

India's giggling guru says laugh yourself to good health

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ARTICLE (November 30, 2012) : India's "guru of giggling" Madan Kataria, who has got thousands of people guffawing globally in pursuit of better health, has an unexpected confession - he hasn't got a very good sense of humour. "But you don't require one to laugh," chortles Kataria, founder of "Laughter Yoga", a movement that has attracted fans worldwide including celebrities Oprah Winfrey and Goldie Hawn. Kataria - who travels constantly spreading his "laugh with no reason" gospel - has been hired by multinationals from computer giant Hewlett-Packard to automaker Volvo to hold team-building laughter sessions. Now he is setting up a "Laughter University" in the southern city of Bangalore on land donated by a building contractor and \$250,000 from an anonymous tycoon. "In three months, we will start building and by the end of 2013, we will be up and running. We want to build a worldwide community headquarters of laughter yoga," he said. Kataria envisions holding laughter sessions and conferences at the centre and setting up an alternative medicine unit to expand medical knowledge about the beneficial health effects of laughter. Studies already suggest laughter releases feel-good endorphins, the brain chemicals that are linked with a sense of well-being. "Laughing is the healthiest thing you can do - it's the best medicine," said the towering, bald 58-year-old, whose movement has inspired thousands of "Laughter Clubs" in India and around the world from Beirut to Dublin. Kataria also holds laughter sessions in schools, prisons, hospitals and retirement homes, and a few years ago testified before a US Senate committee that laughter yoga could help the country cut healthcare costs. A qualified doctor, he hit upon medical literature advocating laughter as a stress-buster and remedy for other ailments. In 1995 he decided to "field-test" his findings before setting up the first of his clubs. Kataria started with four strangers in a Mumbai park. They stood in a circle and "laughed like hyenas," he recalled. Numbers soon swelled to around 50. They recounted jokes but realised they didn't have enough gags - then he found that the body was unable to distinguish between fake and genuine laughter with both producing the same "happy, healing chemistry". "Anyway, fake laughter turns into real laughter after a few moments. Try it," he said. He persuaded his group to laugh with him for one minute with no reason. It stretched into 10 minutes as the laughter turned infectious - and the Laughter Yoga movement was born. "Laughter is more about social connection and bonding than something being funny," Amit Sood, a doctor at the Mayo Clinic in the United States, told AFP. "Studies show all kinds of benefits from laughter from better immunity and coping skills, lower stress, better relationships to improved digestion," he said. Many Indian parks now host sessions every morning with peals of laughter ringing out from people standing in groups. "It relaxes me. If I laugh in the morning, the rest of the day goes well," said Lisa Singh, 39, one regular "laugher" in New Delhi. Kataria, who runs his non-profit Laughter Yoga Institute with a dozen employees from his Mumbai home, says one needs a full 15-to-20 minutes of giggling daily to reap the full benefits. Researchers believe it may be the use of abdominal muscles in laughing that triggers the release of endorphins - a phenomenon also associated with exercise, such as running. "It's not enough to just watch a funny movie because you just laugh a few seconds at a funny line - you need to laugh for a stretch to get the rewards," Kataria said. Kataria was the youngest of 14 children from a poor farming family in the state of Punjab. Six siblings died as medical help was too far away and his mother set her heart

on him becoming a doctor. She sold her gold bangles so he could go to medical school. He qualified as a physician but was more drawn to acting and admits he was a "bit of a showman". "My family was rather disappointed - but now they have seen how big Laughter Yoga has become, they're proud," he said. His talent to engage people came across at a recent financial analysts' team-building session in New Delhi. He stretched his arms out and led off with his signature "tee-hee, ho, ho" that finally gave way to unrestrained bellows. There were a few nervous titters, then within minutes the room was engulfed by laughter and some people were wiping away tears. "Laughter is contagious - like yawning," said Kataria who intersperses the merriment with deep breathing yoga exercises and stretching. "We need to laugh to help us deal with life, which can be very difficult," he said, briefly sounding serious. "When you laugh you're joyful - you're living in the moment."

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