

Laughter is the best medicine

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EMC Lifestyle - On Tuesday evenings, in a small room on Carling Ave., there is a group of ten women with glittery stickers on their cheeks and smiles on their faces, who produce more laughter in one hour than most adults do in a week.

Some are battling cancer, some have just finished up chemotherapy, and some are there to support someone they know who has had to hear those all too-common words: "You have cancer."

Whichever the reason, they dedicate an hour of time per week to do something that we don't do often enough: laugh. For no particular reason, they force themselves to laugh. A joke isn't told, a funny movie isn't playing, someone isn't telling them a humorous story.

"When you fake it, your brain doesn't know the difference," said Sylvie Dagenais-Douville, the certified laughter therapy instructor in charge of running the program that is offered by the Ottawa Regional Cancer Foundation.

Laughter Therapy, which began Oct. 12, is open to people with cancer and their friends and family and is one of the first programs

that will be part of the Well-spring Ottawa-Maplesoft Centre once the building is completed.

"Our goal with this facility is to give cancer patients and their families the tools they need to cope with the impacts of a cancer diagnosis and treatment," said Linda Eagen, president and CEO of the Ottawa Regional Cancer Foundation.

For eight weeks, the therapy incorporates laughter with breathing techniques to help participants release anxiety and stress.

"When we laugh, we create endorphins," Dagenais-Douville explained. "You have to push yourself to do it and use the right, more free side of your brain."

Dagenais-Douville, who works mostly with seniors, saw the benefit of bringing her program to people dealing with cancer.

"For one hour a week, you don't have to think about anything other than laughing," she said. "People find that stress gets them less and less and that the things you can't change, you can have a good laugh about."

The class begins with a warm up of breathing exercises while people get their joints moving. Dagenais-Douville gives a few tips for the laughter exercises like making eye contact with



Sylvie Dagenais-Douville has one of the best careers. As a laughter therapy instructor, she uses breathing techniques and laughing exercises that help relieve anxiety and stress. Just a few weeks ago, she began her sessions with cancer patients and their friends and families in partnership with the Ottawa Regional Cancer Foundation.

others and putting a smile on, as it makes laughter become more contagious.

From there, participants do a variety of exercises that encourage laughter. From imitating the sound of a ghost, to attempting a toothless laugh, to throwing around an invisible ball, and even dancing the infamous chicken dance gets the group howling.

"You're going to write about how stupid we all look, aren't you," one of the women said to the EMC, chuckling.

What may start out as forced, eventually becomes true, hearty, right from the gut laughter and you begin to have fun being silly, no matter how stupid you think you look.

"Children laugh 300 to 400 times a day," said Dagenais-Douville. "Adults only laugh about 15 times. We're trying to be more playful, more spontaneous."

These women not only get a chance to escape whatever challenge or situation they are faced with, but they get to be together, sharing

similar situations, and just taking time out of their day to focus on being happy.

The room becomes filled with good energy as the women shout positive mantras: "I am amazing, you are amazing, we are amazing," and "I am happy. I am relaxed."

The class finishes up with laughter meditation, which begins with a smile, then a giggle, a cackle, a chuckle, then pure laughter and in the final minutes, participants relax by closing their eyes and listening to soothing

music, enjoying all the endorphins they've produced during their session.

Dagenais-Douville offers tips to the women during their week when they can find laughter in frustrating situations: laughing in the car when you're stuck in traffic, sharing embarrassing moments with your friends, and keeping a journal of funny things that happen can all help.

"When you depend on humor, you leave laughter to chance," she says. "Take charge. Fake laugh. You don't need a reason."

After the class finishes, most of the women stick around to chat. Some discuss some of the moments in their lives that week when they laughed when they ordinarily wouldn't, others talk about how their chemotherapy sessions are going, and others simply talk about what they're up to this weekend.

But one thing was consistent: they all left with a smile.

And in a world of obstacles, unexpected challenges, and devastating situations, we can always make ourselves do that. Smile. And if you try hard enough, maybe even laugh.

For more information on the programs, please visit www.ottawacancer.ca.