

Laughter Yoga - The Science Behind Acting Happy

Laughing for no reason is the core philosophy of Laughter Yoga. Simply put, it is the art of laughing for no reason combined with the science of breathing. Another slogan we use in Laughter Yoga clubs is: *Fake it until you make it*. But what is the scientific rationale behind acting happy? Here are some theories that support this philosophy:

The Science Behind Acting Happy

Acting happy can influence our emotional state through a combination of physiological, cognitive, and social mechanisms. By engaging in behaviors associated with happiness, we can potentially increase our actual feelings of happiness over time.

Motion Creates Emotion

“How do you laugh when you’re in no mood to laugh or don’t feel like laughing?” The answer lies in the *theory of motion creates emotion*.

The "motion creates emotion" theory suggests that physical actions or movements can influence and alter emotional states. This concept is rooted in psychology and physiology, emphasizing that how we move our bodies can affect how we feel. It draws from the ideas of Professor William James and Charles Darwin, who both explored the relationship between physical expressions and emotional experiences.

William James' Theory

William James believed that physical expressions, such as facial expressions and bodily movements, precede and reinforce emotional experiences. In Laughter Yoga, the physical act of laughing (even if forced) triggers the emotional experience of happiness and joy. For example, if you smile—even when you don't initially feel happy—the act of smiling sends feedback to your brain, creating a feeling of happiness. In simpler terms, we don’t laugh because we’re happy; we feel happy because we laugh.

The Two-Way Link Between Body and Mind

There is an inherent link between the body and mind. Whatever happens to the mind affects the body, and vice versa.

For example, if you observe sad or depressed individuals, their body language reflects their state of mind—they walk slowly, speak softly, and their movements are sluggish.

Conversely, keeping the body active can positively influence the mind. I remember my father saying, “*If you’re sad, don’t sit idle. Keep doing physical work or go for a walk; you’ll feel better.*” And he was right—staying active always lifts my mood. This two-way connection establishes the foundation of the *motion creates emotion* theory.

Facial Feedback Hypothesis

The facial feedback hypothesis suggests that facial expressions can influence our emotions. For example, smiling can make us feel happier. Studies have shown that people asked to hold a chopstick between their teeth (mimicking a smile) experienced the release of happy chemicals in the brain.

Behavioral Feedback from the Body

Our behaviors and body language can significantly impact our emotions. Engaging in activities associated with happiness, such as laughing, playing, or socializing, can lead to genuine increases in happiness. This concept, known as *embodiment*, highlights how physical actions and postures can influence emotional experiences.

Behavioral Activation

Behavioral activation is a therapeutic technique used to combat depression. It involves engaging in positive behaviors, even when you don't feel like it. For instance, going for a walk, meeting a friend, or doing something creative can lift your mood.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Cognitive dissonance occurs when there is a conflict between attitudes and behaviors. Acting happy, even when you're not, creates internal conflict. Over time, the brain resolves this dissonance by aligning emotions with behavior, resulting in a genuine sense of happiness.

Cognitive Reframing (Positive Affirmations)

Positive affirmations can help reframe negative thoughts and alter emotional states. For example, instead of thinking, "*This day is terrible,*" try saying, "*This challenging situation will pass, and I'll learn from it.*"

In Laughter Yoga, many positive affirmations are practiced during sessions, such as:

- *Very good, very good, yay!*
- *I am happy, very happy, always happy.*
- *I am healthy, very healthy, always healthy.*
- *I am joyful, very joyful, always joyful.*

Social and Environmental Influences

Acting happy can also influence how others respond to us. Positive social interactions can create a reinforcing cycle of happiness. Additionally, being around happy people can unconsciously inspire us to mimic their behavior, which can improve our mood.

How Acting Happy Can Be Applied in Daily Life

- **Smiling on Purpose to Boost Mood:** Even if you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed, try smiling. Research shows that forcing a smile can enhance your mood by sending signals to your brain.
- **Posture and Confidence:** Before a presentation, adopt a "power pose" (hands on hips, shoulders back). This can increase confidence and reduce anxiety.
- **Exercise to Improve Mental Health:** Physical activity, even light stretching or a walk, can release endorphins and improve mood.
- **Laughter Exercises to Reduce Stress:** Engaging in Laughter Yoga can transform forced laughter into genuine joy, reducing tension and releasing endorphins.
- **Clapping and Movement to Increase Energy:** Clapping, combined with chanting ("Ho Ho, Ha Ha Ha"), can invigorate the body and lift energy levels.
- **Dancing to Elevate Mood:** Dancing along to joyful music (e.g., Bollywood Laughter Yoga) triggers dopamine and serotonin, promoting happiness.

Learning from Actors, Athletes, and Soldiers

Actors: Many actors report experiencing real-life emotional changes when portraying strong emotions.

Athletes and Soldiers: Competitive athletes and soldiers often shout or use bold body gestures to psych themselves into a positive, courageous state of mind. These actions reduce fear and boost confidence.

Personal Experiences

- **Leading Laughter Sessions:** Many times, I wasn't in the mood to lead a laughter session, but as I began, my mood shifted, and I felt energized.
- **Bangalore Laughter Club:** A grieving woman initially believed she couldn't laugh after losing her husband. But after attending the Laughter Club, she found that laughing helped her overcome her grief and brought a positive shift in her emotional state.