

The Light Hearted Therapist

By Patricia Morgan MA CCC

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If a key factor to increasing mental health is a sense of humor, as many studies have substantiated, does it not make sense that a therapist would model such well being? In my experience many therapists, social workers and psychologists need a booster shot of smile and laugh. Therapists don't need to wear red noses or dress like a clown; however, growing numbers in the US have joined the American Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, acknowledging the power of humor to heal.

Like Doctors Allen Klein and Patch Adams, increasing numbers of therapists are discovering that we are emotional human beings—experiencing the joy along with the pain. The state of wellness includes the ability to create more moments of joy, mirth and bliss. Patch Adams said, “When the woes of existence beset us we urgently seek comic relief. The more emotions we invest in a subject, the greater it's potential for guffaws.” The lows and highs are valued when we add a dose of chuckle to a therapy session at the right time. When a client presents as depressed, ruckus humor is inappropriate. Appropriate humor can be used when the client is in an up, open and play state. A sign on my counselling wall reads, “Share with me my sadness and I will share with you my joy.”

Humor increases creativity, a necessary component to problem solving. It opens one's perspective to see life's problems differently. When we experience the absurdity of life, we tend not to take the upsets of life so personally. The truth will set us free and it is often funny. My mentor, Gwendolyn Jansma, of Heartseek Gatherings says, “Life is wondrous and messy.” A sense of humor develops as we mature and learn to laugh not only with others but also at ourselves.

Be cautious. Use humor only when it is appropriate to facilitate the client's healing. It should not be used to show off a therapist's quick wit. Safe humor excludes racist, sexist or sarcastic comments. Beware of sarcasm as an expression of your own anger and aggression. Clues need to come from the client and he should never feel slighted or be the target of a tactless comment for the sake of humor. If therapists increased their own light heartedness they would benefit from the positive aforementioned outcomes, and can then recommend from their own laughing experience.

Spending time with children and animals can brighten anyone's world. Playing every day at a passion is important for both therapist and client alike. Often a client will cry until she laughs or laugh until he cries. It is not appropriate to join in the crying, but for a therapist to join in with the laughter provides a wonderful moment of connection. A therapist's disclosure of her own faux pas can be humorous and normalizing for individuals or groups to hear.

David Granirer, a Vancouver counsellor, uses humor extensively in his practice. In the spring 2001 issue of *Cognica*, the Canadian Counselling Association's newsletter, his article *Laughing It Off: Using Humour to Stop Self-Defeating Behaviours*, provided a fun technique for clients to discover more about themselves. He recommended that clients list the reasons they love their behaviour. This process helps clients in a fun way to discover the underlining payoffs of a particular pattern: "I love having anxiety attacks because I get all kinds of loving attention from my partner," or "I love having anxiety attacks because it makes me feel normal in a neurotic culture."

I have used Granirer's process with groups. In stress management workshops, participants are invited to write down their biggest stressors. Groups agree on the biggest stress in their work careers and brainstorm as to why they love that stress. Results are hilarious and revealing: "Deadlines make us feel important and show us how smart we really are."

Gentle humor can be very effective in making a point and changing an old pattern. Here is a silly story to provide awareness of over involvement or weak boundaries. A mother was pushing her grown son in a wheelchair when she saw a friend in a shopping mall. The friend said, "Hello Mary. I didn't know your son couldn't walk." Mary answered, "He can walk, but isn't it wonderful that he doesn't have to?"

Comedy, humor and therapy have to do with the tragedies, absurdities, sufferings, truths, contradictions and conflicts in life. With effective humor, a shift in perspective occurs. Feelings are acknowledged and then calmed. Humor can provide powerful healing if in the smile of a kind and judicious therapist.

Patricia Morgan, Light Hearted Concepts
Phone: 403-242-7796
Email: patricia@lightheartedconcepts.com
Website: lightheartedconcepts.com