

Metromagazine

How cracking-up adds years to your life



SOMETHING FUNNY? The best medicine is an aching good roar according to Kate Hull Rodgers

WHEN was the last time you laughed until it hurt? Not a gentle giggle or a small appreciative "huh" through a smile, but proper laughter that caused abdominal spasms and left you needing a pee.

The stresses and strains of modern office-based life seem to be giving us all something of a humour bypass. Nowadays we laugh for as little as six minutes a day and even they are rarely sent into hysterics.

Everyone is taking life far too seriously, according to humour specialist Kate Hull Rodgers, and in doing so missing out on incredible benefits for our physical and mental health.

Kate, with her booming Canadian voice and irreverent manner, runs Sheffield-based consultancy firm Humour Us, which specialises in improving businesses through humour.

Her clients include such organisations such as HSBC and the Marriott Hotel chain, but she also runs Improve Your Laugh Life workshops through the North West social club Spice.

I went along to the International Society on Oxford Road on Saturday to see if she could help me lighten up and increase the amount of time I spend chortling.

I arrive late, naturally, and a little bit stressed. It's the middle of a heat wave and a beautiful day outside but this is a small, hot room and there are 15 strangers staring at me.

We begin by sitting in a circle, little eye contact, nervous fumbling, not so much as a smirk - except on Kate of course, who is already beaming from ear to ear.

After the brief activity of choosing names for the day based on what amuses us (I choose Bill Hicks, the late US comic), Kate launches into a presentation about the benefits of a healthy laugh life, which verges on a stand-up routine at times.

It's all eye-opening stuff. Laughter, we're told, is scientifically proven to reduce blood pressure, release endorphins that give you a natural high, improve the immune system and reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

Laughing for at least 20 minutes a day can increase life expectancy by eight years, make us more productive workers and (this is the important part) four minutes of laughing has the same calorific burn as 10 minutes of hard graft in the gym!

But, short of kidnapping Peter Kay, how are we supposed to increase our laugh time? Well, the first thing to do is find out what makes us laugh and then seek out more of it, which was one of the goals of the naming exercise. The second way is to fake it. The body apparently doesn't

know when you're laughing for real, so Kate has invented a system she calls Humourobics.

It basically consists of letting your face go blank and then forcing your mouth muscles into a smile, then eye muscles and forehead before letting your mouth drop open and recreating the sound of laughing until it turns into a natural laugh.

It looks as weird as it sounds, but practising the technique leads to the highlight of the day.

We all lie on the floor with our heads on someone else's belly and someone's on ours, and then begin the exercises. I find it a bit difficult at first to let go, forcing laughter feels uncomfortable, but then I hear one of the other blokes and it sets me off.

It spreads like wildfire and within minutes everyone is laughing. Some people are crying, unable to control themselves. It's like group therapy.

The afternoon is spent learning the rest of Kate's 10-step programme to a better laugh life. It includes venting - basically shouting at a wall about what's making you angry - as well as humour hooks, random acts of kindness, joy-listing and rituals at the end of the workday.

By the end of the session, the 15 people in the group are all friends and the nervous fumbling has been replaced by open and relaxed body language.

It seems a little laughter does go a long way.

Paul R Taylor