



# Did You Know This Existed? What a Hoot!

*By Susan Saldibar*

Who said “Against the force of laughter, nothing can stand”? Mark Twain.

Okay, I cheated. The quote was on page one of the Laughter Yoga Activities Guide, by Peter Davidson. Maybe you’ve heard of this program, but I have to say that my first thought was “What does yoga have to do with laughter?” For answers, I went to the person who sent me the guide, Shane Malecha, Clinical Specialist for Aegis Therapies (a Senior Housing Forum partner).

First of all, I have to say, the guide is a lights-out fun read. It has a lot of exercises, all geared towards senior living residents and all of which involve a variety of different kinds of laughs (no joke). But there is real science behind it, as I found out after talking with Shane. I asked him if programs like the Laughter Yoga really work. Yes. They do. And this little acrostic description taken from the guide that tells us why:

**L**aughter releases endorphins, giving us the “feel good factor”  
**A**cts as aerobic exercise and is like “internal jogging”  
**U**nleashes inhibitions, breaks down barriers  
**G**reat team building tool encourages better communication  
**H**elps boost our immune system which helps us resist disease  
**T**ones muscles, improves respiration and circulation  
**E**ncourages positive thinking and creativity  
**R**elaxes the whole body by reducing stress and tension

## It turns out, that laughter wellness is no laughing matter.

Aegis Therapies has been working with senior living communities for years, using Laughter Wellness programs, including Laughter Yoga, to get residents to move, relax and improve their health and spirits. As Shane told me, “We all know the benefits of laughter and its effect on the human body. However, as they lose their independence, many seniors in assisted living and long-term care also lose some of the joy in their lives,” says Shane. “Introducing activities that have a laughter component may actually help to improve overall demeanor, decrease isolation, improve physical and functional status and help prevent or slow cognitive decline.”

Shane pointed out 5 areas where their Laughter Wellness programs can help senior living residents. This is pretty amazing:

1. **Decline of Cognitive Faculties.** As mental faculties decrease, it can become more difficult for residents to organize thoughts, let alone identify humor. So, it’s harder for them to laugh. Programs like Laughter Wellness and Laughter Yoga enable residents to laugh, even with low cognitive skills. As little as one hour per week can help improve their cognitive skills and sense of wellbeing.
2. **Isolation.** Seniors need to bond. They may no longer have someone close to them with whom they can share emotions. Laughter is known to greatly improve cooperation and empathy between people, even with different cultural backgrounds. Therapeutic approaches, such as Laughter Wellness and Laughter Yoga helps stimulate a sense of belonging in the form of closeness and fraternity.
3. **Physical Illness.** One of the major causes of frequent illness is a lack of oxygen to the body’s cells. Programs such as Laughter Wellness and Laughter Yoga are forms of elective exercises, which can significantly increase the supply of oxygen. Many of those who practice Laughter Wellness have found chronic pain, migraines, headaches and asthma attacks to become less frequent. This is also true for those with high blood pressure, severe spinal, neck or shoulder problems and even diabetes. Many people with depression, anxiety and chronic stress-related diseases have reported moving from debilitating fear and anxiety to a more positive state of mind, transforming their quality of life.
4. **Physical Immobility.** Laughter moves the body. The physical aspect of laughter is a benefit that often goes unrecognized. When you laugh, all your body systems are affected in a positive manner. This is particularly effective for seniors as well as bedridden or wheelchair-bound people.
5. **Stress and Depression.** A big stressor for seniors is a feeling of being useless after retirement. It can lead to major depression. Laughter Wellness programs help to reduce stress and generate a positive attitude. Laughing together in a group also helps to boost self-esteem and overcome feelings of insecurity.

As Shane says, “Reliable and sustainable therapeutic approaches to laughter such as Laughter Wellness and Laughter Yoga are a sound form of complementary medicine for seniors that can help keep them in good health and good cheer. The exercises are low-impact and well tolerated. It is a unique approach that is easily adaptable to all levels of cognitive, sensory and motor abilities. And, best of all: It’s fun!”



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