

Cancer survivor leads laughter yoga class

By Rachel Raskin-Zrihen

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Maybe Will Rogers said it first. Or it actually may have first appeared as a Reader's Digest magazine column.

Then again, perhaps it paraphrases Proverbs 17:22: A merry heart doeth good like a medicine, but a broken spirit drieth the bones.

Whoever first coined the phrase "laughter is the best medicine" may have been on to something.

Vallejo native Teena Miller, 60, said she is proving that as a certified laughter yoga coach.

Concentrating mostly on the elderly and other institutionalized clients, Miller, a seven-year breast cancer survivor, says her next project is to offer a free laughter yoga class for other women battling the disease and its aftermath.

"Can you imagine a room filled with women doing this? It would be awesome," she said.

Described as a mild physical technique involving "a blend of playful, empowering and tension-releasing laughter and breathing exercises," laughter yoga, Miller said, is based on the philosophy of "enacting joyfulness," as developed by Madan Kataria of India in 1995.

A married mother of two grown daughters and grandmother of four, Miller first began investigating the laughter yoga concept after reading about it in a newspaper five years ago. She was certified in the technique about three years ago, and said it's helped her lower both her blood pressure and her anxiety level, which were elevated by her cancer and its treatment.

"I had late stage-three cancer, and the tumor was the size of my fist," she said.

That was in 2002, and despite a less-than-encouraging prognosis then, Miller is thriving now. She said she attributes that at least partially to laughter yoga.

"It's prolonged my life and given me a better quality of life," she said. "I want to give that to other women."

One need not have a highly developed sense of humor or be able to tie oneself into a knot to benefit from laughter yoga, Miller said.

The practice qualifies as yoga because it involves yogic breathing exercises, Miller said. It approaches laughter as an exercise, she said.

And it's more of a workout than one might think. Heart rate-wise, three minutes of laughter is equivalent to about 30 minutes of aerobic exercise, Miller said.

"Laughing is a powerful form of exercise that gives you more of a cardiovascular workout than many 'regular' aerobic activities," Miller said. "A typical laughter yoga session lasts about 30 minutes. Any more than that can be too much."

At a recent session at Vallejo's North Camino Alto Residence Club, a couple dozen elders in various stages of health participated in what Administrator Trisha Beard said is one of their favorite activities.

"Teena comes two times a month, and they love it," Beard said. "It raises their spirits and the spirits of the staff. They look forward to the class and I've recommended it to other facilities." The exercise laughter typically starts out as manufactured or false, but often becomes the real thing over the course of the session, she said.

Though she's no longer sure of her age, facility resident Betty Flowers said she's quite sure she enjoys the laughter yoga classes.

"It makes me feel good," she said.

Former World War II fighter pilot David Welch, 87, said he, too, finds it "fun. It's something to do, and it's good for you."

As far as Miller is concerned, Laughter Yoga can benefit almost anyone.

"Laughter needs no passport," she said. "You can laugh anywhere in any language. It's universal." For information on Laughter4Health, call 707-552-9742.

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