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UTILIZING THE HOLISTIC APPROACHES OF AI CHI AND LAUGHTER YOGA FOR SELF-CARE AND WELLNESS

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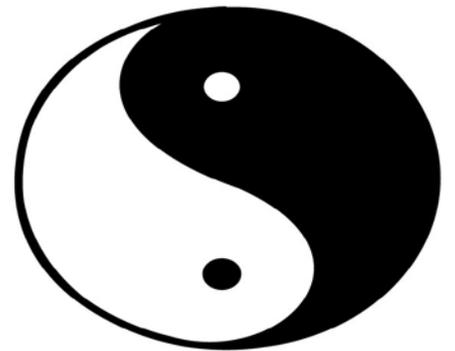
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Utilizing the Holistic Approaches of Ai Chi and Laughter Yoga for Self-Care and Wellness

*Utilizing the Holistic Approaches
of Ai Chi and Laughter Yoga for
Self-Care and Wellness*





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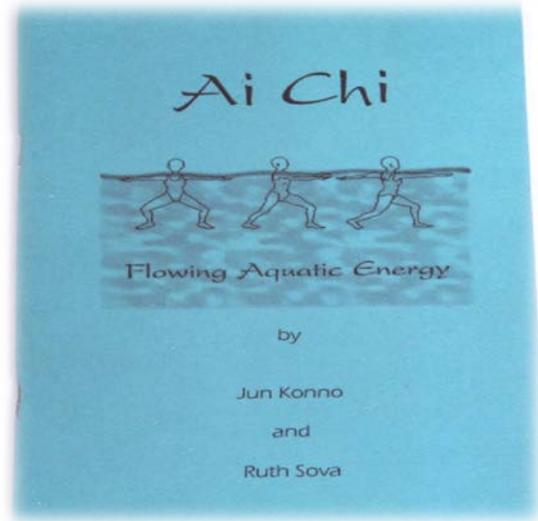
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**Ai Chi - What It Is (Your essence, breath, energy,
spirit, life force)**



Ai Chi is a water movement and relaxation program that has been created to help aquatic practitioners and clients enjoy the water in a flowing, yet powerful progression. It is an efficient exercise program that increases oxygen and caloric consumption simply with correct form and positioning in the water; it is a perfect relaxation technique for highly stressed, over-challenged clients, and it is ideal for creating improved range of motion, balance, and mobility. Ai Chi, created by combining Tai-Chi concepts with Shiatsu and QiGong techniques, is performed standing in shoulder depth water using a combination of deep breathing and slow, broad movements of the arms, legs, and torso. It is an aquatic technique that can be used with groups or one-on-one and will expand the practitioners' ranges. While some protocols can be used with only a specific population group, Ai Chi has been successfully used with conditions of: pain management, arthritis, fibromyalgia, COPD, diabetes, MS, amputee, paraplegic, etc. and with neurological and orthopedic diagnoses and balance deficits. Participants are introduced to basic concepts of "Eastern Thought" such as circular movement, breath control, tranquility, and moving with nature as they experience the upper extremity trunk stability and lower extremity movements, and learn proper pelvic mechanics.

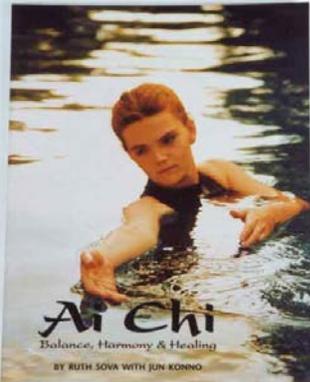


The History of Ai Chi, Written by its Creator, Jun Konno

"I was one of the youngest Olympic swim coaches on the national team around 1980, and watching slow-motion films of sea snakes swimming was part of my daily routine. This was because I thought I could find some sort of inspiration for a new kind of crawl from the snake's movement. I had some particularly excellent crawl swimmers cool-down after every workout where they slither through the water laterally. It resembled a snake's movement, so for lack of a better word, I called this 'snaking.' They really like 'snaking' and said that 'if you do it, you aren't as tired the next day.'

Then one day, a breast-stroker from England named D. Wilkie, who had set an astonishing world record at that time, came to Japan. He was a fervent lover of yoga, and was famous, or perhaps notorious, for taking a lot of time before and after each workout to do yoga, and was regarded as a 'strange athlete.' He told me, 'I know what kind of condition I am in on any given day, by the softness of the long axis of my body.' I thought that perhaps snaking has the same sort of effect. I subsequently resigned as a swimming coach, and forgot all about swimming including snaking. Ten years or so rolled by, and in the fall of 1991 I witnessed Watsu™ for the first time at the Aquatic Therapy Symposium held in Northglenn, Colorado.

What I then witnessed was something entirely different from what I had imagined, which was 'shiatsu performed in water.' I was also very surprised to see the way they were holding other people in the water. The movements were 3-dimensional and very creative. I recalled the snaking that I had forgotten for all these years, and thought, 'this might be the real McCoy!' Watsu™ is normally performed in pairs. The receiver floats horizontally in the water, and the giver stands



upright while holding the receiver in the water. There is bound to be some number of Japanese people, particularly among the elderly, who feel somewhat uncomfortable or awkward with this Watsu position.

The advantage of the Ai Chi program that I introduced is that it can be done alone, without feeling uncomfortable or awkward. Participants can stand alone and achieve excellent benefits. We work on the Meridian Stretch which extends the long axis of the body. By heightening the flexibility in the long axis of the body, one can improve one's posture, and assist in maintaining health because it puts the body and mind into a desirable balance. Also, the Meridian Stretch is far more effective in water, under weightless conditions created by the buoyancy, than on land where the full forces of gravity are present." (Jun Konno, Ai Chi creator)

Purpose

The purpose of Ai Chi is relaxation. In our hectic but sedentary world we found that we needed to exercise so we set aside time to exercise. Now we find we have cumulative stress symptoms and diseases, and we have to set aside time to relax.

Since Ai Chi began we have found anecdotal support for the following responses to the program: flexibility, range of motion, balance, coordination, and general mobility increase. There are increases in metabolism, caloric consumption and blood circulation. The yogic breathing massages vital organs and therefore improves liver efficiency. The water and music are used to locate and free the body of stress and to encourage a state of relaxed awareness which in turn decreases stress, insomnia, depression, anger, fatigue, anxiety, and confusion. Increased mental alertness is another by-product of relaxed awareness. Finally, the slow, flowing movement creates design sense (a feeling that you're doing what the body was designed to do) and therefore, improves kinesthetic sense. Breathing creates most of the benefits.

Breathing

The core of Ai Chi is breathing but it's difficult to convince clients to simply breathe. It doesn't seem effective to them. It's easier, however, to ask them to breathe while moving. That's what Ai Chi does. The basis of the breathing techniques is to bring balance to the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems.

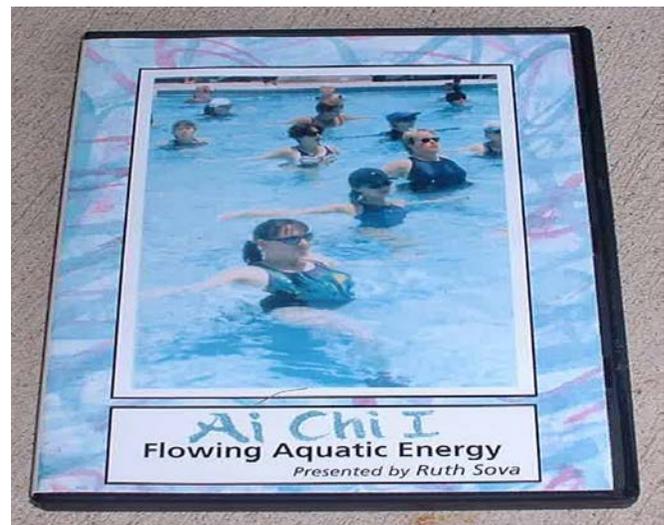
The autonomic nervous system is divided into two branches, the parasympathetic and sympathetic systems. The parasympathetic system involves resting activities, which slow the heart rate, speed digestion, and activate the cleansing processes of the body. The sympathetic system involves activity ranging from responding to emergency to normal physical exercise where the heart rate increases and blood is shunted away from the digestive and excretory organs. For good health the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems should be in balance.

Balance between the parasympathetic and sympathetic systems strengthens the immune system. Unfortunately, our stressful lifestyles elicit a sympathetic response and keep us chronically out of balance.

The balance between sympathetic and parasympathetic systems is reciprocal and determines the overall state of the autonomic nervous system at a given moment. Chronic chest breathing can perpetuate or cause a state of sympathetic nervous system arousal (Rama). Chest breathing elicits a sympathetic system response which, if continued decreases the strength of the immune system. Diaphragmatic breathing elicits a parasympathetic system response which assists in balance and increases the effectiveness of the immune system (Chopra). Ai Chi's deep diaphragmatic breathing can strengthen the parasympathetic system and bring balance to the autonomic nervous system. We Westerners were taught that the autonomic nervous system portion of our functioning lies outside our awareness and runs entirely unconsciously. In accepting Eastern thought we find we actually can affect and control the autonomic nervous system with the one portion of it which is both voluntary and involuntary, the breath.

Physical Movement Principles

Roundness, continuity, naturalness and slowness: slowness allows reflection and self-observation. It is an excellent approach to teaching movement - especially if a person is fearful of changing movement patterns. Clients need to challenge habitual movement patterns through continual self-assessment. There is a Japanese proverb that says "Willow does not break under weight of snow." Stiff or inflexible branches, bones, and psyches will break. The pliant willow doesn't break. Pliant bones, connective tissues and psyches won't break. Ai Chi will make us pliant.



Movements must flow (not forceful in the beginning of a move but of equal force throughout the move). Work towards continuity with a continual flow between exercise movements. Flowing movements integrate mental, physical, and spiritual energy. Ai Chi is flowing, soft, round movements executed with a profound inwardly-directed focus. It requires a non-judgmental attention to self.

Move with the water (muscles and joints will relax and eyes become partly closed). Move naturally until the motions flow easily, with no straining. Ai Chi should be done slowly, gently, and quietly. By eliminating all other thoughts you'll achieve a unity of movement and consciousness. Awareness of the mind's presence in the various parts of the body is taught through the techniques of Ai Chi. With that training we can acquire greater degrees of health, fitness, and longevity than through physical training alone.

Pelvic mechanics and alignment

Correct alignment is crucial. Twists created by the trunk stability movements are neutralizing, cleansing, and organic. They improve digestion and remove sluggishness. They are effective in relieving backaches, headaches, and stiffness in shoulders and neck. After Ai Chi positioning is taught, natural, continual movement and slowness are taught, and then breathing is incorporated.

Advancing Ai Chi

Rather than add new or more moves we progress with Ai Chi by changing the focus. We progress from “soma” to “psyche”, through relaxation, breath-control, meditation, and unity. Relaxation, the primary step, combines comfortable physical postures and proprioceptive awareness to create the ability for focus on breathing. The breathing techniques, using “breath centering” while developing calm, serene, and even breathing, lead to a meditative state. In the meditative state, we attempt to control the conscious mind, and to calm and steady the mind.



The meditative state, after incredible practice controlling the involuntary system and the unconscious mind, can eventually lead to unity, the means for experiencing the deeper levels of being. “Not only do our physical organs contain receptor sites for neurochemicals of thought and emotion, our organs and immune system can themselves manufacture these same chemicals. What this means is that our entire body feels and expresses emotion - all parts of us ‘think’ and ‘feel.’ White blood cells for instance can produce morphine-like pain relieving substances, and they in turn contain receptor sites for the same substances. So if the ovaries, bowels, and heart make the same chemicals as the brain makes when it thinks, where in the body is the mind? The mind is located throughout the body” (Christine Northrup, MD).

Health and medical professionals are now recognizing that the integration of mind, body, and spirit is what allows us to best cope with life’s problems (Moyers). This integration is based on the notion that body, mind, and spirit are inseparable. It views the person from a quantum perspective in which the energy flowing through us is more important than our bodies. Integration sees the body as a series of energy channels, the blockage of which is a fundamental cause of disease (Chopra).

Optimal health, then, is the integration and harmony of mind, body, spirit, and emotions (Moyers). Yet for many health professionals, virtually all attention is placed on the physical well-being because it is the most tangible aspect of health. Disease originates at the most subtle level of our mind and spirit and progresses until it reaches the physical. Pain and disease are messengers of information not just of our physical being but of our overall being. Too often we depend on external forces to “fix” our bodies and minds because we’re unaware of our own innate ability to achieve health. We simply need to attain and sustain balance to achieve health. In bodymind healing, a level of total, deep relaxation is the most important precondition for curing any disorder. The underlying concept is that the body knows how to maintain balance unless thrown off by disease; therefore, if one wants to restore the body’s own healing ability, everything should be done to bring it back into balance.

Appropriate Patient Populations

Ai Chi has been successfully used with pain management, scoliosis, carpal tunnel syndrome, hypertension, CVA, fatigue, eating behaviors, weight control, breast cancer patients, balance deficits, type II diabetes, back pain, cardiac and pulmonary rehab., COPD, cancer therapy, arthritis, fibromyalgia, congestive heart failure, fall prevention, prenatal, menopause therapy, immunodeficiency disorders, orthopedic problems, mastectomy, RSD, MS, migraine headaches, anxiety and depressive disorders, and anger management.

Pelvic Mechanics and Ai Chi Positioning

The human body is designed for movement and with proper mechanics; it is not likely to break down with use. When the body is in good mechanical alignment, all the forces acting upon it, both internal and external, are balanced. When a deviation from good postural alignment exists in one area, there is always a reactive deviation in another area. Balance, in all aspects, is a goal of Ai Chi.

Proper body alignment or pelvic mechanics is extremely important in all bodymind and exercise programs, but especially in this one. Proper posture allows the weight of the body to be balanced. When body segments are aligned, there is less likelihood of strain in the muscles and ligaments. Begin with your feet in a wide stance. Point your knees and toes somewhat out and keep your back straight. Both arms are forward, palms down with thumbs touching each other. Bend your knees until the water is at shoulder level and your arms are resting easily at the water surface. Chin is relaxed and slightly down. This is the beginning position.

Here are five hints to help clients maintain good pelvic mechanics:

Think about lifting your rib cage

Think about lifting your pubic bone up toward your navel, but allow your natural back curves to remain in place. Do not try to move with a completely flat back.

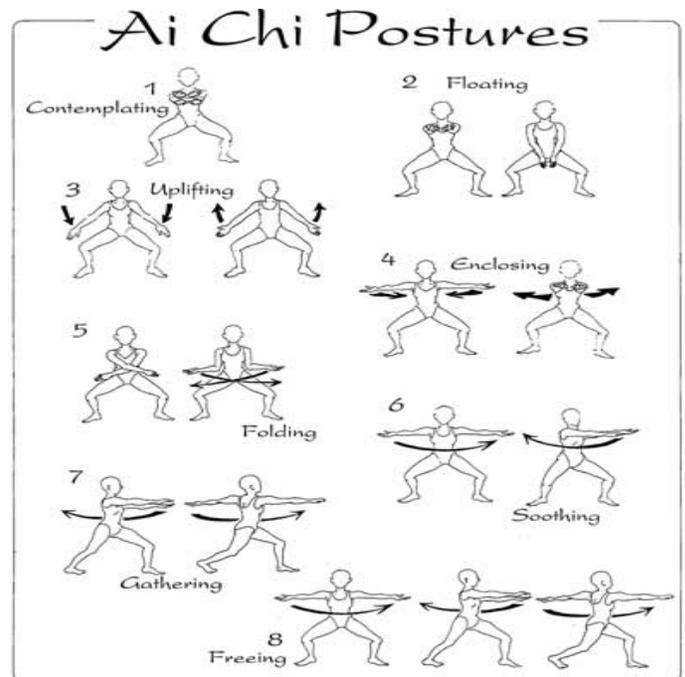
Imagine a helium balloon holding your head up and lifting the weight of your head for you.

Think about your head moving up, not forward.

Taken from the website: <http://ruthsova.com/aichiart2.htm>

Ai Chi Concepts

Ai Chi is a combination of Tai Chi concepts and movements with Shiatsu and Watsu techniques. It is performed standing in shoulder depth water using a combination of deep breathing and slow broad movement of the arms, legs, and torso. The concept of Ai Chi is to relax within the movement. By using equal force throughout the movement, and moving continually one creates a harmony and awareness of mind and body. With the support of the water's buoyancy, participants are able to coordinate the Tai Chi movements to their fullest extent. Participants can then focus on their breathing and body movements without having to worry about falling over!



Benefits

- *Increased joint range of motion, increased mobility, increased flexibility
- *Increased blood circulation and metabolism
- *Improved liver efficiency (diaphragmatic breathing, massages internal organs)
- *Increased circulation of energy along acupoint meridians
- *Decreased stress, anger, depression, insomnia, fatigue, anxiety, confusion
- *Calms the mind.

Target Participants

- *Chronic pain
- *Pre and post-natal
- *Post mastectomy
- *Back pain
- *Arthritis
- *Fibromyalgia
- *Multiple Sclerosis

Taken from the website: <http://cisaquatics.com/aichi.html>

Laughter Yoga is a revolutionary idea – simple and profound. An exercise routine, it is sweeping the world and is a complete wellbeing workout. The brainchild of Dr. Madan Kataria, a Physician from Mumbai, India, launched the first Laughter Club at a Park on March 13, 1995, with merely a handful of persons. Today, it has become a worldwide phenomenon with more than 6000 Social Laughter Clubs in about 60 countries.



Laughter Yoga combines ‘Unconditional Laughter’ with ‘Yogic Breathing (Pranayama).’ Anyone can **Laugh for No Reason**, without relying on humor, jokes, or comedy. Laughter is simulated as a body exercise in a group; with eye contact and childlike playfulness, it soon turns into real and contagious laughter. The concept of Laughter Yoga is based on a scientific fact that the body cannot differentiate between simulated and real laughter. One gets the same physiological and psychological benefits!

Mission - World Peace

The goal of Laughter Yoga is to bring good health, joy, and world peace through Laughter. Laughter is universal with no language and cultural barriers. Laughter Yoga Clubs are fast growing into a worldwide community of like-minded people who believe in “unconditional Love, Laughter, and Fellowship.” Every first Sunday of May is celebrated as “World Laughter Day.” In the year 2000, nearly 10,000 people laughed together in Copenhagen, Denmark to set a Guinness World Book of Records.

Life Changing Experience

Throughout India, thousands of Laughter Yoga Clubs meet every morning in public parks. Most Laughter Club members proudly report that they have not missed a day in five years or more. They say it makes them happy, healthy, and energized - effecting a transformation in their lives. The Laughter Yoga session each day results in positive energy that makes it easy to cope with the stresses of daily life and saves them from depression. In fact, the impact of laughter is so profound that many practitioners claim they no longer need anti-depressants. The sustained positive emotions keep them coming back for more.

Participants of Laughter Yoga report significant general health improvements. Many have felt a reduction in the frequency of respiratory infections, like the common cold and flu, and some others reported overcoming depression, and relief/cure from chronic medical problems. With people's committed participation, Laughter Yoga has helped many people become healthier.

Scientifically Proven

Clinical research on Laughter Yoga methods conducted at the University of Graz in Austria, Bangalore, India, and in the United States has proven that Laughter lowers the level of stress hormones (epinephrine, cortisol, etc.) in the blood. It fosters a positive and hopeful attitude. It is less likely for a person to succumb to stress and feelings of depression and helplessness if one is able to laugh away the troubles.

Our Breathing is connected to the state of our Mind. It is apparent that the state of our Mind directly affects our Breathing. When in a Stressful, Emotional state or Turmoil, the Breathing Pattern alters drastically. It becomes faster, shallow, and irregular. Sometimes people even hold their breath under Stress, which leads to an accumulation of Carbon Dioxide in the blood. Mental Stress occurs due to the arousal of the Sympathetic branch of our Autonomic Nervous System, which is very sensitive to Carbon Dioxide levels in the blood. Laughter Yoga provides an excellent Cardiac workout, and triggers a Breathing Pattern that offers significant respiratory benefits. It lowers the amount of residual air in the lungs, replacing it with Oxygen-rich air. This reduces the level of Carbon Dioxide in the lungs, and inhibits the Stress Arousal System. It has been scientifically proven that laughter is both preventive and therapeutic. People practicing Laughter Yoga regularly report amazing improvement in their health as well as a more positive mental attitude and higher energy levels. The first thing participants say is that they don't fall sick very often; the frequency of normal colds and flu reduces or even disappears. There are daily reports of partial or total cure of most stress-related illnesses, like hypertension, heart disease, depression, asthma, arthritis, allergies, stiff muscles, and more. While this sounds fantastic, it all makes perfect sense, as laughter is nature's best cure for stress.



Most illnesses today are stress related and chronic stress attacks the immune system and makes us vulnerable to infections, virus attacks, and cancer. In fact, this is a major motive for people taking to Laughter Yoga. You can feel the difference from the very first session. You get energized; your mood changes and you feel great. With regular practice you can experience a big change in mental and physical health. Laughter Yoga practitioners are happier and healthier; they can cope with stress better, and have a positive outlook on life.

How Laughter Yoga Works As Laughter Therapy

The healing effects of Laughter Yoga come from following reasons: the immune system is the master key of health and if it weakens, one is exposed to constant infection and sickness.

Scientific research by Dr. Lee Berk from Loma Linda University, California proved that laughter strengthens the immune system by increasing the number of natural killer cells and antibodies. Dr. Kataria says, "Ever since I started the laughter clubs, I don't suffer from cough, cold, or sore throat anymore."



The disease process has two components according to Dr. Kataria – one is the organic disease itself; and the second is the mental component in the form of anxiety, fear, and depression. Why people get therapeutic benefits from Laughter Yoga so quickly is because it removes the mental factor immediately and one finds an improvement in symptoms. The rest of the healing effects comes

from increasing oxygen supply to the body cells, strengthening the immune system, increasing blood circulation, and creating positive mental states.

Laughter Therapy for Reducing Stress

Stress and depression are two major components of ill health. Most health benefits people get are because they are able to manage physical, mental, and emotional stress with Laughter Yoga exercises. Once the stress levels are down, the immune system becomes stronger automatically.

Laughter Yoga as an Exercise

As a medical practitioner for over 25 years, Dr. Kataria says that people often fall sick due to indiscriminate eating and lack of exercise. In this high-pressure, high tension modern world people have little or no time to exercise. **Dr. William Fry, well-known research scientist from Stanford University scientifically proved that 10 minutes of healthy laughter is equal to 30 minutes on the rowing machine.** Laughter is the best cardio workout. As an exercise it has similar benefits as compared to any other aerobic activities like jogging, swimming, and cycling. Laughter Yoga is ideally suitable for people who cannot walk, have no time to exercise like business professionals, and those who are bedridden.

Laughter Therapy for Cancer Patients

The immune system plays an important role in the causation and prognosis of cancer. In fact, cancer is most likely to occur because of a weak immune system. Most of the natural treatments for cancer are focused on strengthening the immune system to stem the rapid growth of cancer cells. Laughter therapy increases the count of natural killer cells, which is an important component of the immune system and helps to overcome and destroy cancer cells.

Laughter Therapy and the Role of Oxygen

Dr. Otto Warburg, German scientist and Nobel Laureate, said that the main reason we fall sick is because there is a lack of oxygen in the body cells. Since Laughter Yoga combines laughter exercises and breathing from yoga, it brings more oxygen to the body and brain. A good supply of oxygen is the key for maintaining good health, as well as healing a variety of illnesses. It is also important for people suffering from cancer and chronic respiratory diseases, such as bronchitis, asthma, and others.

Laughter Therapy for Depression

Depression is the number one sickness in the world and millions of dollars are spent on producing antidepressant drugs, especially in the West where people feel lonelier and isolated due to high divorce rates, faulty relationship patterns, etc. Laughter Yoga is extremely therapeutic for depression as it helps to release certain neurotransmitters from the brain cells, as well as helps people to stay connected and share their feelings and emotions.

Laughter Therapy for Heart Disease and Blood Pressure

High blood pressure and heart diseases are increasing at an alarming rate because of tremendous stress. Dr. Michael Miller of Maryland University did some scientific studies and proved that laughter improves blood circulation to the coronary arteries and also dilates the blood vessels to help reduce blood pressure. People coming to Laughter Yoga clubs found that their blood pressure came down considerably and they could reduce antihypertensive medication. This also

helps to reduce the risk of a brain stroke. A scientific study in Bangalore, India confirmed that Laughter Yoga therapy well as diastolic BP.



Laughter Therapy for

A major causal factor of person's inability to express their feelings and emotions. reactions and conflict. As a result they suppress and hold their emotions,

which ultimately affect the immune system adversely leading to a variety of sickness. Laughter Yoga is a cathartic exercise which helps people release their blocked emotions in a non-violent way and makes them emotionally balanced. Bangalore research indicates that Laughter Yoga also helps to increase positive emotions and decrease the negative ones, thereby promoting a healthy life.

Mental Health

many illnesses is a result they suppress which ultimately

Laughter Therapy for Diabetes

Dr. Lee Berk's recent study confirms that laughter therapy significantly helps to bring down blood sugar levels thereby controlling diabetes. A research study in Bhopal monitored some laughter club members suffering from diabetes and found that the laughter group had a better control of blood sugar than those doing other exercises.

Laughter Therapy for Chronic Illnesses

Since most people in laughter clubs in India are age 50 and above, they are likely to suffer from several age related illnesses. We found that they benefited immensely from Laughter Yoga and the incidence of chronic illnesses like arthritis, chronic aches and pains, migraine headaches, allergies, Parkinson's disease, and multiple sclerosis was greatly reduced. It may not cure the disease but definitely helps in enhancing one's ability to cope with and maintain a positive attitude.

Taken from the website: <http://www.laughteryoga.org/>

Laugh and Learn with the Laughter Yoga Institute

Laughter Yoga is a unique, newly-developed practice of laughter as a form of exercise, free of the need for jokes or comedy. Yogic breathing techniques are integrated with intentional laughter practices. Participants live life more joyfully and are better able to cope with whatever stresses life may bring.

Laughter Yoga was created by Dr. Madan Kataria (a physician from India) with his wife Madhuri (a yoga teacher) in 1995. The health benefits of heartfelt laughter are now available to everyone on demand.

BENEFITS OF LAUGHTER:

- Enhances the immune system**
- Relieves stress**
- Reduces blood pressure**
- Reduces pain**
- Increases endorphins, the body's natural painkillers**
- Improves lung capacity and oxygen levels**
- Provides a massage for internal organs**
- Is contagious, like yawning**
- May help prevent heart disease**



Sources:

American Journal of Medical Sciences, Alternative Therapies, Psychology Today, The Scientists of the University of Maryland Medical Center (as cited in The Orange County Register)

Taken from the website: <http://lyinstitute.org/>

(* **Important Note:** The information above was taken from the websites listed. Far Eastern cultures have practiced various types of T'ai Chi and its derivatives for thousands of years. While many empirical research studies have been verified supporting the health and wellness benefits of Ai Chi and Laughter Yoga, much remains to be studied as far as evidence-based practices; yet they hold immense promise towards improving resiliency and overall health.)