



May the farce be with you

If you like nothing better than a good laugh then join the club — a laughter club.

IT'S hard not to attract attention when you are sitting in a cafe wearing a red nose, fluffy animal ears and a large yellow sunflower. No wonder people are looking.

Bronwen Williams doesn't mind one bit. She's used to it.

The thing is, you can't help but smile. And even if it is just for a few seconds, Williams has achieved exactly what she set out to do.

As a laughter coach and teacher, her mission is to make people see the world through different eyes, to relieve their stress and find happiness through laughter.

Laughter is the body's natural pain reliever because it increases the serotonin levels in our brain, leaving us more relaxed and content. Laughter also enhances creativity. So why is it that adults laugh less than 10 per cent as much as children?

As children, most of us were taught to be quiet, along with other golden rules which are implied as we are growing up. In

turn, we enforce them as we grow older and move through the world. Why else do people look strangely at you if you laugh out loud in a crowded space or compliment someone in a lift?

"We are supposed to control the noise we make in public," Williams says. "It's all to do with this gap we have to keep between us and the next person."

"Why are you whispering?" I ask minutes later. A devilish grin bursts onto Williams' face. She starts her sentence again, but this time says "SEX" loudly. People turn around, I duck for cover. The second time it happens, I laugh and feel empowered. The pair of us laugh out loud. Laughing is crazy human glue.

For Williams, laughing reminds her to shift her attitude; to be positive. It's the little things which will keep a smile on your face, she says. An exploding yoghurt carton brings a moment of giggles rather than a panicked race to clean up the mess. A box of cereal spilt over the floor presents the chance to feel the crunchy flakes between your toes.

"Now I try to turn around things

which make my life unhappy and turn it into a positive," says Williams, who recently took her Buddhist vows. "My solution is to laugh and play."

Williams was considered a bit of a class clown in her teens and it took years for her to realise how to harness that energy.

"People look at me like I'm a little silly because I do laugh out loud but years ago I would never have done that. Now I realise my happiness is more important than what other people think of me. I want to help people understand that for themselves."

Williams practices what she preaches with her son, Jesse, 13. During a dispute, they exaggerate the point until the issue dissolves into hysterics as they realise how ridiculous they are being.

"This way it can really quickly move into something good. But you still have to put effort into it because angry people in a house affects everything."

Williams runs a weekly laughter club in Kalamunda. She also holds award-winning workshops and seminars, working with groups ranging from corporate chiefs →

→ to the long-term unemployed and teen mums. Activities include dress-ups, finger painting, keeping a joy journal, learning how to summon up a big belly laugh and laying on the ground pretending to be an upturned cockroach.

One of Williams' biggest tools for laughter is juggling. "It will take me 15 minutes to teach you to juggle," Williams challenges me. I'm sceptical but happy to try. I suggest a public place so we can laugh in the open and watch people's reactions.

"People are afraid of making too much noise or looking funny in front of each other," Williams says. "Now more than ever, with such high rates of depression and suicide, there is so much distress that people are searching for ways to feel better. More and more people are starting to realise it starts with themselves.

"Juggling is very powerful in that way. It's a metaphor for life. For most people, juggling starts

with the idea of something they can't do. Once you make the effort and pick up something to juggle with, start to try it out and progress through the steps. Before you know it, you can juggle and you've just overcome a hurdle. It's about not being afraid, not being afraid that you are going to drop them. When you realise you can let the balls drop, the pressure is off. It teaches you not to be afraid of things you can't do."

So next time you feel angry, frustrated or ready to explode at someone, try this: stand in front of a mirror and hold your tongue with your thumb and index finger. Do you feel silly? That's the point. ■

Celebrate World Laughter Day at King's Park on May 4. Laugh WA, which runs non-profit laughter clubs around Perth, has free sessions from noon to 2pm in the Western Power Parkland.

LAUGHTER burns calories too. American author, humourist and educator Steve Bhaerman is thinking of starting a new exercise craze called Laugh Your Ass Off.

Bhaerman's alter-ego, Swami Beyondananda, disguises wisdom as comedy — or is it to disguise comedy as wisdom?

He uses the technique of re-framing in his comedy. It's a term to explain ways to look on the bright side. For example, you're not in jail, you just live in a gated community. Or a rainy day doesn't ruin plans for the beach, but makes it perfect weather for Scrabble. Such a re-frame lets the absurdity of it all shine through. "Rather than worrying, hire someone as your mercenary worrier," Bhaerman quips. "They can worry for you and you can get on with your life."

Bhaerman has released books, CDs and cassettes with titles including *Driving Your Own Karma*, *Yogi from Muskogee*, *When You See a Sacred Cow, Milk it for All it's Worth* and *Enlightening Strikes Again*.

"There's something about laughter that rocks your whole body," he says. "And often, if you come to it by comedy, there's a wisdom in it." You can train yourself to see the humour in most situations, Bhaerman calls it making a comedic distinction.

"With a lot of the comedy, what I am seeing now is that it has heart and is connecting to people's passions. At the same time as having heart, that humour has a loving intention to open people's eyes, bring them closer together and change the way they think."

Illustration by don hendry

