

Defining Therapeutic Humor

Therapeutic humor is the **purposeful** and **intentional** use of humor that is specifically designed to create a positive impact (physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and/or biochemical) for another person or persons, and the positive impact must be at least minimally experienced by the receiver. In general, the humor is presented by an individual who is skilled and trained in the use of humor for health and wellness.

For therapeutic humor to be present, the individual offering the humor must be skilled in the creation of a humorous encounter and experience and convey three core inter-relational qualities. These qualities are: 1. Empathy (compassion and caring for the receiver of the humor); 2. Acceptance (a non-judgmental attitude toward the receiver); and 3. Genuineness (the use of humor that is sincere and congruent within the sender). The receiver of the humor must experience these core qualities of the sender, as well as, experience the impact of the humor including perceiving the encounter as amusing/humorous.

It is the sender's skill, purposeful intent, and ability to convey the core qualities, combined with the receiver's experience of the impact, that ultimately make a humorous intervention therapeutic.

Non-Therapeutic Humor

Examples of non-therapeutic humor include: 1. Humor that lacks therapeutic purpose or intent, 2. Humor that carries a corrective message, 3. Humor that is for the joy or enhancement of the sender, and 4. Hostile humor.

1. Humor that lacks therapeutic purpose or intent

Humor that is not purposeful and intentional would not be considered "therapeutic humor" although such humor may have a therapeutic impact. The purpose of a comedian is primarily to entertain even though the humor may have a therapeutic impact. A gathering of friends reminiscing and laughing at old times may be therapeutic but the humor is not "therapeutic humor."

2. Humor that carries a corrective message

Humor that is for the purpose of sending a corrective message (often in the form of teasing) is not therapeutic humor. Often such humor is experienced as hurtful, and it is common for the sender to "withdraw" the humor by saying, "I was only joking."

3. Humor that is for amusement or enhancement of the sender

Often when individuals tell jokes, they do so for their own joy and pleasure at telling the joke. Often these joke tellers are the life of the party, energetic, and socially interactive. They tend to be well liked. While their humor may benefit those around, it is not therapeutic humor.

4. Hostile Humor

Hostile humor typically criticizes others or puts others down. While such humor may be experienced as funny by the receiver or observers, it is not therapeutic humor. Blonde jokes, racist jokes, religious jokes, etc. often fall into this category.