



THE COMEDY ISSUE!

COMIC



RELIEF



Laughter therapy is said to benefit your brain and body, so we challenged writer (and self-confessed misery guts) Antonia Hoyle, 37, to give it a go

**P**ouring milk from a jug into my cup, I'm having an 11am coffee break. So far, so normal - except the coffee, the jug, the milk and the cup don't actually exist. I am acting out a surreal skit that gets stranger still when, after I've had a sip of my fake drink, I force out a loud, long and faintly hysterical laugh. I look - and feel - unhinged, but I haven't lost my marbles. In fact, I'm halfway through a laughter therapy session, a form of self-help that claims to improve both

CELEB JOKERS

A MAN ASKS HIS DENTIST: "WHAT'S BEST FOR YELLOW TEETH?" THE DENTIST SAYS: "HOW ABOUT A BROWN TIE." KELLY JONES, MUSICIAN

REAL LIFE

physical and mental health. Not only has laughter been proven to trigger the release of endorphins - brain chemicals known for their feel-good properties - and lower the production of the stress hormone cortisol, but it has also been shown to increase our pain threshold, too. And above all else, it's supposed to be fun. As my laughter coach Caroline Carr says to me before we embark on our session: 'We all have a hidden giggle waiting to burst out, don't you think?'

Well no, not me personally, because I am sadly lacking a sense of humour. Weird as it sounds, the television shows, films and situations that make others titter simply don't do it for me. My friends' banter is met with a blank expression and my husband Chris despairs that I don't even find classic comedies such as *Blackadder* funny. I can go for days without so much as raising a weak smile, so the idea of being taught to guffaw by a stranger fills me with dread.

I'm a bag of nerves before Caroline - a jovial 58 year old who trained as a hypnotherapist before qualifying as a laughter coach three years ago - turns up to my house to treat me. I've put on my brightest T-shirt in the hope of projecting a sunny disposition, but can't help but worry I'll be exposed for the perennial grump I am.

'Your sense of humour actually has nothing to do with it,' she says, explaining that she'll chaperone me through a series of exercises while I laugh, regardless of whether I find them funny or not. 'Your body doesn't know the difference between real and pretend laughter, so even if you don't feel like laughing, you will see the benefits.'

**C**onfused, but reassured that I can remain inwardly miserable throughout, I start our warm-up, clapping my hands twice while saying 'Ha ha,' and then pushing them down parallel to the floor three times to the words 'ho ho ho.' A couple of minutes in and I feel like a substandard Santa imposter, but Caroline insists it's essential to expel the stale air from my body before we start. Righto.

With my body primed, I begin my exercises, which mostly entail mimicking decidedly unfunny household chores and chortling while I do them. I take an imaginary duster to clean some pretend windows, polish my computer screen and pretend to do the vacuuming - accompanied by an enthusiastic Caroline, who joins me in laughing like a deranged banshee.

Cringeworthy doesn't begin to cover it. But to my surprise, I find my fake chuckles turning into authentic laughter at the ridiculousness of it all. Apparently this is par for the course, although inevitably, the practice isn't to everyone's liking.

'You're making a conscious decision to be wacky, which some people can feel threatened by,' says Caroline. 'It's important to be open-minded and embrace the playfulness, or it won't work.'

Laughter therapy - or laughter yoga, as its practitioners prefer to call it on account of its emphasis on breathing - was coined in 1995 by Indian doctor Madan Kataria, who found that laughter could be easily stimulated in a group setting, and that it didn't matter if people were genuinely amused because more often than not the fake laughter quickly became real.

The practice soon spread around the world and to date there are over 8,000 laughter clubs in 100 countries, as well as professionals who lead laughter yoga sessions. A raucous chuckle has also been linked to a better functioning heart and the increased flow of

'WE BOTH LAUGH LIKE DERANGED BANSHEES'

oxygen to the body and brain, honing both our concentration levels and physical fitness. In fact, the benefits to overall wellbeing are believed to be so great that, in April, laughter therapy was introduced by the University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust to tackle the staffs' soaring number of sick days.

Back at my house of fun, Caroline and I move on to high-fiving each other while laughing as hard as we can. We're making such a racket that I pray the neighbours are out. Then we pretend to be posh old men with nasal chortles and stick our tongues out. It's so infantile - I feel like Mr Tumble on acid, and can't help but wonder what my daughter Rosie, four, and son Felix, two, would make of it.

'I'm sure they'd love to join in,' says Caroline. 'Children laugh constantly and don't care how silly they look. It's only as we grow up and get bogged down by negative self-awareness and analysis that we stop, which is a shame because laughing opens up new neural pathways in the brain and helps us focus better.'

**N**ext, we titter silently, which I am told is harder work and therefore better cardiovascular exercise. I cast my mind back to the times I stifled giggles in history class at school. I realise I haven't laughed like this since I was 15, which, ironically, makes me feel sad.

Caroline says 10 minutes of deep belly laughter a day is enough to reap the benefits. She suggests I do this by chuckling at my computer, forcing a chortle as I'm folding the laundry or, if I want to save my blushes while I'm out and about, holding my mobile phone to my ear and conducting a fake but hysterical phone call.

Then she makes me stand back to back with her, bend over and wave at her through our legs. Forty-five minutes in and I no longer feel self-conscious, but I am getting tired from the prancing around and jerky breathing. Little wonder Caroline describes laughter therapy as an aerobic workout - the muscles in my face and stomach are aching.

Her eldest patient is 101, but she sees plenty of stressed-out thirty-something women like me, and believes learning to laugh is addictive. 'The more you do it, the easier it becomes,' she says.

As we near the end of the session, the novelty of laughing at my own idiocy is starting to wear off. I can't imagine wanting to do this every week, let alone every day. Yet I feel less stressed and surprisingly relaxed afterwards and suspect that incorporating shorter bursts of laughter - even of the forced variety - into my lifestyle will do me good.

So for the past few days, I've made myself laugh like a maniac whenever I've felt stressed or low and, for at least a few minutes afterwards, I feel better as a result. This old grouch could be converted yet. **F**

#### CAROLINE CARR'S TITTER TIPS

\*Don't analyse. You don't need a reason to laugh - just do it.

\*Cast aside your inhibitions. People are usually too self-focused to judge you.

\*Incorporate laughter into your daily routine. Making a cup of tea? Exaggerate the movements and laugh during each stage.

\*Embrace your inner child. Pull a funny face like a kid and you'll laugh like one, too.

\*Exploit bad moods. Say: 'Ho ho ho, ha ha ha,' furiously for as long as you can. You might find yourself laughing.