

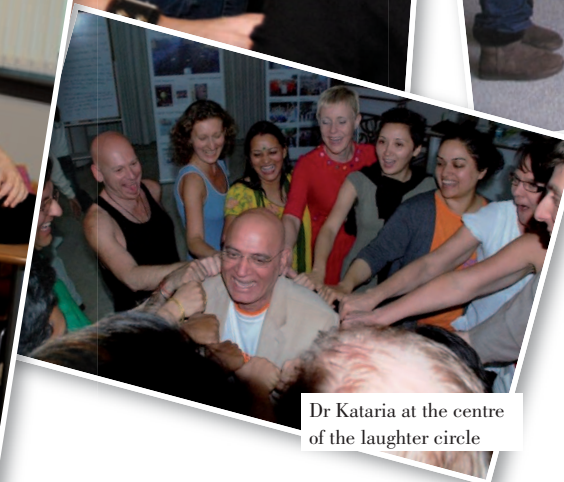


A Joyworks staff awareness event at the Royal Edinburgh hospital, with NHS Lothian and Choose Life

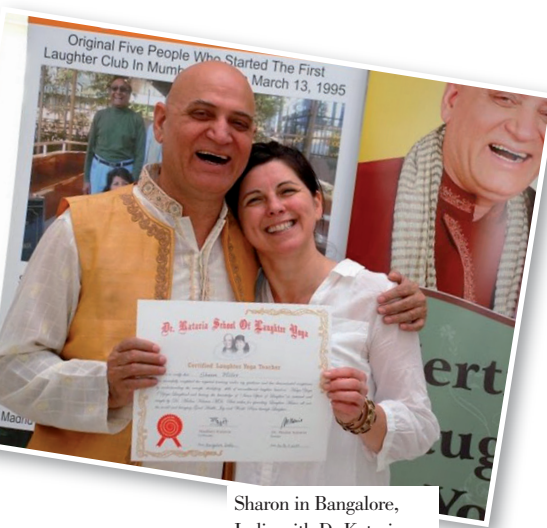
# Spreading Joy to the World



Using Laughter For Confidence project, funded by North Ayrshire Council, at Greenwood Academy, Irvine



Dr Kataria at the centre of the laughter circle



Sharon in Bangalore, India with Dr Kataria, founder of laughter yoga

There's no doubt that a good stint of hearty laughter makes you feel better. Sharon Miller has given this hard to argue against, everyday feature of life an even cheerier purpose, by organising regular laughter clubs, workshops and training events, to teach people how to use laughter to induce positive changes in their health and daily interaction with others.

"The great thing about laughter is that it's quick, easy and free. You don't need to use humour or comedy, as it breaks all language barriers. It's universal, so it doesn't matter what age you are, and it changes your mood instantly. It's like the saying goes; there's no proof that laughter adds years to your life, but it certainly adds life to your years," she says.

Sharon, who has a background in education and drama, launched Joyworks in 2007 after doing a workshop with a group of senior carers. Up until then, the majority of Sharon's work had been issue-based, using drama for conflict resolution and helping people with depression and anxiety. She directed arts projects at Polmont Young Offenders, and ran

drama courses at Cornton Vale Women's Prison. She has also worked with the National Theatre of Scotland and Scottish Opera, and was an associate artist with the Scottish Youth Theatre.

"I went into this first workshop with my joyful box of tricks, and by the end the transformation in the group was incredible, and everyone was high as a kite, including me. As I was driving home, I heard someone talking about laughter therapy on the radio, so I started researching it," she says.

Joyworks began its merry journey as weekly, public workshops in Glasgow, before branching out to Edinburgh and Stirling, then setting up training events for the health, education and corporate sectors. Much of Sharon's work is with charities, including carer organisations, with a recent laughter session held at the Glasgow South East Carers' centre at The Dixon Community, where people with day-to-day caring duties can come and receive support. "These are people that lead really difficult, demanding lives, and some of them are desperate

for a laugh. Carer organisations know that, and they know that the sessions are about lifting people and bringing them together," she says.

Sharon's Joyworks sessions combine the main ingredient of laughter with drama, games, music (including The Laughing Policeman, who could fail to chuckle at that?), relaxation and laughter yoga, a concept founded by an Indian medical specialist named Dr. Madan Kataria, who began a laughter yoga clubs movement in 1995. What started as five people gathered in a park in Mumbai has now spread to 60 countries, and encompasses 6,000 laughter yoga clubs worldwide, with Joyworks being the first laughter yoga organisation of its kind in Scotland. It has recently been awarded funding by NHS Tayside, having previously worked with other NHS boards across Scotland, to train five laughter yoga teachers in Perth, Dundee and Kinross, who will be leading their own sessions for NHS staff. "It's great

that we're bringing the laughter to another area of Scotland. I think the fact NHS staff are now being trained up in laughter therapy is groundbreaking stuff," says Sharon.

Recent research on laughter, carried out by the University of Oxford, showed that it really could be the best medicine, to use the well known expression, as volunteers who sat and had a good, long, belly laugh at examples of slapstick comedy exhibited a higher pain threshold than the volunteers who

had to sit through "boring programmes" (one of which was golf, interestingly enough). Scientists at the university put this reaction down to the laughter producing endorphins, which act as a natural painkiller. Laughter

yoga is said to produce the same, happy, chemical results, but also teaches people to combine the laughter with breathing deeply from the stomach. This oxygenates the blood and major organs, and can improve the body's immune system and limit cortisol, the stress hormone. "The combination of laughter and breathing is a powerful concoction. They say that we now laugh three times less than we did in the 1950s, and we're ten times more stressed. I think coming to Joyworks makes people very aware that something as simple as laughing can improve their health and allow them to de-stress," asserts Sharon.

Aside from the healthy, physical effects of laughter, there is the breaking down of social hierarchies and emotional boundaries between people, which Sharon says she enjoys the most.

"I absolutely love watching complete strangers make a connection through laughter. It all becomes worth it when that one person that was really reticent at the beginning finally cracks a smile. People that come to the workshops regularly say they feel much brighter and more outgoing than they were before."

Sharon says she would love to have Joyworks' facilitators working across Scotland and internationally. "It's really all about finding the child inside. Joyworks came together just after my grandad died, and I often think that he would kill himself laughing at

the fact I'm doing laughter workshops, because he always used to say "You need to lighten up hen, you've got to laugh." You teach what you need to learn, and I think I'm working out my karma with this. I just have this insatiable need to bring people together."

**"There's no proof that laughter adds years to your life, but it certainly adds life to your years."**

**Cheryl Caira talks health, happiness and the power of laughter with Sharon Miller, director of Joyworks laughter workshops...**

[www.joyworks.co.uk](http://www.joyworks.co.uk), Joyworks will be kicking off the Scottish Women in Business Christmas event at Princes Square, Glasgow on Tuesday 13 December.