

HumorMatters™



Using Humor in the Counseling Relationship

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The goal of counseling is to help clients feel better and act differently. All models of counseling attempt to reach this goal by creating interventions that focus on one of four areas. Each model intervenes to alter *feelings*, *behaviors*, *thinking*, and/or *biochemistry*. Humor can effect changes in all four areas and therefore, a counselor who learns to effectively use humor increases the potency of the therapeutic process.

Humor as a Therapeutic Intervention

To use humor effectively in counseling requires that the counselor: 1) have planned humor in his repertoire; 2) be willing to risk using the humor; 3) have assessed the client's level of humor and his receptivity to humorous interventions; 4) be prepared to respond to the client's reaction to humor; 5) be capable of taking himself "lightly" and his work seriously; and 6) use humor which is genuine and congruent with whom the counselor is as a person. As with all therapeutic interventions the counselor must ask himself, "How will this humor help my client?" The counselor must avoid gratifying his own need to be humorous and focus on how humor will be helpful to the client.

Humor indeed must be spontaneous, however, it must equally be planned. This process is called planned spontaneity.

Planned Spontaneity

Many therapists are under the mistaken notion that humor cannot be developed or planned for application in the therapeutic relationship. Their argument is that—to be effective—humor must be spontaneous. Their vision and understanding of humor may be shortsighted. Humor indeed must be spontaneous, however, it must equally be planned. This process is called *planned spontaneity*.

Effective therapeutic interventions are planned in that the counselor is trained to offer facilitative responses to the client. At any moment during treatment the counselor selects a particular response based on his knowledge of the client and what interventions might be effective with that particular client. The same concept applies to the use of *therapeutic humor*.

The counselor, to be effective, must be prepared with "humor tools" such as cartoons, anecdotes, jokes, puns, signs, props, etc., which illustrate a wide range of psychological issues. However, the way in which these tools are utilized to intervene therapeutically with a particular client is based on the counselor's understanding of the client and the timing of the intervention. This therapeutic humor is planned in that it is part of the counselor's repertoire of skills and, like all interventions, is used spontaneously to be most effective in working with the client.

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In my practice I keep copies of numerous cartoons as well as props such as juggling balls available in my office. If I have a cartoon that speaks to a particular issue, I will present it to the client as a form of communication. “Ziggy,” “Cathy,” and “Peanuts” cartoons are filled with messages that might be appropriate to a particular client at a particular time.

For clients who seem to take on too many of the world’s woes, I often share a “Peanuts” cartoon where Charlie Brown, Sally, and Snoopy are inside the house looking out at a driving rain storm. As they look out into the night’s darkness Charlie Brown and Sally are sharing how difficult it must be for all the animals out in the storm including the birds, deer, rabbits, and even the little bugs. Snoopy goes off and returns moments later in his slicker and with a flashlight and Charlie Brown says to him, “No, I don’t think we can rescue all of them.”

By sharing this cartoon many co-dependent clients gain perspective on their own rescuing behavior. They learn to laugh at themselves while placing perspective on the situation.

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Juggling can also be used to illustrate specific points. When a client is discussing the many problems he is “juggling,” I may pull out the balls and show how it is easy to juggle one ball (e.g., a new relationship). However, when there are two balls (e.g., the relationship plus a new job) it becomes more difficult. If we increase to three balls (new relationship, new job, and buying a home) the task is much more difficult. As we add more balls we find that the balls exceed our capacity to juggle.

Even the process of humorous exaggeration can be planned although the content of what exactly is exaggerated is spontaneous and evolves out of the client’s presentation.

The Risk of Using Humor

Using humor in any situation involves risk in that the individual using humor may be rejected. Sharing humor in counseling involves greater risk in that the client may be harmed. The concern is not with the counselor being rejected for using the humor, but for the client to be potentially harmed by receiving the humor. Humor must be in the client’s interest and not the counselor’s. By using humor the counselor risks alienating the client, being perceived as not taking the client’s predicaments seriously, being perceived as less competent and therefore less capable of helping, etc. Effective use of humor requires that the counselor assess the client’s ability to relate to humorous interventions.

Assessing the Client’s Ability to Therapeutically Accept Humor

In order for the counselor to attain an acceptable level of risk for using humor he must assess the client’s ability to relate to humor. Assessing another’s readiness to accept humor is not an easy task. There are several guidelines, however, which can help.

First, clients can be asked directly *what they find humorous*. As they share their humor the counselor can observe how animated and energized they become. Generally, the greater the energy, the more they are in touch with humor. Also, by knowing what humor the client enjoys indicates the type of humor which will be best received by the client. For example, a client who tells jokes may relate to jokes, anecdotes, and stories by the counselor, while a

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client who enjoys cartoons may be more receptive to “Peanuts,” “Cathy,” “For Better or Worse,” etc.

Second, clients who in their presentation laugh at themselves and their situations are more open to humor interventions than clients who do not laugh. *The depth to which clients can laugh at themselves* will be directly related to the depth of humor the counselor can use therapeutically.

Finally, to test a client’s level of humor the counselor may relate a funny story, joke, cartoon, etc., that does not directly relate to the client and observe *how the client responds to the humor*.

Responding to the Client’s Reaction

As with all interventions in counseling it is critical for the counselor to respond to the client’s reaction to the intervention. This is especially true of using humor. When the counselor uses humor he takes a risk. The humor used is far less important than the reaction to the humor. In addition to the client’s reaction, the counselor’s ability to understand the reaction and reconnect with the client is crucial. If the client integrates the humor and seems to react favorably then the counselor has learned an effective intervention. If the client reacts negatively, it is imperative that the counselor repair the “damage” by understanding the client’s reaction to the humor. The counselor must take himself lightly by not becoming overwhelmed by a negative client reaction and take the work seriously as illustrated by effectively responding to the client’s negative reaction.

Taking Yourself Lightly and Your Work Seriously

It is essential for the effective counselor to be serious about the therapeutic process while at the same time be able to take himself “lightly.”

Too often, counselors become wrapped up in their need to “perform” effectively and, when attacked by the client, become defensive and therefore, ineffective. Counselors who take themselves lightly are able to unhook from their own defensive reactions, accept their therapeutic blunders, and remain focused on the client.

Being Genuine and Congruent

Effective counselors are genuine and congruent. This means that they act and respond in a sincere and honest manner. In using humor, genuine counselors laugh when they experience something as funny and do not force laughter that is insincere. They do not attempt to be humorous by sharing humor which they themselves do not experience as humorous.

Humor—through the development of planned spontaneity; with an understanding of the client’s ability to integrate therapeutic humor; and with the counselor’s ability to be genuine and take himself lightly—can create effective interventions for the skilled counselor. Humor can be employed to directly intervene to assist clients to change how they feel, how they act, how they think, and even how their biochemistry responds. As with all therapeutic interventions, the counselor must begin with asking, “How will this humor be of value to the client and the therapeutic process?”

