

Humor in Counseling: A Review and Examination from an Invitational Perspective

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Integrating humor into counseling situations can be beneficial to the counseling process. This article presents and discusses some of these benefits and their applications as well as precautions to take into consideration when using humor in clinical settings. The therapeutic uses of humor are examined from the perspective of invitational theory. The author suggests that humor is a clinical tool that is inherently inviting, and thus has high potential for utility in invitational counseling.

Having a good sense of humor has long been correlated with positive mental, emotional, and physical health (Dimmer, Carroll, & Wyatt, 1990; Johnston, 1990). If humor and laughter are associated with healthy living, it stands to reason that humor can be a useful tool in counseling situations. Because of the many inviting aspects of humor, the use of humor is particularly applicable in conjunction with invitational theory. This article offers an overview of the benefits that humor can bring to counseling as well as some of the potential disadvantages. A discussion illustrating how the therapeutic uses of humor correspond to invitational theory is then presented.

Advantages and Precautions of Using Humor in Counseling

The literature illustrating the numerous benefits of using humor in counseling is abundant (Dimmer et al., 1990; Johnston, 1990; Keller, 1984; Rutherford, 1994; Schnarch, 1990; Thomson, 1990). Perhaps the greatest advantage is the ability of humor to build rapport with clients by strengthening the counselor's alliance with them (Johnston, 1990; Rutherford, 1994). Using humor with clients can prevent a counselor from being seen as a judge or arbitrator (Schnarch, 1990). As Rutherford (1994) stated, humor "equalizes the relationship" between the counselor and client (p. 209). Laughing with clients can reflect the counselor's good will

towards them. This also may indicate that the counselor is comfortable with his or her own shortcomings (Schnarch, 1990). Keller (1984) stated that taking a humorous approach to therapy can reduce the clients' hostility. By loosening the stereotypical roles of the counselor and the client, tension and anxiety in both the counselor and client can be significantly reduced (Dimmer et al., 1990).

Because of the non-threatening aspects of humor, (Johnston, 1990), it has the potential to facilitate communication between clients and counselors as well as reduce clients' resistance to therapy. Clients may find that clinical insights are more acceptable when phrased in a humorous context (Schnarch, 1990). According to Rutherford (1994), humor is therapeutic in that it alleviates the intensity of serious discussions that are otherwise difficult for clients to engage in. Discussing uncomfortable or painful memories may be easier for some clients when approached from a humorous angle (Keller, 1984). Additionally, humor encourages the expression of emotions and can therefore facilitate emotional catharsis in clients (Dimmer et al., 1990).

One benefit of humor that is significant to psychodynamically-oriented counselors is the fact that humor can often be a key to the unconscious (Johnston, 1990). Clients' jokes can reveal much about them, which might not be discovered easily through other means. Clients disclose important aspects of themselves through humorous comments or innuendos they make during a counseling session. Humor is sensitive to repressed feelings, and can be an outlet for many clients to break free of social and personal taboos (Keller, 1984). For this reason, using humor in therapy works well for clients who present sexual concerns (Dimmer et al., 1990). Humor has the ability to reduce the guilt that clients may feel concerning their sexual problems as well as their inhibitions when discussing those problems or concerns (Keller, 1984).

In addition to these theoretical benefits, there are practical uses of humor in counseling. Jokes are an excellent means of "breaking the ice", particularly with new clients (Dimmer et al., 1990; Rutherford, 1994). A major advantage of humor is its ability to alter and widen a client's perspective by reframing problems into a positive context (Rutherford, 1994).

Humor has the potential to be an excellent means of demonstrating alternative points of view and courses of action (Thomson, 1990). Practical uses of humor facilitate the development of clients' insights into their own lives (Johnston, 1990). It is often beneficial for counselors to end therapy sessions on a positive note, and using humor is perhaps the most effective way of accomplishing this (Rutherford, 1994).

Humor can be used for diagnostic and assessment purposes within a counseling session (Rutherford, 1994; Schnarch, 1990). Counselors can learn much about their clients by observing their ability and willingness to take a step back from their problems and laugh at them. Clients' reactions to therapist humor can also provide insights for the therapist, particularly if defensive or offensive reactions are manifested (Schnarch, 1990). An inability to laugh or joke may be an indication of an emotional disturbance (Rutherford, 1994). Conversely, a sense of humor often indicates social interest (Rutherford, 1994).

Promoting humor in clients can be an effective preventative measure. As a general rule, people are drawn to those who can make them laugh. Therefore, by fostering a sense of humor in clients, counselors can help them develop a more extensive social-support network, which in turn has the potential to increase their self-esteem (Johnston, 1990; Keller, 1984; Rutherford, 1994). Humor is effective as a method of coping and stress reduction for many individuals (Rutherford, 1994; Thomson, 1990).

The physical act of laughing has been found to be associated with good mental and physical health (Johnston, 1990). Chemical secretions called endorphins, which reduce physical stress and generate euphoria, are released into the bloodstream when one laughs (Johnston, 1990). Laughter promotes emotional freedom and is incompatible with depression (Dimmer et al., 1990; Rutherford, 1994). If a person is laughing, it is impossible for that person to be depressed in that instant. Laughter also has many positive physiological effects; it builds the immune system, increases heart rate, and stimulates circulation (Johnston, 1990).

Though these and other benefits of using humor as a therapeutic device advocate its use in counseling, there are precautions that must be

given consideration when integrating humor into therapy. Utilizing humor as a therapeutic tool requires skill. It takes practice to learn to use humor appropriately and therapeutically (Schnarch, 1990). The use of humor may be exploited by clients to divert the counselor away from core issues (Schnarch, 1990), to avoid uncomfortable feelings (Dimmer et al., 1990), or to reinforce clients' maladaptive defense strategies (Johnston, 1990). In addition, the counselor's use of humor has the potential to undermine her or his credibility (Johnston, 1990).

There are additional considerations for counselors using humor clinically. Humor should be used with caution in group settings. Although humor fosters group cohesion, laughter is contagious and joke-telling can easily get out of hand (Johnston, 1990). Multicultural issues must also be contemplated in any counseling environment (Dimmer et al., 1990). What is considered humorous in one culture can be construed as something quite different in another.

Because the potential power of humor in therapeutic situations, there are practical guidelines to remember when using humor for therapeutic purposes. It is important that counselors use humor gradually with each client and constantly assess its effects (Johnston, 1990). As with any counseling strategy, humor should be used in moderation. The overuse of humor will neutralize its therapeutic effect. The importance of spontaneity when utilizing humor in therapy is emphasized in the literature (Johnston, 1990; Rutherford, 1994). Spontaneous humor has profound effects, though it is imperative that spontaneity does not interfere with the appropriateness of the humor (Johnston, 1990).

Also essential to using humor appropriately, counselors always consider their clients' needs, personality, and issues before using humor (Dimmer et al., 1990). For example, humorous techniques are not used in therapy with clients who require a formal approach to counseling, who feel invalidated or misunderstood by authority figures, or who have cognitive deficits (Schnarch, 1990). In addition, humor is used prudently with clients who have a high defiance potential (Schnarch, 1990). Keller (1984) has found that addicts are resistant to therapeutic uses of humor and often experience paranoia that is exacerbated by therapist humor.

As Gomez, Gomez, and O'Connell (1994) stated, it is important to remember the difference between "healthy humor and hostile wit" (p. 292). Humor often reflects aggression, and it is imperative that counselors avoid this form of humor at all costs. An example of this type of harmful humor is sarcasm. While humor used in a healthy manner tends to reduce clients' anxiety and strengthen the therapeutic alliance, sarcasm induces the opposite effect (Schnarch, 1990). Hence, therapists' use of sarcastic humor can be devastating to the productivity of therapy.

By maintaining awareness of the precautions involved in using humor in therapy and by following the guidelines provided, the potential drawbacks are easily avoided and humor's potential as an effective therapeutic tool may be successfully employed.

Humor from an Invitational Perspective

Because of its inherently inviting properties, humor can easily be utilized with an invitational approach to counseling. It is possible to invite humor intentionally without causing adverse effects (Dimmer et al., 1990). The model incorporated by invitational counseling is integrated in its nature, meaning a wide variety of approaches can be applicable within this type of counseling (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996). Therefore, humor is a viable option for use in invitational counseling. Applying humor in an inviting manner can reap all the previously discussed benefits.

Invitational counseling is based on invitational theory, which is defined by four elements that counselors must bring into the counseling relationship: optimism, respect, trust, and intentionality (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996). These four elements interact with each other dynamically, allowing the counselor to create a helping relationship with the highest potential for benevolence. Integrating humor into any of these elements can further increase the counselor's potential for helping.

Optimism is characterized by a belief that all individuals are valuable and capable and should be treated as such (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996). As has been mentioned previously, humor reflects the counselor's good will,

and makes it clear that the counselor is not there to judge clients, but to accept and value them as they deserve (Schnarch, 1990).

Within the element of respect are appropriateness, responsibility, and acceptance (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996). Invitations to clients must occur at appropriate moments, and this is especially true for humorous invitations (Johnston, 1990). Responsibility is an important aspect in respecting individuals. From an invitational standpoint, each person is ultimately responsible for his or her own behaviors. However, counselors are responsible for facilitating their clients' development (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996). Both the client and counselor's responsibilities must be acknowledged in counseling situations, and framing these responsibilities in a humorous manner may relieve tension and anxiety and facilitate communication of these responsibilities to the client (Schnarch, 1990). Finally, accepting individuals goes hand in hand with respecting them. Humor is beneficial in showing the counselor's acceptance of clients, and laughing with them makes this acceptance evident.

Invitational counseling operates from the assumption that counseling is a collaborative process and requires mutual trust between the counselor and the client (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996). A trusting relationship is established by a series of inviting actions on the part of both the client and the counselor. One way to encourage the client's trust is to allow them to lead the counseling session in any direction they choose (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996). Clients may decide to take the session into many humorous directions, and responding to this humor demonstrates the counselor's acceptance, which in turn builds the client's trust (Keller, 1984). It is important to remember that blaming others or making excuses, even when phrased in humorous contexts, should be avoided by both counselors and clients. Neither is inviting and both can damage the trust between the counselor and client (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996).

The last element of invitational counseling, intentionality, is perhaps the most significant. Invitations given without intentionality are unsubstantiated and mean nothing. What good is an invitation if it was not given on purpose? In accordance with invitational theory, a client's potential can best be recognized in counseling settings that are designed specifically to

facilitate that client's development and affirm his or her value (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996). Using humor intentionally is a fundamental aspect of some counseling techniques. Examples of these techniques include modelling (Johnston, 1990), paradoxical approaches (Dimmer et al., 1990; Gomez et al., 1994), and humorous metaphors (Schnarch, 1990; Gomez et al., 1994).

Victor Borge once said, "Humor is the shortest distance between two people" (Keller, 1984, p. 7). There is no better way to explain the profound impact that humor can have in facilitating relationships between individuals, as well as its potential for building rapport in counseling situations. For counselors, using your humor and inviting the client's humor are ways to demonstrate the optimism, respect, trust, and intentionality that establish both an inviting and successful counseling relationship. Based on the evidence in the literature, it seems that humor has an undeniable and important place in invitational counseling.

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