





ARE YOU HAVING A LAUGH?

Laughter schools are being touted as anxiety-busters in our stressed society. Self-confessed grump Marianne Halavage went along to see if there was anything to really smile about

SHARON Miller has a strange confession. When she was wee she hated the dimples on her cheeks so much that she tried to fill them in with builder's putty. It didn't work, which is just as well given her work as a laughter therapist. In this role, Miller can liberate me – or so she says – from the charge, often hurled my way, that I take life too seriously. Even strangers pass me in the street and urge me to “lighten up, hen. Smile, why don't you.” Naturally, I frown miserably at them and walk on by.

I'm standing opposite Miller in a low-ceilinged, dimly lit hall in the west end of Glasgow. If I'm being honest, it's the last place I want to be; I'm doubtful Miller's workshop can squeeze so much as a snort out of me. Still, as this small framed, blue eyed woman of 40 – who looks younger than my 27 years – pumps my hand up and down, I can't help but grin back and marvel jealously at those cheeky dimples.

Laughter workshops are a new wellbeing fad, and in recent years many have sprung up in Britain. There is everything on offer from comedy and improvisation clubs to clowning clubs and laughter-obics. The LaughterNetwork, founded in 2004, now has 27 laughter therapists running workshops

across the country. All are marketed as anxiety-busters and a means of connecting with others in our supposedly stressful, fragmented society.

Miller runs sessions that mix the games she once taught to drama students (she has a diploma in music and drama) with laughter yoga – a practice she first learned about while listening to a radio phone-in show a few years ago. But I am pleased to learn that Miller drops “yoga” from the title of her workshops because, she reckons, it misleadingly connotes standing on one's head. Thankfully, the similarity lies only in the deep breathing.

Awaiting Miller's talents today are 14 female participants, two men and me – the grumpy, sceptical one. Some have medical reasons for being here; some have social reasons; and some are just here for a laugh. We are sitting on chairs in a big circle, which Miller skips around saying: “My papa used to tell me, ‘Aw hen, you're awfully serious. You need to lighten up.’”

Oh yeah, I think – sounds familiar. “They say you teach what you need to learn,” she explains. She must have learned her craft well because I can feel my nervous tension ease as she beams a thousand-watt smile at us.

Miller has been running her laughter circles for just over three years but



the concept of laughter therapy has been around since 1995. It all started with Doctor Madan Kataria from India, who had been studying the healing effects of laughter. He decided to start a “laughter club” but the format of people telling jokes to each other floundered because the quips quickly turned vulgar or derogatory. Instead, Kataria attempted to foster participants’ innate, childlike laughter with a series of exercises he conceived with his yoga teacher wife, Madhuri – roughly equivalent to the games we’re playing with Miller tonight.

Personally, I’m still not convinced. Yes, I see truth in the oft-quoted statement (unfounded by science) that children laugh 400 times a day, adults only 15. Yes, I see proof in child-like adults who are happier than me, such as the Dalai Lama, who seems to never stop giggling. I even see proof that, among friends, laughter is contagious. But never have I seen a room full of strangers belly-laugh on command. I just don’t think this workshop can make me laugh. And I have the lingering suspicion that I’m being filmed for *You’ve Been Framed*.

Still, under Miller’s instruction, we will at least give it a try. First, we are to run around the circle, looking each other in the eyes, grinning manically and introducing ourselves by the funny nicknames we’ve come up with. Miller, of course, goes by the nickname Dimples. A cheery blonde woman jogs up to me. “Hello Cupcake, I’m Smiley,” she says, grinning sheepishly. “Hello Smiley, I’m Marianne, I mean, I’m, er, Cupcake,” I chorus back, as my face turns a shade of pink. The childlike half of me thinks it’s actually a wee bit funny. The grumpy half – the one that’s more visibly red-faced – wants the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

But I’m beginning to loosen up. For the next game we are to mime along to a song Miller reckons we might recognise, Charles Jolly’s 1920s music hall hit *The Laughing Policeman*. You know the one: a whole two minutes and 36 seconds of HO-HO-HO-HO-HO-HO-HOs and HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HAs.

Miller begins HO-ing and HA-ing along to the track, using her whole body to laugh. She throws her arms in the air, doubles over at the waist and slaps her thighs hard, all the while radiating what seems to be pure, undiluted joy from her eyes, mouth and dimples. I have been half-heartedly miming along until now, stopping every now and then to check nobody’s laughing specifically at me. I watch everyone miming along with Miller – arguably the most ridiculous thing I’ve seen in my adult life – when, suddenly, I feel this weird burst of merriment rising up from inside. Up, up it goes. My mouth opens and, and ... there’s this weird noise coming from my mouth. I’m actually laughing – genuinely letting loose with the chuckles. Before long, I can’t stop myself bellowing, HA-HA-HA-HA ...

SMILER, who I met earlier and who goes by the real name Pamela White, is guffawing too. This is White’s second laughter workshop and she’s back because, she says, the first one profoundly changed her life. Due to a difficult childhood, White has a long history of depression and anxiety and has been in receipt of counselling treatment for years. She used to only wear black and had pretty much shut herself off from the world. “For years I separated myself from people and I was dead cold,” she says, beaming a smile. “At that first class I felt

human warmth for the first time in years. Words fail me to describe how touching it was. It has totally transformed my life.”

Since that class a few months ago, White has begun to read books about spirituality and inner strength, and everyone around her has said she is a new woman. According to her aromatherapist, her aura has even altered for the better. “I’d always felt suicidal,” says White, no longer in black but wearing a bright, floral-pattern chiffon top. “But it’s completely out of my head now. I’m so infused with life. I love it and I love everybody.”

“I’ve been on antidepressants and I just wish other people who took them would go to things like this. The pharmaceutical companies would go bust. This touches your soul and it’s your soul that’s damaged when you’re depressed or anxious. Something like this completely cleanses you. You just feel uplifted. It’s a high that you can’t come down from.”

Miller, like White, has experienced the health benefits of laughter via her workshops, especially the first one in 2006. A few days earlier, the block of flats she lived in had gone up in flames and she was hospitalised with carbon monoxide poisoning. The first workshop she led fell a few days after she was discharged. “That first night was such a joy for me,” Miller says. “At the end of the night I thought I should have paid everybody or given them their money back. They had no idea what had happened in my life, and I just felt like taking that session was exactly the healing I needed.”

The so-called healing benefits of laughter can surely be no more profoundly demonstrated than in the case of the now deceased New York journalist, Norman Cousins. Cousins claimed he healed himself in 1964 from a degenerative disease by laughing at Marx

Previous pages, having a right good laugh are, clockwise from top, Sharon Miller, Johnathan, Ken Gardner, Shona, Sheila Roberts, Ruth Mills and writer Marianne Halavage. Workshop participants are encouraged to play games to get the giggles going, above

PHOTOGRAPHS: KIRSTY ANDERSON

Brothers films. "I made the joyous discovery that 10 minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anaesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep," Cousins reported in his 1979 book *Anatomy Of An Illness*. "When the pain-killing effect of the laughter wore off, we would switch on the motion picture projector again and, not infrequently, it would lead to another pain-free interval." Though Cousins was plagued with other illnesses for the rest of his life, he continued to believe in a "laugh-cure", and wrote books and articles on the subject.

In the 1980s, American medical researcher Doctor Lee Berk found that mood-elevating and immunity optimising hormones increased substantially in people who knew they were about to watch a funny video. Another of Berk's studies found that people who anticipate experiencing mirthful laughter have dramatically reduced levels of the stress hormones cortisol, adrenaline and dopac. Berk's latest study, reported in *Science Daily* last year, concluded that cheerful laughter can markedly lower the risk of heart disease associated with diabetes mellitus and metabolic syndrome.

Back in Glasgow, we're putting these and other wellbeing theories to the test. My favourite game of the evening, which makes me giggle until my jaws ache, is *Pass The Parcel*, to the frantic background tune of *Yakety Sax*, the *Benny Hill* Theme. We write a funny word on a piece of paper, pop it into a bag then pass the bag around until the squealing music stops. The woman across from me pulls out a piece of paper and shouts, "BOTTOM," which elicits a smirk from me. "BOOBIES," the next woman yells, which makes me smile. "JOBBIES," I yell as the music stops and the bag lands in my lap. Everyone bursts out laughing. I feel like a naughty five-year-old and I love it. I can't seem to stop laughing because as soon as I do someone starts me off again.

Ruth Mills, a small-framed Glasgow woman with chin-length grey hair and a baby face, has been coming to Miller's workshops regularly for the last year and claims that they help relieve her muscle and joint pain. "The classes have a real therapeutic effect," she says. "And they have helped build my confidence. You leave feeling energised and with a warm glow. Happier than when you came in."

Like Mills, I leave feeling good about the world and its people. I think back to earlier when Miller distributed laminated cards and had us each read out a message. Mine, from Anne Frank, read: "Everyone has inside of him a piece of good news. The good news is that you don't know how great you can be." As I remember this, a warm feeling of wellbeing hits me and I realise I'm glad I came tonight. I have giggled until my cheeks were sore, and enjoyed a raucous belly laugh or two. As I walk out into the night air I can still feel the warmth of Miller and her laughing strangers.

Sharon Miller will be running lunchtime laughter workshops every Wednesday in March at the G12 Studios in Glasgow. Monday evening workshops will be running from February 15 at the Sports Café in Glasgow. Laughter workshops are also coming soon to Paisley and Stirling. For full details visit www.joyworks.co.uk



Laughter therapist Sharon Miller enjoys a belly laugh

LAUGHTER IN ALL THE RIGHT PLACES

☺ It's easier to smile than to scowl. You use 33 muscles to frown and only 13 to smile (The Washington Post, 1982)

☺ **Laughing helps you lose weight. Laughing 100 to 200 times each day is the cardiovascular equivalent of rowing for 10 minutes** (The Seattle Times, 2005)

☺ Smiling when you feel like crying could cheer you up. Charles Darwin found that facial expressions influence moods in his 1872 work, *The Expression Of Emotions In Man And Animals*

☺ **A sense of humour can add eight years to your life, according to a University of Chicago study.**

☺ Laughter oxygenates your organs, helping treat disease (NaturalNews.com, 2005)

☺ **A good laugh and a long sleep are the best cures in the doctor's book, according to an Irish proverb**

☺ Laughing for 15 minutes a day provides you with the same benefits as two hours of sleep. (humor-laughter.com)

☺ **"There are three things which are real: God, human folly and laughter. The first two are beyond our comprehension. So we must do what we can with the third"** (John F Kennedy, 1963)

☺ Short daily laughter sessions in the workplace improve concentration and productivity and reduce your stress levels (JobBank USA)

☺ **Laughter stimulates your brain. In normal conditions the left and right sides of the brain look different under a PET scan. When you laugh, both sides look almost identical** (Studies in Computational Intelligence, 2008)

☺ "You can fake an orgasm but you can't fake laughter," said Bob Dylan in 2009.

MARIANNE HALAVAGE