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## The power of a good laugh THE MIND

IT'S said to be a true story that has become legendary: a cancer-riddled man is told by his doctors they can do no more for him.



He thinks: "What the hell, I may as well die laughing," and shuts himself up for a weekend with a pile of comical videos. He feels strangely better by Monday. When he next visits his doctor, the perplexed specialist says his tumours have shrunk. Eventually, they disappear.

The very idea makes you want to smile.

"Go ahead; it's a beginning," says Johannesburg "laughter coach" Shareen Richter.

She has just returned from India where she learnt a powerful programme created by Dr Madan Kataria, a medical doctor and the founder of Laughter Yoga.

On his website ([www.laughteryoga.org](http://www.laughteryoga.org)), Kataria says the concept is now "widely accepted in the business world as it is the most effective tool to reduce work stress and provides companies and organisations powerful operational benefits". It involves learning to laugh without listening to jokes, comedy or humour, says Richter, who now runs the South African School of Laughter.

It's usually done in a group, she says, because we have "mirror neurons" in our brains: when we see someone laughing and make eye contact with them we join in, even when we have no idea why.

"The laughter becomes real and contagious and is combined with breathing exercises."

Today the average stressed adult no longer breathes deeply by using his lungs and gut, says Richter. Most of us "stress breathe" instead, in shallow intakes with the result that stale, toxic air sits in the lower part of our lungs and above our diaphragms.

"We don't clear the stale air out of our bodies and that's what a good belly laugh does," says Richter. Laughter is

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also scientifically shown to produce endorphins, the neurotransmitters produced in the brain that reduce pain and produce our natural "happy juice", she says.

During our interview she produces medical studies to prove the efficacy of laughter exercises and shows scores of news clips, from CNN to the BBC and Sky, that have reported on the excellent health results of laughing.

The concept has been reported in Time magazine, National Geographic, the Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times and the Daily Telegraph, to name a few.

Research by Dr Michael Miller of the University of Maryland Medical Centre points to laughter's heart healthy benefits.

His study, presented at the Scientific Session of the American College of Cardiology in Orlando, Florida in March 2005, showed that laughter relaxes arteries and boosts blood flow.

Before and after showing comedy clips to 20 volunteers, Miller and his team made ultrasound measurements of blood flow and dilation. Arteries relaxed and blood flowed more freely for 30 to 45 minutes afterwards for 19 of the 20 volunteers.

After harrowing scenes from another video were shown, the artery wall constricted, reducing blood flow in 14 volunteers.

Miller advocates "15 minutes a day of hearty laughter as part of a healthy lifestyle".

In November 2007, Norwegian Dr Sven Svebok released his study at an American Psychosomatic Society meeting in Budapest, Hungary, showing that a laugh a day can help keep death away.

Svebok tracked 54000 Norwegians for seven years and concluded that adults with a sense of humour outlive those who don't find life funny.

Japanese geneticist Dr Kazuo Murakami believes laughter is a stimulant which can trigger energy inside DNA with the potential to help cure disease. In his research, in the American Academic journal, Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics, in January 2006, he said if it could be proved that people could switch genes on and off with an emotion like laughter, that has no side-effects, it would be "the finding of the century".

It's not only medical scientists who see the worth in laughter. US actor Will Smith was quoted in media reports last year saying he credits Nelson Mandela with teaching

him the value of laughter and inspiring him to use his comedic gift to "spread happiness". Smith said Mandela told him that for the 27 years he was in prison he got much pleasure out of the one movie sent every six months that made him laugh and helped him escape for a few hours from the hopelessness.

Mandela must surely be one of the world's best examples of humour to cope with stress and trauma for after his release from prison, his laughing, smiling and dancing figure led a potentially tragic nation to a new high road.

Richter's day job is marketing director of a security business. She is currently introducing a professional laughter programme and has registered a company devoted to coaching it.

"The potential applications for the business world, schools, the police, for one-on-one coaching with health therapists, are endless," she says.

South Africans, not surprisingly, seem to need it. "Internationally, adults laugh about 10 times a day on average. We laugh half that amount," she says.

Richter's work brings her into daily contact with crime victims: "The level of stress that we, often subconsciously, absorb daily takes a direct toll on our health because 80% of diseases are stress related."

Studies show stress is associated with diabetes, cardio-thoracic problems, depression, high blood pressure, strokes, sexual dysfunction, insomnia and migraines.

Richter says our bodies can't tell the difference between real and fake laughter: "When laughter is done as an exercise our bodies experience the same physiological and biochemical results it does when we're watching movies or reading a book."

It is based on the most simple, yet profound philosophy of "acting happiness. Because it's physically oriented it doesn't rely on the mind at all so you don't need a sense of humour or even a reason to laugh".

For more information, visit [www.laughtercoaching.co.za](http://www.laughtercoaching.co.za)

Will Smith credits Mandela with teaching him the value of laughter and inspiring him to use his comedic gift

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