

Interview with Dr. Madan Kataria – Founder of the Worldwide Laughter Yoga Movement

For Apakhabartv by Vincent D'Silva

During my visit to Malaysia for the 2nd Malaysia Laughter Yoga Conference, I was interviewed by Vincent D'Silva. Here are some of the questions he asked about the Laughter Yoga movement.

What inspired you, a medical doctor, to start the Laughter Yoga movement in 1995?

As a medical doctor, I was deeply concerned about the rising levels of stress and lifestyle-related diseases I saw in my patients. In March 1995, while researching for an article I was writing on "Laughter – The Best Medicine," I came across numerous scientific studies confirming the powerful health benefits of laughter, such as reducing stress, strengthening the immune system, and improving mental wellbeing.

This sparked a simple yet revolutionary idea: *What if we could practice laughter like an exercise, rather than waiting for jokes or comedy?* That's when I decided to test it out in a Mumbai park. I started with just five people, telling jokes and stories to make each other laugh. But very soon, we ran out of good jokes, and some were even becoming offensive.

That's when I had a breakthrough — I realized that the body cannot differentiate between real and simulated laughter. Even if you laugh as an exercise, with a willing spirit, it has the same physiological and psychological benefits. From that day on, we dropped the jokes and started laughing as a group exercise. We combined this with yogic deep breathing and playful activities to create what is now known as *Laughter Yoga*.

What began as a small experiment grew into a global movement that now spans over 120 countries. My medical background gave me the scientific understanding, but it was my desire to spread joy and wellbeing that truly inspired the Laughter Yoga movement.

Do you remember the exact moment or event that made you realize laughter could be healing?

Yes, I remember it very clearly. It was the morning of **March 13, 1995**, in a public park in Mumbai. I was walking with my wife, Madhuri, when I shared my idea of starting a laughter club as an experiment. We approached a few morning walkers and asked if they would like to laugh with us for health reasons — and surprisingly, five people agreed!

As we stood in a circle telling jokes and laughing together, I noticed something amazing — within just a few minutes, people's facial expressions changed, their eyes sparkled, and their body language became more open and relaxed. One elderly man came up to me and said, *"Doctor, I haven't felt this good in years!"* That simple feedback touched me deeply.

But the real turning point came a few days later when I saw that people were continuing to come, not just for fun, but because they felt mentally and physically better. Some even reported sleeping better, feeling less anxious, or managing their pain more easily. That's when I realized — *laughter is not just a reaction to happiness, it can be a cause of happiness*

and healing. It was a profound moment that changed the course of my life and led to the creation of Laughter Yoga.

How did your family and peers react when you decided to champion laughter as a serious wellness program?

To be honest, the initial reactions were mixed. As a medical doctor, people expected me to follow a more conventional path. Many of my colleagues and peers in the medical community were skeptical — they thought I had gone a bit crazy! “*A doctor promoting laughter?*” It sounded strange and even unscientific to some at the time.

But I was lucky to have strong support from my wife, Madhuri. She stood by me from day one. In fact, it was her background in yoga and her belief in mind-body healing that helped shape the Laughter Yoga concept. She was my first follower, and later, my co-trainer and co-founder in spreading the movement.

Over time, as people began experiencing real benefits — lower stress, better mood, improved health — and as research started validating the science behind laughter, the skepticism gradually turned into curiosity and respect. Today, Laughter Yoga is practiced in over 120 countries and has been embraced by doctors, psychologists, educators, and even corporate leaders. But in the beginning, it took courage, conviction, and a little bit of craziness to walk this unconventional path!

Why is laughter important, and why is it important to practice unconditional laughter rather than just laughing at jokes and humor?

Laughter is one of the most powerful tools we have for improving our health and wellbeing. It reduces stress, boosts immunity, improves cardiovascular health, and uplifts our mood almost instantly. But the kind of laughter we usually rely on — from jokes, humor, or entertainment — is *conditional*. It depends on our mood, mindset, and external situations. And let’s face it — life isn’t always funny.

That’s why we promote *unconditional laughter* in Laughter Yoga. This means laughing intentionally, without relying on jokes or comedy. It’s a choice we make — to laugh as a physical and emotional exercise, whether we feel like it or not. The beauty is, the body doesn’t know the difference between real and simulated laughter. Even if you start with pretend laughter, it quickly becomes genuine and gives you all the same benefits.

Unconditional laughter gives you emotional independence. It means you don’t have to wait for something funny to feel happy. You can create your own joy, on demand — even in difficult times. That’s true freedom. That’s why this kind of laughter is not only important — it’s life-changing.

What is the science behind laughter being the best medicine? Can it truly change one's physiology or state of mind?

Yes, absolutely — and that's what makes laughter such a powerful and natural form of healing. Scientific research has shown that laughter has both *physiological* and *psychological* benefits.

Physiologically, when you laugh, your body undergoes a series of positive changes:

- It reduces the level of stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline.
- It stimulates the release of endorphins — your body's natural feel-good chemicals — which relieve pain and elevate mood.
- It improves blood circulation and oxygenates the body and brain, which enhances organ function and boosts energy.
- It relaxes muscles and reduces physical tension for up to 45 minutes after laughing.

Psychologically, laughter shifts your mental state almost instantly. It activates the parasympathetic nervous system — what we call the “rest and digest” mode — which helps you calm down and feel safe. It also increases resilience, emotional balance, and optimism.

The beauty of Laughter Yoga is that we don't wait for laughter to happen naturally. We *create it voluntarily*, and the body responds as if it were real — because the brain doesn't know the difference. Within minutes, people report feeling happier, lighter, and more energized.

So yes, laughter *can* change your physiology and your state of mind. It's a science-backed way to take charge of your health, without side effects — just side benefits!

Laughter Yoga is now practiced in over 100 countries. What do you think makes it so universally appealing?

The universal appeal of Laughter Yoga lies in its *simplicity, inclusivity, and power to connect people beyond language, culture, or background*.

First of all, **laughter is a universal language**. You don't need to understand a word to share a laugh with someone. It breaks down barriers and instantly creates a sense of connection. Whether you're in India, Italy, Iran, or Indonesia — laughter means the same thing and feels the same everywhere.

Second, Laughter Yoga is *easy and accessible to everyone*. You don't need to be physically fit, have a sense of humor, or know yoga. It can be practiced by children, seniors, people with disabilities — even those who are going through emotional or physical pain.

Third, people around the world are dealing with increasing levels of stress, loneliness, and anxiety. In such a world, Laughter Yoga offers a direct, joyful solution — a way to feel better

instantly, without medicine. It brings people together, lifts their spirits, and builds emotional resilience.

Finally, Laughter Yoga creates **community and belonging**. Whether it's in a laughter club, a school, a workplace, or even online — people feel more connected, more positive, and more alive.

That's why, even though it started with just five people in a Mumbai park, today Laughter Yoga has grown into a global movement — because *joy is contagious, and everyone is looking for a reason to smile*.

Can you share a powerful story or testimonial that deeply moved you and affirmed your mission?

There are many touching stories from around the world, but one that I will never forget is from a woman in the United States who was suffering from **severe clinical depression**. She had tried everything — medications, therapy, and even hospitalization — but nothing seemed to work. One day, she came across a Laughter Yoga group and decided to join, just out of curiosity.

In the beginning, she said she couldn't even smile, let alone laugh. But the group welcomed her with warmth and acceptance, and she kept coming back. She told me that in the first few weeks, she just *pretended* to laugh — but gradually, something inside her started to shift. She began to enjoy the sessions, felt lighter, and started laughing for real.

A few months later, she wrote to me saying, “*Dr. Kataria, Laughter Yoga gave me back my life. I am off my medications. I laugh every day. I have friends. And I feel joy again.*” Her message brought tears to my eyes. It was a powerful reminder that what we are doing is not just about laughing — it's about *healing, hope, and human connection*.

Stories like these keep me going. They affirm that Laughter Yoga is not just an exercise — it's a mission to bring joy where there is pain, connection where there is loneliness, and light where there is darkness.

How do people in different cultures respond to the concept of laughing without a reason?

When people first hear about *laughing without a reason*, their reactions can vary widely depending on their culture, background, and mindset. In many cultures, laughter is strongly linked to humor, jokes, or entertainment — so the idea of laughing *as an exercise* without comedy can seem unusual or even silly at first.

For example, in **Western countries**, people are often curious but skeptical. They might ask, “Why should I laugh if nothing is funny?” But once they experience the joyful, playful

environment of a Laughter Yoga session, they quickly feel the benefits — especially the emotional release and stress relief — and their skepticism melts into genuine laughter.

In **Asian cultures**, where emotional expression may be more restrained, people can be hesitant to laugh openly in public. But when done in a group, with structure and safety, even the most reserved individuals start opening up. In countries like Japan, South Korea, and China, Laughter Yoga is thriving in workplaces and wellness programs — because it helps people relieve stress in a socially acceptable way.

In **India and other traditional societies**, the idea of communal laughter fits well with the collective spirit of the culture. Once people understand that it's not about jokes but about health and happiness, they embrace it wholeheartedly.

Interestingly, what I've found across all cultures is this: **once people start laughing together, all differences disappear**. There is a deep human longing for joy, connection, and play — and Laughter Yoga touches that universal core. No matter where you are in the world, the shared sound of laughter creates a sense of unity and peace.

What challenges have you faced in getting people to accept laughter as a legitimate wellness practice?

In the beginning, one of the biggest challenges was that **people didn't take laughter seriously**. They thought, "How can something so simple — just laughing — have real medical or psychological benefits?" Especially as a doctor, when I started promoting laughter as a wellness practice, many of my peers in the medical community dismissed it as unscientific or even frivolous.

Another challenge was **breaking social conditioning**. Most adults have been taught to behave seriously and suppress their emotions, especially in professional or public settings. Laughing without a reason often felt childish or even embarrassing to them. It took time to help people overcome these inhibitions and rediscover their natural, childlike playfulness.

There were also **cultural and religious barriers** in some places. In conservative societies, especially among women, laughing openly in public was seen as inappropriate. We had to build trust gradually and create safe, respectful spaces where everyone could feel free to express joy.

Additionally, when approaching **corporate sectors and healthcare institutions**, I had to work hard to back up Laughter Yoga with solid scientific research. Over time, studies began to emerge showing how laughter reduces stress, improves heart health, boosts immunity, and even enhances productivity and emotional intelligence. That scientific evidence helped gain credibility and open doors.

Despite all these challenges, the transformation I've seen in people's lives — from depression to joy, from isolation to connection — has kept me going. Today, Laughter Yoga is practiced in over 120 countries, and what once seemed like a strange idea is now part of wellness programs, hospitals, schools, and companies around the world. It's been a long journey, but every smile and every laugh has been worth it.

How can someone with a stressful job or lifestyle incorporate Laughter Yoga into their daily routine?

In today's fast-paced world, stress is one of the biggest silent killers — especially for people in high-pressure jobs. That's why Laughter Yoga is such a powerful and practical tool: *it doesn't take much time, requires no special equipment, and can be done anywhere.*

Here are some simple ways people can incorporate Laughter Yoga into their daily routine:

1. **Start your day with 5–10 minutes of laughter.** Stand in front of a mirror, stretch, take deep breaths, and start laughing — even if it feels artificial at first. Within a minute, it becomes real and sets a positive tone for the day.
2. **Use laughter breaks during work.** Just like coffee breaks, take short “*laughter breaks*” — 2–3 minutes of hearty laughter, clapping, and deep breathing. This quickly reduces stress, recharges your brain, and boosts your energy and mood.
3. **Practice silent laughter.** If you're in an office or public place, you can laugh silently with your mouth wide open and eyes sparkling. It's subtle, fun, and surprisingly effective.
4. **Join a Laughter Club or online session.** Even once or twice a week, attending a group session — in-person or online — helps reinforce the habit and provides social connection and emotional release.
5. **Bring Laughter Yoga to the workplace.** Many organizations now include it in wellness programs, team-building sessions, or morning meetings. It helps employees relax, collaborate better, and stay mentally resilient.

The key is **consistency over intensity**. Just 10–15 minutes a day can shift your emotional state, improve focus, and build inner strength. Laughter Yoga helps you not only cope with stress — it trains you to respond with joy and lightness, even in challenging situations.

What is your advice for people who say they don't feel like laughing or find it difficult to laugh?

This is a very common concern, and I understand it deeply. In fact, when people are stressed, anxious, or going through emotional pain, laughter is often the last thing on their minds. But that's *exactly* when you need it the most.

My advice is: **don't wait to feel happy to laugh — use laughter to *become* happy.** In Laughter Yoga, we say: “*Fake it till you make it.*” Your body doesn't know the difference between real and voluntary laughter. Even if you just go through the motions at first, your brain releases the same feel-good chemicals — like endorphins and dopamine — and your mood starts to shift naturally.

Also, remember: **you don't need a reason to laugh.** You just need the willingness to try. That's why Laughter Yoga uses playful exercises, deep breathing, eye contact, and group connection to help you ease into laughter. You're not laughing *because* you feel good — you're laughing *to* feel good.

If you're finding it hard to laugh alone, try joining a group or online session. When you're surrounded by smiling, welcoming faces, laughter becomes easier and more contagious.

Most importantly, be gentle with yourself. Like physical fitness, emotional fitness takes practice. The more you laugh, the more natural it becomes. And over time, you'll discover that laughter isn't just something that happens to you — it's a skill, a mindset, and a powerful way to heal and uplift yourself from within.

What is your vision for the future of Laughter Yoga?

My vision is to see **Laughter Yoga become a global movement for health, happiness, and world peace**. In a world that is becoming increasingly stressful, divided, and disconnected, I believe laughter can serve as a *unifying force* — a way to bring people together beyond borders, beliefs, and backgrounds.

I want to see **Laughter Yoga integrated into every aspect of society**:

- In **schools**, to help children grow up emotionally resilient and joyful.
- In **corporate workplaces**, to reduce stress, improve productivity, and build positive work cultures.
- In **hospitals and senior homes**, as a powerful complementary therapy for healing and pain management.
- In **communities and social groups**, to reduce loneliness, depression, and social isolation.
- And most importantly, in **daily life** — so people learn to laugh not just when life is good, but *especially* when it is not.

I also envision Laughter Yoga being recognized more and more by the **scientific and medical communities**, supported by ongoing research showing its benefits for mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing.

Ultimately, my dream is to see **a world where people laugh together — not because everything is perfect, but because laughter gives them strength, hope, and the ability to face life with a smile**. A world where we don't just *do* laughter — we *become* laughter.

As I often say: *When you laugh, you change — and when you change, the world changes.*

Do you hope Laughter Yoga will be integrated into hospitals, schools, and workplaces globally?

Yes, that is one of my greatest hopes — and it's already starting to happen. I strongly believe that **Laughter Yoga should be a part of every hospital, school, and workplace in the world** because it addresses one of the biggest challenges of modern life: *stress*.

In **hospitals**, Laughter Yoga can be a valuable complementary therapy. It helps patients cope with pain, anxiety, and depression. It improves immunity, speeds up recovery, and creates a more positive healing environment. Even doctors, nurses, and caregivers benefit from it by reducing burnout and emotional fatigue.

In **schools**, it helps children manage academic pressure, improves their focus, enhances creativity, and boosts emotional intelligence. Laughter Yoga also teaches them valuable life skills — like optimism, resilience, and social connection — which are not taught in textbooks.

And in the **workplace**, it improves employee wellbeing, reduces stress, enhances teamwork, and creates a more joyful and productive work culture. Happy employees are not only healthier — they are also more motivated, innovative, and loyal.

My dream is to see **Laughter Yoga recognized as an essential part of preventive healthcare, education, and corporate wellness**. It is simple, low-cost, and has no side effects — only *side benefits*! With growing awareness and scientific support, I believe it won't be long before Laughter Yoga becomes a global standard for holistic wellbeing.