

The Washington Post

The Best Medicine, Minus the Humor Laughter Therapy: Plenty of Giggles But No Punch Lines

The Washington Post - Washington, D.C. Author: Anita Huslin - Washington Post Staff Writer
Date: Sep 24, 2006 Start Page: D.2 Section: STYLE

Ho ho. Ha ha ha.

Ho ho! Ha ha ha!

HO HO!! HA HA HA!!!

The bright yellow flier promised "a joyful after-work tuneup with therapeutic effects," and so a half-dozen stressed-out Washington types are standing in the George Washington University Center for Integrative Medicine waving their arms in the air and chanting a warm-up in this evening's "laughter therapy" class.

"Ho ho. Ha ha ha," they say, in unison.

The instructor -- a tall, angular man with somber gabardine trousers, gum-soled shoes and a crisp blue dress shirt -- smiles at his charges. Surely this is not what he had in mind? How's he going to put some juice into these mechanical guffaws?

Maybe: So the chicken walks into the library . . .

But there's no chicken joke, no guy in a bar with his dog. Not even a halfhearted knock-knock joke. No

lawyers or light bulbs or blondes. There's nothing funny here.

Never mind that. Laughing is good for you. It supposedly opens your arteries, if you believe the research from the University of Maryland; boosts the immune system, according to a Loma Linda University scientist; relieves stress; teaches you how to breathe like a baby. And you don't need Dave Chappelle to achieve these benefits.

So here we are, in a roomful of people practicing mirthless laughter.

"Ho ho. Ha ha ha."

Laugh leader Siddharth Shah, who is a physician and psychotherapist, clasps his hands at his waist. He has counseled and treated humanitarian workers responding to disasters and violence, and treats patients here in his psychotherapy practice. The laugh class is one in a series of periodic sessions, which participants pay \$10 to attend. He looks pretty serious.

"I do a little bit of this in the shower every day," he says. "And when I do a session like this, it's as good for me as it is for the people who are doing it."

Shah leads the group through the cellphone laugh, where they walk around the room and giggle like they're talking on the phone; the lion laugh, where they lift their arms like paws and roar; the lawnmower laughter, which has a couple of crank-up laughs and then full-bore guffaws. Now they're gasping for air, and one woman is shaking and starting to cough. They finish the set with a free-form bout of chuckles, snickers, chortles and giggles. It tapers down to a few snorts and hiccups, and then the expiration of a sigh.

Hahahahohohaaaaamm.

Humor, after all, is a reaction to the absurdity of life. So the idea of a roomful of people standing around laughing for no reason is kind of funny. Sort of. But as a concept, laughter without humor is not new. It started out as grunting noises emitted by primordial man when he was tickled, as a part of chasing and play, if you buy into the evolutionary tale mapped out by Robert Provine, a neurologist and psychologist at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. After language and humor developed, the bipeds' grunting noises evolved into the ululations we now call laughing.

But according to Provine, who has done field research on the subject, 80 percent to 90 percent of the times people laugh, nothing funny was said. People laugh to be agreeable. Or because they're nervous. Or trying to attract the opposite sex.

Sometimes it's because they're high. In the early 1800s, promoters such as P.T. Barnum and the young Samuel Colt sold patrons a snort of nitrous

oxide, then watched them stagger about, giggling and guffawing uncontrollably, to the amusement of themselves and others.

Maybe there's something to the idea of dispensing with the humor. Thousands of people in 40 countries belong to laughing clubs. (In his early efforts to begin one more than a decade ago in India, founder Madan Kataria tried telling jokes but ran out of them quickly.) Senior centers in Rockville and Howard County embrace the practice. Even the Pentagon has created laughter clubs to energize its ranks.

The late Norman Cousins, editor of the Saturday Review for 30 years, introduced the idea to Western medicine after falling ill in 1964. Stricken with a degenerative connective tissue disease in his spine, he hired a nurse to read him funny stories and watched Marx brothers films to distract himself from the pain. He discovered that 15 minutes of hearty laughter could produce two hours of pain-free sleep, and in his 1979 book, "Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient," he credited laughter with reversing his illness. Ten years later, an article in the Journal of the American Medical Association concluded that for patients with chronic illnesses, "laughter has an immediate symptom-relieving effect" on patients with chronic illnesses . . . an effect that is potentiated when laughter is induced regularly."

Humor as inspiration for laughter may not be necessary. But as much as laughing is a human impulse, so is the instinct to have something to laugh at. Turns out the people in the class,

unknown to their instructor, have been thinking funny thoughts.

June Jackson envisions her grandmother trying to stuff herself into a corset. Samit Shah conjures a funny scene from "The Lion King." Lorraine Wodiska simply looks at the other people around the room, waving their hands in the air and cackling, and cracks up.

Catherine Bernard, a Bethesda psychologist, is having a hard time getting into things, until she starts thinking about a Seinfeld episode. "You want to be my latex salesman?" she blurts out and starts sputtering with laughter.

Don't get the joke? Don't worry about it. Humor is optional.