

Zimbabweans find laughter to cope



Page last updated at 10:59 GMT, Tuesday, 4 May 2010 11:59 UK

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BBC News, Harare

Two women are planning to set up laughter clubs in Zimbabwe, one of the world's most challenging economies.

Shilpa Shah and Celina Stockill believe they will help people cope with the strains of Zimbabwean life.

They recently held workshops at the Harare International Festival of the Arts, with a range of exercises to encourage good hearty laughter.

"If you laugh - you change; and when you change - the world changes," said laughter trainer Ms Shah.

[AFRICA HAVE YOUR SAY](#) If citizens accept the idea that things can change considerably from bad to good because of how much they laugh, then they are to be pitied - Amarachi

"So it's peace to the world, laughter to Zimbabwe, so let's share the happiness and spread the happy-demic."

At their workshops, Ms Shah and Ms Stockhill encourage people to hold hands, make funny faces at each other and lie on the floor and kick their legs in the air.

They also ask them to pull their empty pockets out to laugh at each other's lack of cash, and to point and laugh at themselves.

"We need to laugh more, especially in our situation in Zimbabwe - being poor, you've got to learn to laugh," said one man at a recent workshop.

Last year a unity government halted the collapse of Zimbabwe's economy - which left the Zimbabwean dollar almost worthless - by allowing the use of foreign currency.

But it has meant that those without access to hard currency are often in a desperate situation.



The trainers believe laughter delivers genuine health benefits

'No sense of humour'

The mood in the workshop quickly moved from quiet anticipation to an explosion of mirth and merriment.

"You don't have to have a reason to laugh; you don't have to be happy to laugh," said Ms Shah.

"And you don't have to have a sense of humour to laugh."

Ms Stockhill says laughter has many health benefits, and she passionately believes that people should aim for 10 minutes of hearty laughter a day.

"There are three benefits - emotional, physical and mental. We release stress by laughing, we activate our lymphatic system and it's a very strong cardio work-out."

"It helps your digestive system and your reproductive system - it's a big 'on' button, whereas stress is a big 'off' button.

"We need to use our diaphragm to laugh, to laugh from our stomach. I look at myself in the mirror and laugh for 10 to 15 minutes."

Outgoing, genuine and wanting to make the country a better place, the two laughter trainers plan to start a network of clubs around Zimbabwe.

"We've been conditioned to laugh only at certain things and the classes are a way of laughing for no reason in a safe space," said Ms Stockhill.

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/8659574.stm>

Published: 2010/05/04 10:59:22 GMT

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