

# Laughter The Best Medicine



Iranian youth in Tehran metro, Dr. Madan Kataria (inset).

Photo by Asghar AzadDei

When Indian doctor Madan Kataria began "laughing yoga" classes 13 years ago, many people laughed at him. Now they laugh with him.

In cities across India, groups of people meet every morning and stand in the open air, stretching their arms, attempting to touch their toes, and chanting: "Ho, ho! Ha, ha, ha!" Crowds that gather to watch invariably end up laughing too.

After all, laughing is infectious and the "Laughing Yoga" movement has proved that, with clubs now in about 60 countries. The man who started the movement is the bubbly 52-year-old Dr. Madan Kataria who lives in Mumbai.

What amuses him these days is that his ideas, at first were thought a joke, have grown in acceptability globally. This year's 10th World Laughter Day, on the first Sunday in May, was one of the most celebrated.

"You don't have to laugh at jokes or humor to get the medical benefits from laughter," he told Reuters.

"Laughing increases the oxygen in the body, which physically makes you healthier. As an exercise, laughter might start out pretentious, but the body doesn't know the difference."

Over the years critics have questioned the medical basis for Kataria's amusing yoga but the movement has proved contagious.

Life has changed for Kataria since he came up with the idea while researching an article for a medical journal about laughter being "the best medicine."

"I became so convinced of the health benefits that a few of us got together and told jokes for 10 days. But eventually the jokes became negative, vulgar and racist. That's when I came up with laughter exercises."

Four years later, in 1999, Kataria wrote the book "Laugh For No Reason," gave up his job as a family physician, and traveled to 35 countries training others on his laughing yoga techniques.

While joining a laughter club is free, Kataria charges for his services as a trainer. He has taken his idea to the corporate world and even prisons.

But is he laughing all the way to the bank?

"I have more than I need. And I like sharing with others."

Kataria is less of a solemn guru and more of bubbly showman. He greets people with big, smiling eyes, open arms and, of course, a warm belly-laugh. He even answers his phone with a laugh. But he maintains he has not overdosed on his own medicine.

When his wife was in intensive care for 9 days after a road accident, Kataria said: "I went into my room and laughed. Not because it was funny, but because laughing made me feel better."

## Breast-Fed Children Smarter

A new study provides some of the best evidence to date that breast-feeding can make children smarter, an international team of researchers found.

Children whose mothers breast-fed them longer and did not mix in baby formula scored higher on intelligence tests, the researchers in Canada and Belarus reported.

About half the 14,000 babies were randomly assigned to a group in which prolonged and exclusive breast-feeding by the mother was encouraged at Belarusian hospitals and clinics. The mothers of the other babies received no special encouragement, Telegraph reported.

Those in the breast-feeding encouragement group were, on average, breast-fed longer than the others and were less likely to have been given formula in a bottle.

At 3 months, 73 percent of the babies in the breast-feeding encouragement group were breast-fed, compared to 60 percent of the other group. At 6 months, it was 50 percent versus 36 percent.

In addition, the group given encouragement was far more likely to give their children only breast milk. The rate was seven times higher, for example, at 3 months.

The children were monitored for about 6 1/2 years.

The children in the group where breast-feeding was encouraged scored about 5 percent higher in IQ tests and did better academically, the researchers found.

Previous studies had indicated brain development and intelligence

benefits for breast-fed children.

But researchers have sought to determine whether it was the breast-feeding that did it, or that mothers who prefer to breast-feed their babies may differ from those who do not.

The design of the study—randomly assigning babies to two groups regardless of the mothers' characteristics—was intended to eliminate the confusion.

### > Mothers are different

"Mothers who breast-feed or those who breast-feed longer or most exclusively are different from the mothers who don't," Dr. Michael Kramer of McGill University in Montreal and the Montreal Children's Hospital said in a telephone interview.

"They tend to be smarter. They tend to be more invested in their babies. They tend to interact with them more closely. They may be the kind of mothers who read to their kids more, who spend more time with their kids, who play with them more," added Kramer, who led the study published in the journal Archives of General Psychiatry.

The researchers measured the differences between the two groups using IQ tests administered by the children's pediatricians and by ratings by their teachers of their school performance in reading, writing, math and other subjects.

Both sets of scores were significantly higher in the children from the breast-feeding promotion group.

## News in Brief

### Women Better Managers

Women make better business leaders than men in all but two areas of management but men have the upper hand when it comes to focusing on the bottom line, according to an Australian survey.

Data collected from 1,800 Australian female and male chief executive officers and managers found women exhibit more strategic drive, risk taking, people skills and innovation and equaled men in the area of emotional stability, Reuters reported.

But men came out on top when it came to command and control of management operations and focusing on financial returns.

The survey, conducted for the Steps Leadership Program by employment consultancy firm Peter Berry Consultancy, found women were more likely to take a chance with their ideas and challenge the status quo.

"Women are ambitious, bold, mischievous, colorful and imaginative. They are more confident, competitive, visionary and have a stronger presence," Gillian O'Mara, general manager of the Steps Leadership Program, said in a statement.

But the survey found that men were more task focused and concentrated on getting the job done rather than dealing with relationships.

"Men believe that bottom line dollars are the only game in town. Their key motives and preferences in life appear to be around revenue, budgets and profit. At work and at home, they are driven by financial opportunities," said O'Mara.

Men are task focused and concentrate on getting the job done without bothering too much with relationships. They are more comfortable with hierarchies, title silos and processes."

### Warming Could Hit Tropical Wildlife Hardest

While global warming is expected to be strongest at the poles, it may be an even greater threat to species living in the tropics, scientists say.

Tropical species are accustomed to living in a small temperature range and thus may be unable to cope with changes of even a few degrees, according to an analysis in Tuesday's edition of Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, AP wrote.

"There's a strong relationship between your physiology and the climate you live in. In the tropics many species appear to be living at or near their thermal optimum, a temperature that lets them thrive.

But once temperature gets above the thermal optimum, fitness levels most likely decline quickly and there may not be much they can do about it," Said study author Joshua J. Tewksbury in a statement.

### When Parents Die, Some Children Suffer Doubly

Children who lose a parent suddenly may suffer a "double whammy" to their mental and physical health—from the shock of the loss and because of inherited risks, researchers reported.

They said the risk factors that contribute to many early deaths of parents—such as mental illness or alcoholism—can be passed on to children. Such children may be more vulnerable to the stresses of losing a parent, the researchers said, Reuters reported.

"Kids whose parents die early are at risk because the conditions that their parents have, that predispose their parents to early death, are also heritable and therefore they get both," said Dr. David Brent of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

Brent and colleagues studied 140 families in which one parent died prematurely and suddenly from suicide, accidental death, or sudden natural death.

### 7,400 US Ivory Items Illegal

Nearly one-third of ivory items for sale in the United States may have been illegally imported after a US moratorium on the trade imposed in 1989, conservation groups said in a report.

A survey conducted for the groups Care For the Wild International and Save the Elephants found that more than 24,000 ivory articles are for sale in the United States, making it the second biggest market in the world after China, AFP reported.

The survey of 657 outlets in 16 US towns and cities found that "perhaps 7,400 ivory items, or nearly one-third of the total, may have been crafted after 1989 making their importation illegal."

Nearly all of the ivory items in the United States, or 95 percent, come from China, according to the study's author, Esmond Martin, who has dedicated his 30-year career to ivory trade research.

The per-kilogram price of raw ivory is between 154 and 346 dollars, compared to 110 to 144 dollars in 1990, the report said.