



The Impact of Humor in the Counseling Relationship

By Steven M. Sultanoff, Ph.D.

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The goal of counseling is to help people change how they feel and/or how they behave. Counselors use interventions that influence feelings, behaviors, thoughts, and biochemistry to help clients feel better and behave differently. While each theory of counseling focuses on one of these aspects, humor can be used to directly change all four (*feelings, behavior, thinking and biochemistry*) and therefore, can be a powerful tool for the counselor in promoting the psychological health of clients. In addition, humor helps build relationships, facilitates communication, and promotes attending all of which strengthen the therapeutic alliance.

In counseling, humor can increase communication since it can be a non-threatening way of passing a message from the counselor to the client.

Humor Builds Relationships

Humor brings people together. We enjoy and like people who are humorous. Humor, when used therapeutically, creates a bond between the counselor and client. Humor in counseling helps build a base from which the therapist can continue to respond to the client in ways that facilitate growth.

Humor Increases Communication and Attending

When people use humor, others listen. In counseling, humor can increase communication since it can be a non-threatening way of passing a message from the counselor to the client. Cartoons that poke fun at situations similar to those of the client may give the client a message that a direct statement by the counselor would not convey. In addition, by using humor the counselor will more readily catch the client's attention and therefore, the message is more likely to be heard.

Humor Changes Feelings

Humor changes how we feel. We cannot experience humor and feel depressed, anxious, or angry at the same time. In those moments of experiencing humor the other feelings dissolve. It is true that the other feelings may return, however in those moments of humor they disappear providing a respite for the client as well as hope that the other feelings can be reduced or eliminated.

Humor, for example, can be used to reduce the anxiety associated with performance. Clients who experience performance anxiety can be asked to envision a situation in their lives where

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they experienced humor. They can then be encouraged to recall this situation in the future when they are anxious or even having a panic attack. The recall of this humorous situation actually serves two purposes. First, it reduces anxiety by substituting the feelings of “mirth” for the feelings of anxiety. Second, while recalling the situation the client is distracted from the anxiety-provoking thoughts and therefore, the anxiety is reduced.

We find things humorous when we are cognitively guided down one track only to be derailed in the end. In jokes, we call this the “punch line.”

Humor Changes Thoughts

We know that situations have less to do with our feelings than our interpretations of the situations. It is not that something has *happened* that is the primary influence of our feelings, but it is the *meaning* that we place on the event that has a major impact on how we *feel*.

Humor helps us to change the way in which we perceive events. One way humor helps change thoughts is by providing perspective on a situation. Consider the “Ziggy” cartoon where Ziggy is lying on the psychiatrist’s couch and the psychiatrist is saying, “The whole world isn’t against you...there are *BILLIONS* of people who don’t care one way or the other!”

Humor also helps us to change our thinking through incongruity. The cartoon depicting a client reading a sign which says, “Sensitivity Training; This way stupid!” illustrates incongruity. Norman Cousins called it “trainwrecks of the mind.” We find things humorous when we are cognitively guided down one track only to be derailed in the end. In jokes, we call this the “punch line.”

Humor Changes Behavior

We know that humor changes how we feel, and how we behave is linked to how we feel. When we feel good we reach out and connect with others. We are more open to trying new things, taking risks, and being open to possibilities.

When we feel distressed, we tend to withdraw and close off relationships and opportunities. When experiencing humor we feel good and therefore, behave differently. People who are depressed tend to become lethargic and do very little, while happier people are energized and connect with others.

Humor Changes Biochemistry

There are studies that indicate that people experiencing humor have a reduction in stress hormones and an increase in certain antibodies. We have known for a long time that people who are depressed have a suppression of the immune system, but now research is indicating that those experiencing humor may indeed have a bolstering of their immune system.

People experiencing humor—especially those laughing—report feeling physically better afterwards. There appears to be a sensation of relaxation associated with this post-laughter “rest period.” While laughing, many body systems (such as the cardiovascular, muscular, and skeletal) are activated. It stands to reason that, with this activation, numerous biochemical changes occur.

Because humor helps build relationships, improves communication, promotes attending, and can serve as a direct line into feelings, behavior, thinking, and biochemistry, it can be a powerful tool for the counselor as he assists clients in initiating changes for psychological growth.

