

How Clowns Can Share the Soul and Spirit of Laughter Clubs with Seniors

By Jacki Kwan "Elfinya"

Jacki Kwan, LCSW-C, has been a clinical social worker since 1989. She consults with hospitals, nursing homes, health care providers, organizations that deal with specific illnesses (heart, stroke, etc.), as well as PTAs, philanthropic groups and corporations. Jackie is also the clown "Elfinself" aka "Elfi." She has studied at Clown Camp® and recently went on the People to People Ambassadors trip to China with Patch Adams (and Shobi and 42 other clowns!). She travels and gives workshop on Laughter Clubs and Humor and Health. Jackies created HA!HA!LOGY™ as a way to cheerfully bring the universally recognized benefits of humor to the healing process.

Certified Laughter Leader

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"I love smiles and laughter. If one wants more smiles in one's life, one must create the right conditions for it. Certainly not through anger, jealousy, extreme greed or hatred, but through loving kindness, an open mind, and sincerity."

Dalai Lama

I love smiles and laughter too! Like you, I want more smiles in my life and I'm always on the lookout for ways to create the right conditions for it. What the Dalai Lama is describing is both in the heart of a clown and in the spirit of Laughter Clubs. As a Caring Clown and as a Laughter Club Leader, I have embraced this most delicious union. I am inviting you to do the same!

For the past 15 months I have been leading Laughter Clubs in nursing homes. Here's what some of the seniors are saying:

"Marvelous! You are really interested in seeing people move around and people see that they can do things."

Rhoda, Age 71

"I like you because you make me laugh and feel good inside."

Ruth, Age 86

"I like it! It makes the world better."

Frank, Age 80

"The club speaks for itself. We need more Laughter Clubs. I want people so involved that we won't be able to keep them quiet! You keep people happy. Keep them with a smile on their faces. This is good because everybody is in a happy mood."

Helen, Age 84

"It's everything to me!"

Minnie, Age Undisclosed

"I like it! It's enjoyable. You laugh and I laugh with you!"

Celia, Age, "Gettin' There!"

"When you are a kid, you laugh for no reason. Now, we need so much excitement before we laugh. But who will tell you a joke 365 days a year?.....If you want to laugh 30 days a month, 365 days a year, then you better learn to laugh for no reason."

Dr. Madan Kataria

Dr. Madan Kataria, a family practice physician in India, created "Laughter Clubs" in 1995. He wrote a book, describing this therapeutic laughter method entitled "Laugh for No Reason." These Laughter Clubs are now spreading throughout the United States and Canada, thanks to the work of Steve Wilson, a psychologist from Ohio, and Karyn Buxman, a mental health nurse from Missouri. Together they have created the World Laughter Tour Inc., and I am proud to be the first member of the Board (or as Steve Wilson writes "Bored!") of Directors. The three of us are conducting workshops to train folks to lead Laughter Clubs using this method of laughter exercises, which in part, borrows from Yoga health practices.

The training is co-sponsored by a community college, and has been approved for the continuing education of nurses, social workers, counselors, and activity and recreation therapists. Completion of the training leads to the designation of Certified Laughter Leader.

I currently lead two to four laughter clubs per week in a nursing home and an assisted living facility. Bringing this form of exercise and fun to these folks is the most rewarding form of therapy I've ever facilitated! This is what I've noticed:

- 1) Joy in an often joyless setting.....for residents who are often bored, depressed, and lonely, AND for staff who are often unsung heroes and angels.
- 2) Fewer tremors of folks with Parkinson's disease while doing the laughter exercises.
- 3) Residents connecting with each other through laughter.
- 4) Improved coordination.
- 5) Some of the Alzheimer's patients remember the exercises from week to week.

These observations are echoed by other laughter leaders in long term care facilities across the country.

Here's my take: Laughter brings people into the present moment where there is no pain, fear or anger.....only joy, hope and love.

I tell the residents that our bodies don't know the difference between thinking about doing something and actually doing something. I ask those with limited mobility to think about or visualize themselves doing the movements. One of the residents has MS and can only move a couple of fingers on one hand. She loves the Laughter Club and says. "It makes me forget." WOW! Even a nanosecond of relief from pain and problems seems to make a difference to these folks. The residents tell me they look forward to attending week after week.

Brains and bodies may be compromised but spirits are still alive, and there's something about this work that elicits that spirit!

Keeping It Simple – It takes a little effort to make a BIG difference!

“Today at the Hebrew Home I decided to bring my banjo. I’m just learning to play and so far can only play “Old MacDonald” and “Shortenin’ Bread!” I figure since clowns are not perfect that I don’t have to play perfectly!! Soooo I arrived at the Home, and took my banjo out of its case. I walked up onto a unit and just off the elevator was a resident who saw the instrument and wanted to play. I gave her my baby banjo and she was in heaven just strumming it! I didn’t have to play a thing!! She was pretending to play a most delicious tune!! She was just strumming and giggling like a kid! WOW! She went on for about ten minutes, seemingly in Nirvana! Such joy! Just the thought of music gave her so much pleasure. Just the presence of that little instrument brought a feeling of glee…… Yipeeeee!”

So, what exactly does a Laughter Club entail?

It is a systematic routine of exercises that are usually done in groups, although I have also done it one-on-one. The method is based on ancient wisdom (Yoga) and the modern science of laughter. Leaders are certified when they have completed a basic 10-hour course of training during which they learn the theory, the philosophical foundation of the therapeutic laughter clubs, and the contra-indications for participation in a laughter session; they are helped to develop important leadership characteristics, and they are coached in the physical aspects of the laughter exercises.

Each laughter session has a beginning, a middle, and an ending. There is a beginning laughter activity, which is always some kind of greeting like a handshake laugh, cocktail party laugh, or a high five laugh. In the middle there are gentle breathing and stretching exercises (since Laughter Clubs are grounded in Yoga) in addition to various laughters, such as bow-and-arrow laughter, arm swinging laughter, argument laughter, and lion laughter. At the end there are three cheers. We also incorporate ideas of sensible living to include lessening of anger, absence of criticism, increase of gratitude, as well as complimenting one another and increasing compassion.

Once the leader has mastered the basic structure and motivation of a session, there is lots of room for creativity. Leaders and club members have invented laughters such as the “ice cube down the back laugh,” the “hot cement at the swimming pool laugh,” and the “hokey pokey laugh.” Members also do a “laughter-sing” with Happy Birthday and seasonal songs.

This is a way to magically combine therapeutic laughter and clowning.

LEADING LAUGHTER CLUBS PROVIDES AN ADDITIONAL TOOL THAT CLOWNS CAN USE TO SPREAD CHEER.

Walt Disney and Uncle Remus' Brer Rabbit said, "*Everyone has a laughing place. Some people just don't take time to find it.*" The Laughter Club is a place we hope everyone will find.

For information and a free brochure about the Laughter Clubs, call 1 (800) NOW LAFF (669-5233) or go to our website: www.worldlaughtertour.com

HA!HA!LOGY at www.hahalogy.com

What is HA!HA!LOGY?

HA!HA!LOGY is directed by Jacki Kwan, chief HA!HA!logist. She trains your staff and volunteers to use humor effectively in a health care setting. Hospitals have departments of Oncology, Radiology, Pathology. Jacki Kwan offers a "department" of

HA!HA!LOGY, a facility-wide therapeutic humor program to enhance the emotional, physical and spiritual health of patients or residents, employees, health care providers and visitors through the use of positive humor.