

# Feature

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A STOURBRIDGE laughter yoga instructor has kept people smiling throughout the pandemic by taking her sessions online.

Coronavirus lockdowns over the last year have taken their toll on many, thrusting problems such as loneliness, isolation and depression to the fore, but those who have tried it have hailed laughter yoga a surprising solution to the sadness.

Former champion racing cyclist 'Merrie' Maggie Thompson has spent more than a decade promoting the health benefits of laughter yoga - which combines laughter exercises with yoga breathing techniques.

Her regular sessions in Wordsley, Dudley and Halesowen had a dedicated band of followers but when the Covid pandemic hit - laughter for many people across the country was in short supply.

Stourbridge-based Maggie was determined to continue to spread cheer - something needed more than ever as lockdown hit - so she took her sessions online, inviting people to try out smiling for stress relief via Zoom.

The sessions, which encourage participants to lose their inhibitions and giggle and mime their way through fun, childlike exercises and movements, proved a big hit and brought laughter back to people across the borough and beyond who were able to tune in.

Maggie, a grandmother of six, said: "Being able to share laughter on-line has been a godsend, keeping my club members in touch with each other through laughter, helping to reduce the feeling of isolation."

In fact, the free classes have proved such a hit she's keeping them going on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 5pm for 20-30 minutes.

With the easing of restrictions Maggie is also getting back to in-person smiling sessions and will be holding an outdoor class on Friday, July 16 from 5-6pm in Mary Stevens Park, Norton, and next month she plans to host a session in King George V Park, Wordsley.

Maggie, 69, became fascinated with laughter yoga in 2009 after playing host to a session at Age UK Dudley where she was the LEAP over 50 co-ordinator, organising gentle exercise classes for older people.

She said: "I was absolutely blown away. I'd never come across anything so wonderful in

# Laughter yoga kept spirits up amid crisis



my life."

Following the event's success, she began incorporating elements of laughter yoga into her work before training as a laughter yoga leader in 2010 and starting her own laughter clubs in July 2011.

In 2013, she became a certified laughter yoga teacher and in 2017 was presented with a laughter yoga ambassador award by the founder of the laughter yoga movement Dr Madan Kataria for helping to bring more joy into people's lives.

She said of the movement: "It changed my life completely. I wish I'd known about it when I was a lot younger. It would have been very helpful. It helps to reduce stress and boosts your immune system. It's so powerful, it's so exhilarating."

Maggie has even participants logging in to laugh from as far afield as Berkshire, East Sussex, and even the east coast of America.

One of the participants, a retired senior nurse lecturer Georgina Wood who trained as a laughter yoga leader with Maggie before lockdown, said: "It's been a lifeline during the pandemic and kept my own and others spirits up."

Maggie has also hosted laughter yoga team building sessions on Zoom during the pandemic to help businesses keep staff connected and happy.

The laughter yoga movement began in 1995 in India when Dr Madan Kataria started the first club with just five people in a public park in Mumbai.

It has since developed into an internationally renowned exercise programme for health and wellbeing - with more than 20,000 free social laughter clubs in more than 100 countries.

Described by its founder as preventive and therapeutic, laughter yoga is suitable for anyone who wants to bring more joy to their life.

On his website Dr Kataria says: "It is like an aerobic exercise and best cardio workout. It is like a breathing exercise for those suffering from bronchitis and asthma. Laughter Yoga releases endorphins which are natural pain killers, that can help those suffering from arthritis, spondylitis, chronic migraine headaches, chronic pains, fibromyalgia, autoimmune and chronic inflammatory diseases. "It unwinds the negative effects of stress and strengthens your immune system. If you laugh every day, you will not fall sick easily."

"If you have chronic health conditions you will heal much faster. Laughter yoga increases oxygen to your body and brain, and makes you feel healthy and energetic. It is a great exercise for team building, peak performance, creativity and emotional intelligence."

The official laughter yoga website says it can promote a good mood by releasing endorphins from brain cells, boost the immune system by reducing stress, improve brain function by increasing oxygen in the body and brain, boost self confidence by reducing

inhibitions and shyness and increase emotional intelligence and it adds: "The concept of laughter yoga is based on a scientific fact that the body cannot differentiate between fake and real laughter. One gets the same physiological and psychological benefits."

The site adds that clinical research has proved laughter lowers the level of stress hormones (epinephrine, cortisol etc) in the blood.

Various medical research papers have also confirmed the positive effects of laughter on stress and laughter yoga teachers across the world have shared stories of the benefits they say have resulted from laughter.

Among them London based Lotte Mikkelsen, a laughter ambassador and laughter yoga master trainer who credits laughter yoga with helping her enjoy great health despite having been diagnosed with MS (multiple sclerosis).

The story echoes the story of arthritis sufferer Norman Cousins who claimed in his book Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient that 10 minutes of hearty laughter while watching funny movies gave him two hours of pain free sleep and resulted in significantly reduced inflammation and pain.

Meanwhile, Maggie has been collecting her own data on the feel-good factor of laughter yoga - although she believes more scientific research into the effects laughter has on the body would be beneficial.

She describes the benefits as

"phenomenal" among those who have embraced laughter yoga and says they are available for all to seize - yet the majority of class participants, 75-80 per cent, tend to be women - she said.

"It tends to appeal to women more... but there are a lot of really good male laughter yoga teachers."

Keen to see more men try it out, she added: "I'd love to do it for a football team."

Although she concedes "everybody is different and laughter yoga doesn't suit everybody" - for Maggie herself it has been transformative.

She said: "I don't get quite so stressed out about things anymore. It's like an aid to mindfulness. It just helps people feel more positive. When you laugh you can forget all your troubles."

A study by the Beano revealed people in Dudley laugh just 17 times a day compared with those in Sunderland, dubbed the UK's laughter capital, where people chuckle, on average, 33 times a day - 43 per cent more than the national average.

For Maggie and her laughter yoga chums, however, laughter is a priority and a "great way to start the day".

As well as her classes she's a regular on the Daily Giggle Channel on Facebook which people can join in from 8am on week days and 9am on weekends.

To tune in go to facebook.com/thedailygigglechannel and to find out more about Maggie's sessions call her on 07565 218567 or email maggie@merriemaggie.co.uk.



Laughter yoga teacher 'Merrie' Maggie Thompson