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Force A Laugh; It's Worth A Little Effort

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S T. PETERSBURG - So, there they all were, 20 or so otherwise serious-minded businessmen and businesswomen, all networking like mad at 7:45 a.m. Thursday at the Yacht Club.

But on this sunny morning, the breakfast club members could be found standing in a circle clapping their hands and chanting: ``Ho-ho; Ha-ha-ha," over and over.

They also smelled imaginary roses, swung limp arms performing the ``elephant laugh," bared fangs and stretched tongues in the vaguely menacing ``lion laugh."

They were self-conscious, sure, but after forcing laughter as attitude adjustment, breathing exercise and social interplay as directed by psychotherapist Sandy Herskowitz, many were soon laughing for real, which brings health and emotional bonuses.

Such are the underpinnings of a tittering, chortling, guffawing movement born in India, and codified by physician Mandan Katarian. In his book, ``Laugh for No Reason," he terms the practice, not surprisingly, ``yogic laughter."

Motto: This Is No Laughing Matter

It is a movement of many mottoes: ``Simulated laughter becomes stimulated laughter;" and, ``Laughter is serious business." There are more.

Soon there were ``Laughter Clubs" all over India. Three hundred and 400 people would meet in parks each morning before work - to laugh enthusiastically together. It's something about hearty laughs, exuberance and endorphins - but it seems to get their day off to a fine start.

Then, American psychologist Steve Wilson worked with Katarian to found the World Laughter Tour (www.worldlaughtertour.com) and North American Laughter Clubs, and began training people as ``Certified Laughter Leaders" - no, really - who are then sent forth to form clubs across the land.

With the inevitable result these doubled-over disciples are multiplying like Mary Kay reps. It was inevitable their giggling gospel would spread to the Bay area.

Among them is Donna Cutting, a speaker and humor consultant who's paid to bring laughter to corporate meetings coast to coast. She played second banana for CLL classmate Herskowitz at Thursday's breakfast.

It's A Movement

Both women have been certified. So have several others. Soon we won't be able to get 7-Eleven coffee without first elbowing our way through howling Laughter Club meetings on every corner.

Herskowitz has spent a professional lifetime working with troubled and abused children, even working with traumatized inner city kids who've witnessed killings.

So she can use the odd chuckle now and again herself. And she wholeheartedly believes in the usefulness of laughter therapy with young people, and is working with Pinellas public schools to help kids through such challenges as the state's annual FCAT exams.

And she, Cutting and others in the movement fully believe in the ultimate impact of the group's philosophy ("Think globally; laugh locally") on history, including: "World peace through laughter."

"Do I think if enough people get together laughing we'll avoid war with Iraq? No," admitted Cutting. "But I do think I can change my consciousness, and maybe a few others', and over time..."

May 4, it seems, is World Laughter Day. (Who knew?) There'll be big Laughter Club meetings around the world, including one on the Capitol lawn in Washington, and one in St. Petersburg - details to be announced.

For these folks, it's not necessary of course, but let's hope there's something to laugh about.

This story can be found at:

<http://tampatrib.com/News/columns/MGAQ7MCWADD.html>