

# Up for a laugh?

Laughing makes us feel good but is it something you can learn? Fanny Blake joins a laughter club



**In a small room, cooled by a large fan, seven other adults and I ran around barefoot, each with a hand raised like a shark's fin in front of our face, making eye contact with each other, and laughing "like a shark". How crazy does that sound?**

My self-consciousness had hit an all-time high but I threw myself into the proceedings nonetheless. I've no idea whether the others were laughing from enjoyment or embarrassment, or whether they were faking it (it doesn't matter – apparently the body can't tell the difference anyway), but laugh we did.

I had come to the Edinburgh Laughter Club, run by Jo Bluett of Laughter For Health. The group had been recommended as a way of enlivening a solitary stay in the city, and to energise me and boost my creativity. It sounded good, so why not give it a try?

I spoke to Jo on the phone first and liked the sound of her. She was friendly, intelligent and laughed a lot (but not enough to make me doubt her sanity). Reassured, curious, but sceptical too, the

following morning I turned up five minutes before the session was due to start. In an airy reception area, one smiley young woman was waiting: a regular who told me she had felt the effects of her first session for two days afterwards. My expectations went up a notch.

Jo appeared and showed the two of us upstairs. Thinking we were the entire class, to say I was apprehensive was an understatement. I was infinitely relieved when footsteps sounded on the stairs just as Jo began to tell us about the benefits of laughter.

We lose our readiness to laugh aloud as we grow up. Whereas children can laugh more than 300 times a day, most

adults might manage on average 14 times. But the health benefits of laughter are legion, from reducing stress and lowering blood pressure, to encouraging positive thinking and encouraging communication. Moreover, ten minutes of belly laughing are apparently equivalent to 30 minutes on a rowing machine and they exercise the facial muscles too. Why wouldn't you want to?

By this point there were eight of us, men and women aged between about 30 and 60, all smiling (nervously, in my case) at each other. First we were to introduce ourselves "laughter style". My heart sank. One by one we said our name, and at each one we laughed as if it was one of the funniest things we had ever heard. For some reason, it was!

Time for the "brain gym". This was made up of exercises aimed at reasserting the dominance of the right/creative side of the brain over the left. We didn't pat our

**"We were soon running around the room, discovering our inner children"**

heads and rub our tummies but the exercises were the same sort of confusing thing. After about three or four different sequences of movement, I was completely lost but as we were all so busy laughing at ourselves it couldn't have mattered less.

Next, "laughter yoga", a practice that originated in Mumbai in 1995, thanks to Dr Madan Kataria. Were we going to be asked to laugh and stand on our heads? No, thank goodness. Instead we were soon running around the room, pretending to be animals, as we rediscovered our inner children. At this point, mine was quivering in a corner, with an eye on the clock and the exit sign. Pretending to be a laughing chicken or a penguin didn't come easy, but by the time we got to laugh like a shark, the whole thing seemed so absurd, my faked laughter had become genuine.

Finally, and this was the best bit, we relaxed. Lying on the ground in a circle



with our heads towards the centre, Jo asked us to shut our eyes and laugh. "It doesn't matter if you don't laugh at all." Phew! That was all right, then. "It doesn't matter if you laugh in fits and starts, or whether you laugh longer, louder or more quietly than the others. Let's just see what happens."

We laughed for eight-and-a-half minutes without stopping! And I laughed too. Laughed and laughed quite genuinely, until my cheeks ached and tears were squeezing out of my closed eyes. I laughed because I couldn't quite believe what I was doing, I laughed because the others' laughter was infectious. But who cares why I laughed? It felt great.

After more traditional yogic relaxation, the class was over. I left that building on cloud nine with a feeling of wellbeing that lasted well into the next day. All that laughter, for whatever reason, did make a difference. What's more, I want to go again! This learning to laugh business is not half as crazy as it sounds. For details of Jo Bluett's class, see [laughterforhealth.co.uk](http://laughterforhealth.co.uk). Find a local teacher via [laughteryoga.org](http://laughteryoga.org) or [laughternetnetwork.co.uk](http://laughternetnetwork.co.uk) w&h

## NATURE'S TONIC

**Laughter is proved to be good for our health because it:**

- + Releases endorphins that give a natural high
- + Reduces stress and tension
- + Boosts the immune system
- + Exercises the diaphragm, lungs and stomach, toning muscles
- + Can bring down blood pressure
- + Raises heart rate to stimulate blood circulation and uptake of oxygen