

Interview Notes: Carmela discusses LY with Older Adults *and* Adults of any age who deal with physical and mental challenges.

Most of this information is featured in my DVD. I realize some folks are visual learners who want to see some of this info in writing, not in the video form, so I am including the notes here for those of you attend the workshop in San Diego. I wrote these notes to prepare for my DVD and also for interviews I did with the fabulous Monnet Zubieta, CLYT, who hosts her own laughter show *More Joy: The Laughter Show*. Visit Monnet at www.morejoy.org

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How did you first get interested in Laughter Yoga with elders?

Carmela: Even as a little girl, I loved older people. My mother was reared by her aunts and she took my sisters and me to visit with them and stay with them a lot when I was growing up. So I spent lots of time with my grandmother's sisters.

I have an academic background in psychotherapy with a focus in adult development. I did post-graduate work at The Institute on Aging in the late 1980's. I taught graduate psychology classes on "Women and Aging" when I was only in my 30's. It was really a kick to have guest speakers like the Gray Panthers arrive in their leathers on motorcycles and elder women writers and community leaders and such... role models for aging powerfully.

Then, after ten years as a Staff Training Specialist and Career Counselor for the University of California, I returned to working with elders with hospice as a Bereavement Counseling Program Coordinator, a Community Relations Director and then as a Hospice Volunteer Program Coordinator. I noticed that the people who were still able to laugh handled their life transitions with grace. Most of our clients had dementia and I trained volunteers how to be comfortable and meet folks where they were for quality of life visits.

I first learned about LY from Dr. Andrew Weil when he was speaking about aging gracefully!

When I left hospice in 2005, I briefly worked as an Activities Director in Assisted Living and became Certified as an RCFE Administrator, then, I started my own Counseling and Consulting practice doing art therapy, yoga therapy, counseling and companionship with individuals and groups of elders and that is when I finally took the LY Leader Training and immediately started two Laughter Yoga Clubs --- one was an Arm Chair and Wheelchair LY Club at a retirement community or Independent Living Community, Merrill Gardens, that has been going strong for over 4 years.

**I know you are a full-time Laughter Yoga teacher with a diverse practice with adults of all ages --- and do laughter yoga in many settings --- at professional conferences, yoga studios, in the workplace, at staff retreats, fitness studios, in counseling sessions ----
SO how does doing Laughter Yoga with Elders *differ* from practicing with those other age groups?**

Carmela: We live in a very youth-oriented culture. Plus, with today's economy, many people in their 60's who might be old enough to qualify for Social Security and to be called "seniors" are still working. Baby Boomers want to be "Boomers" not "Seniors.!" People in their 60's seem to identify as 'middle-aged' but if you do the math it does not compute! Living to 130? HAHAHA.

SO, I am talking mostly about people over 70 --- When I am leading LY for "Senior Social Groups" where the folks drive to the meetings they are mostly in their 70's. The Jewish Community Centers and other Senior Social groups hire me for luncheon lecture and laughter sessions. They are very interested in approaching LY as "exercise for fitness." They like to learn about the health benefits and hear about the work I do at UCSF and how LY is being used at Mount Zion Hospital and how it can help your brain and your body and your emotion well-being. They are not too keen on laughing for no reason and appearing crazy or worse, demented! There is a real stigma about being old and just laughing like a crazy old, senile or demented person! At the Independent Living Community where I have been leading a group for years now, there are many residents who refuse to even check it out. They do not want to participate in "that nonsense."

So it is important put LY in a context and make it socially safe and clarify that it is not just for senile old folks! Elders are very concerned with behaving appropriately and do not want to be perceived as demented. They often want to tell jokes to make it seem more comfortable.

Most of the people in Assisted Living Communities and Memory Care communities where I teach are in their 80's and 90's. My eldest LY participant at a Skilled Nursing community is 103. She loves LY and says that "she is sorry she didn't get started with it until she was 99."

Continued response about the cultural/social difference of doing LY with Elders

Many of the people born in the **1920's and 1930's have survived great hardships growing up** as affected by the depression when they often did not get to be childlike and silly. Many of them experienced incredible losses and trauma associated with WW II. There is a woman in my regular LY group who survived the Nazi concentration camps and she quite openly shares that she "has not had much to laugh about in life" and is working on "learning to laugh" now.

Many elders have worked very hard their whole life and **take life very seriously**. They tend to be more Stoic. This is not the Summer of Love crowd!

They are not complainers and they generally do not want to share their pains and health issues in the group. I have learned to offer tips for adapting the exercises and mention the benefits of exercises or skip the movements and just laugh if it hurts. They will "over do" in order to keep up with peers and not look bad. SO, while it is important to make it exercise, it is critical to keep an eye out and adapt the practice for those in attendance...

While the social value of laughing in community and being playful with one's neighbors is obvious to the Activities Director and Staff at eldercare communities and the adult children of elders, they often are reluctant to **"waste time on such nonsense."** They might not have *ever* wasted much time on socializing in groups – or even been silly with family -- during their lifetimes and giggling with a bunch of other residents might not be "their cup of tea."

That said, I have a blast laughing with elders and of course there is always a good laugh at every group who helps get it rolling! I always make it clear that no one should have to attend who is not into it that day. Elders really like doing "Naughty, Naughty Laughter" and to be given the opportunity to be creative with their laughter and take turns sharing, once they feel safe with it. The folks in Memory Care are actually my favorites for just getting into it and not caring what any one else thinks!

Shared Experiences With elders, I try to make it a time to remember positive memories and often lead laughter exercises based on them remembering fun times in their lives by establishing cultural context. Swimming Laughter: When you were young did any of you ever swim in a pond? in a river? in the ocean? in a swimming pool? I often do laughter yoga exercises based on State Fairs and Carnival Rides.

I make up exercises like "Lone Ranger" Laughter and "Tarzan and Jane" laughter and talk about old matinee movies and that sort of thing to establish **a sharing connection** beyond just the pure laughter...

I understand that you lead LY groups at number of residential eldercare communities, or as they are called “RCFEs.” Could you tell us a bit about how you adapt LY to accommodate the different levels of care?

Carmela: Yes --- I lead LY groups at *all* levels of care with elders and it is indeed challenging! I will not go into all of the “ins and outs” of Residential Care Facilities for the Elderly, that’s what they are, RCFEs: Independent Living, Assisted Living, Memory Care or Dementia Care Communities (AL) and then there are Skilled Nursing Facilities (SNFs) but I do think it is important for folks who want to lead laughter yoga with elders to get some training to better understand the distinctions between these levels of care to create appropriate LY Exercises that work best for the different groups. That will all be covered in my upcoming training DVD!

First of all --- all sessions I do with elders are seated. The activities directors want it to be an hour long session, so I **allow time for conversation and warm-ups.** I greet every person personally and by name. I welcome them and **thank them** for attending. I get down and make **eye contact.** Elders cannot sustain laughter as long as Dr.Kataria teaches us to do with groups. Some of them have not laughed in years, so just getting a laugh is a wonderful thing!

My major goal is to enhance their self-esteem and to provide a joyful experience, to model lively, healthy love of company, to genuinely enjoy myself and them in the process! And let’s not forget the importance of including staff and offering them positive feedback and the opportunity to join us in a laugh. They have a tough job and deserve lots of positive energy too.

I always **orient** the group with the month or time of year or the season and work a theme into the session. I honor holidays and do St. Patrick’s Day Laugh of the Irish and the first Day of Spring Laughter and so forth. I make up LY Exercises and **invite others to lead us in a laugh.** I integrate singing and exercises and lots of talking with the laughter. I like to do a **“timed laughter”** near the end to give them a sense of the extended laughter for a minute --- and I close with a **guided Laughter Meditation.** I invite them to laugh for themselves holding their heart and we then offer up healing laughter for our loved ones...

Hydration is very important, especially for elders who often forget to drink water and often are on many medications that dehydrate them, so I always have a toast with little Dixie cups of water and we sit and sip and make “laughter toasts”. It is reassuring to have the same structure each time and to have time to sit and reflect and have a drink. I invite them to notice the effects of their practice and it is during this time that they share with others.

What about the safety of doing LY with elders?

Carmela: Laughter Yoga needs to be safe exercise. Many elders have chronic health conditions that need to be managed or under control in order for them to participate safely. CHF Congestive Heart Failure, UTIs, Pain, Fatigue, lack of sleep, Glaucoma, Diabetes, hip replacements, flu, circulation issues, cardiovascular conditions, arthritis ---- but I always remind everyone that the “Surgeon General issued a report warning older adults that physical *inactivity* is a major risk to health!” LY is ideal for a safe cardiac workout and the deep breathing is wonderful for detoxing the lungs and oxygenation of the blood and brain and all organs.

LY is an ideal way for them to enhance circulation and lower blood pressure and to stretch and get better sleep! I would love a study that measured the effects LY has on decreasing the need for medications.

Avoid inversions for people with UNTREATED high blood pressure or glaucoma.

Laughter Yoga for Adults of ALL Ages who might be dealing with physical and mental challenges.

Carmela, you have been leading two Laughter Yoga Clubs for over three years now. One is in a yoga studio for fit folks --- and you are a Certified Integrative Yoga Therapy Teacher --- and the other one is the Arm Chair and Wheelchair LY Club. Tell us a little about how you created the club where laughter yoga is all practiced seated.

Carmela: When I trained to be a CLYL it was LY mostly done standing --- and then ended with people lying down on the floor. As a psychotherapist I realized the wonderful value of LY for mental health as well as physical fitness --- and wanted to adapt it for people with physical and mental health challenges. So I sought out a venue to host a LY Club where there was public parking, that was wheelchair accessible and that was on the bus route.

My “Arm Chair and Wheelchair Laughter Yoga Club” is hosted at an Independent Living or Retirement Community. Of course, residents are invited to attend, but Sandi, the Community Relations Director there, is very cool about opening it up to *everyone* in the outside community too. SO, the group is not just for elders ----- it has more of a diversity. And, since it has been over three years now, it is always changing. People flow in and out of the group, but there is a core group. It is free and open to the public. First and Third Tuesday of every month.

So, who attends this Wheelchair and Chair LY Club?

Some of the folks who drive there are midlife people with depression or recovering from cancer. We have a Vet with PTSD who regularly attends. Some people who got laid off from their job joined us when they had the time on Tuesday mornings. A few folks live in the neighborhood and ride their bike over as part of their exercise regime.

CLYs who train with me are asked to attend and lead LY exercises and practice their skills. Many of them are in their 20s, 30, 40s --- so that adds another age group to the mix.

Family members and friends of residents who live in the retirement community sometimes come too. There are three daughters of residents who live there who attend --- without their mothers. I had envisioned more of the elders attending, but it is interesting that some of them do not want to come, but their adult children do!

The Sonoma County bus for people with disabilities brings a few participants who use wheelchairs. And, there are a few people who have privately shared with me that they are on disability for psychiatric disorders. There are a few folks who sometimes drive down from Santa Rosa whom I met when I offered LY for the Chronic Pain Support Group at Palm Drive Hospital. The head of the activities committee for a local church brings a group once a month and that is good for their program and for ours. Community Connection is so healing.

How have you adapted the practice to accommodate them?

Carmela: We practice seated. Lots of creativity. Everyone is encouraged to have a solo laughter yoga practice. Every session, I ask "How are you practicing LY alone?" We share ways to do that and every session they have an opportunity to create and lead a LY exercise. It can be as simple as "What is your favorite pie?" Pick an apple laughter. Shake in some cinnamon laughter. I offer themes and then encourage others to make up LY exercises to enhance it. Keeps it fresher than doing the same ones every week --- for years...

What is this I heard about a free brunch?

Carmela: Yes! It really feels like a community when I hear them discussing how much they enjoyed brunch together! Merrill Gardens offers a card that I put stars on each time they attend. When they have 8 stars they are entitled to a free Sunday brunch --- which is really quite good! Mimosas, eggs benedict, the whole deal ---- and it is one more way for people with disabilities or on a tight budget to feel that they are part of a community and can enjoy a real treat together. Free Laughter and a Free Brunch. It creates a multi-generational connection between the elders who live at MG and the others who visit from the community. VGVG YAY