

Laughter exercises to practice

Here are three exercises to help you use laughter to promote emotional, mental and relational well-being.

We also recommend watching a good comedy show or spending time with friends you find funny.

1. Laughter yoga

Research shows that laughter increases the body's amount of endorphins—feel-good hormones, which are also known for their ability to relieve pain. At the same time, it lowers the amount of the stress hormone cortisol. Today, a range of therapies are based on the healing power of laughter. The Indian doctor Madan Kataria—known as the giggling guru—invented laughter yoga, which combines breathing and relaxation exercises with a facial-muscle workout. According to Kataria, laughter yogis can laugh even when nothing's funny: the body can't tell the difference between fake laughter and real. Of course, genuine guffaws are a lot more fun.



Laughter yoga is a form of exercise based on the principle that you can – and probably should – laugh independently of your state of mind or mood. Laughter is used as a form of breathwork and, like other forms of yoga, helps bring the body-mind into harmony and balance. More fun if you can do this with a group of friends – laughter is contagious – but an excellent way to begin the day on your own as well.

- Lie on your back on the floor or in bed.
- Bend your knees and lift them toward your head as though you were sitting.
- Reach up with your hands and grab your toes, or shins, or knees, whatever you can reach comfortably. In yoga circles, this pose is called happy baby pose or dead bug pose.
- In this posture, begin the laughter trajectory: smile, chuckle, laugh, belly laugh. The silliness of the posture helps.
- Continue belly laughing for 5 minutes, then slowly lower your legs back down to the floor or bed.
- Relax; breathe, enjoy any ease you are experiencing. If you do this exercise every morning for two weeks, you will notice a profound shift in how you step into your day.

2. A 15 Minute Laughing Meditation created by Dhyan Sutorious

Do this with at least one other person if you can. Find a quiet, secluded place where you can sit together comfortably. "If you feel a little shy, laugh with your shyness. Respect your limits: you do not have to achieve anything at all."

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PREPARATION

- Stand to stretch, legs solidly planted.
- Stretch your muscles as you exhale, relax briefly as you inhale.
- Repeat this a few times as you reach over your head.
- You may also use your right hand to pull your left arm over your ear; and vice versa. Loosen your fingers by gently pulling each of them back with the other hand.
- Stretch your facial muscles by making funny faces and grimaces... without laughing.

LAUGH

- **Smile;** then slowly, without forcing yourself, laugh with a relaxed throat. Laugh softly at first, then louder until you're bellowing heartily from your belly. Don't force anything. Allow it to happen.
- "Every second of your attention should be directed at what presents itself to you at that moment: laugh or cry with it or be silent. The essence is being aware, accepting, and letting go. The moment you totally accept the situation, the other person or yourself, you can laugh with it."
(In the final minute of the meditation, close your eyes and continue to laugh.)

RELEASE

- With your eyes closed, slowly stop laughing and breathe quietly without sound.
- Each time you notice you're thinking of something, let the thought go and focus your attention on your body breathing.
- Whatever you are feeling, notice it, allow it, accept it.

Rest in ease.

3. Advanced laughter meditation

Steven Sultanoff, professor of psychology at Pepperdine University and an authority on the therapeutic uses of humor, has found that laughter, the physical response to humor, opens us up to the psychological benefit of humor. "Humor triggers wit, and wit shifts belief systems and thinking patterns and prompts changes in attitude."

Follow the same trajectory of laughter as in the laughter yoga and laughter meditation above: smile, chuckle, laugh, guffaw, deep belly laughter.

Once the state of laughter is solid and steady, bring to mind a nagging worry, a recent sorrow or hurt, a moment of disappointment or chagrin. It doesn't have to be a big moment, though with practice it can be.

Allow the laughter to "hold" the moment. The laughter may calm a bit; certainly the worry or chagrin will shift a bit. The feeling of difficulty may not resolve entirely; that's fine. But noticing that laughter can shift a mood state empowers us to use laughter as skillful means to cope with the ups and downs of our days more gracefully, more resiliently.