

CONVERSATIONS

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Legal highs: laughter yoga

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Editor: I want you to investigate laughter yoga; they claim it gives you a natural high. Emma: Ma'am, it's probably some new-age bollocks invented by an annoyingly joyful yummy mummy who once did a yoga retreat. FFS. No. Editor: 400 words. Hurry up . . .

Hasyayoga, it turns out, was invented in 1995 by Madan Kataria, a doctor in India who created a series of breathing and relaxation exercises that “stimulated merriment for better health”. It is based on the belief that fabricated laughter provides the same physiological and psychological benefits as spontaneous laughter . . . and it definitely sounded like bollocks.

Our teacher walked into the yoga studio, said hello and giggled, one of those forced laughs that people do when they're nervous and nothing is funny. We started with some exercises, saying our name and emitting a forced laugh. It was excruciating, but by the time the third student had said "I'm Zoe, ha ha ha," we started to giggle at the ridiculousness of what we were doing. The teacher was delighted. "This is the point - at first the laughter is simulated, but as you warm up to each other it becomes genuine and contagious."



Emma Freud: "I was overwhelmed with a feeling of intense joy, exhilaration and wellbeing"

We moved into kindergarten-style role-playing, shaking hands with each other and laughing, speaking in gibberish and laughing, then jumping like bunnies and laughing. Each time the laugh began as a cringe-making, forced “ho ho”, before moving into an actual laugh at the ghastliness of the exercise, then broadening out to deep belly-laughing with each other, relishing the joy of it all and the sheer bliss of continued laughing at absolutely nothing. We realised we had been given a licence to play in a non-judgmental and supportive setting.

After working through a series of these bizarre rituals for half an hour we lay on yoga mats for a final exercise - the lying-down laugh. We closed our eyes and, to our surprise, with no stimulus or speech, we laughed without stopping for 12 minutes. It was during this weird time that the high happened.

A high is traditionally caused by the consumption of a substance that convinces your brain that life is better than you had previously perceived it to be. As the laughter poured from my mouth my ribs started to ache and, about eight minutes in, I was overwhelmed with a feeling of intense joy, exhilaration and wellbeing. The substance consumed during that hour was unjudged, prolonged laughter, which released such a tangible flood of endorphins that life felt infinitely better than I had previously perceived it to be. That ecstasy is the definition of a euphoriant high and leads me to believe, unexpectedly, and slightly annoyingly, that laughter yoga should come with a health warning.