits of laughter. Stretch, breathe, laugh, although not the usual exercise routine, laughter yoga has proven to be worthy of prescribing due to its salubrious results. Laughter itself increases endorphins and decreases pain thresholds. Laughter yoga is a 20 minute extension of what an occasional laugh can do. Such constant laughter increases blood flow through the body, lessens the amounts of stress hormones released by creating a non-stressful environment and aids depressive symptoms. In a population of elderly depressed women, laughter yoga was as beneficial as exercise, both being much more effective than controls. One severely bipolar patient was able to have a remission when she became a laugh yoga instructor. As more evidence demonstrates the significance of laughter in the psychiatric practice, the almost axiomatic motto Laughter is the best medicine becomes a beneficial treatment option for patients. There are many other types of laughter exercises like greeting laughter, argument laughter, driving laughter and gradient laughter. The last is a mixture of successive steps: Smile, snicker, and burst into laughter. Another extremely simple exercise that can be performed if there is no time for formal laugh yoga is the oxytocin breath developed by Ellie Drake through brave heart women. After assuming a comfortable position with your hands on the belly, you inhale quickly through your nose using diaphragmatic breathing which means having your belly fill up and protrude as you breathe in. The inspiration should be quick as inspirations stimulate the adrenergic, agitating, system. Then you exhale slowly, pulling your belly in, as this stimulates the parasympathetic, calming system. This way the breathing can control your emotions. As you exhale, you make a laughing sound "aahaahaaahaa" and end with a smile. The more pleasure that you feel at the end, the more effective are the results. Sometimes as little as three repetitions are enough to calm oneself down.

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