Laughter is the Best Medicine: Healing Through Humor

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New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services
NYAPRS is a change agent dedicated to improving services, public policies and social conditions for people with mental health, substance use and trauma-related challenges, by promoting health, wellness and recovery, with full community inclusion, so that all may achieve maximum potential in communities of choice.

Advocate, Educate, Demonstrate & Innovate
Your Presenter for today:

Larry Hochwald, CPRP – NYAPRS Training & Technical Assistance Facilitator New York City & Long Island

I know what you’re thinking...
Yes, I was much younger in that picture!

Nevertheless...
In order to satisfy my consent decree with PETA, I am required to apologize to all animals who may be subject to ridicule in the presentation of my training. (I also can’t use any cat memes anymore. I once left slide with the kitten from the “hang in there” poster hanging for an inappropriate amount of time on screen during a verbal de-escalation training.) So, My apologies to Mr. Banjo and Orangutans everywhere.
Larry Hochwald

A mammal—a primate—I have opposable thumbs and I'm not afraid to use them.

- CPRP (Certified Psychiatric Rehabilitation practitioner)
- Over 20 years working in behavioral health: Inpatient, Residential, Employment and over 17 years Training.
- 2007-Present Co-Chair then Board member of the Staten Island Mental Health Council
- 2015: Honored by NAMI, Staten Island region
- Author and Co-authored 3 articles in Behavioral Health News (employment, stigma, integrating medical and mental health care) 2008, 2009 & 2012
- Presented at undergraduate and graduate programs on Stigma and presented on panels at conferences on stigma. 2008-2011
They’re not funny...but you can get CE credit for these!

- Discuss what humor is and its benefits
- Look at integrating humor in a helping relationship. Identifying when and when not to.
- Review humor strategies and exercises
Definition of Humor

• a: that quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous: a funny or amusing quality

• b: the mental faculty of discovering, expressing, or appreciating the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous:

• c: something that is or is designed to be comical or amusing
Benefits of humor on our mental health

- Reduces stress, depression, anxiety and fear.
- Increases energy and can help us perform activities that we might otherwise avoid.
- Laughter, like a smile, is the shortest distance between two people. It makes people feel closer to each other.
- A healthy sense of humor is related to being able to laugh at oneself and a way of accepting oneself.
- When people laugh together, they feel bonded and can better go through hardship together.
- Elevates mood.

https://www.zurinstitute.com/clinical-updates/humor-in-therapy/
Benefits in the therapeutic relationship

- Enhances therapeutic alliance and increases trust between therapists and clients
- Humor can help clients’ thought processes by helping them to get unstuck.
- Helps clients cope with difficult situations, such as death and illness.
- Helps clients accept themselves.
- Laughter shifts perspective, allowing clients to see situations in a more realistic, less threatening light
Potential ways in which humor can contribute in recovery

- In DBT (Dialectical Behavioral Therapy) Marsha Linehan has found the use of humor and irreverence can help by distracting and breaking out of a train of thought, because irreverence is unexpected. For example:

  Client: "I'm going to kill myself."
  Therapist: "I thought we agreed that you were not going to quit therapy."

- In The Use of Humor in Serious Mental Illness: A Review, Marc Gelkopf noted that previous studies suggested that the use of humor may reduce psychiatric symptomatology, anxiety, depression, verbal hostility and aggression, anger, and improve social support and social competence.
• It’s a good icebreaker that can put people at ease.
  - It might be better to start a meeting than telling people they won’t have any fun.

• Modeling and playfully engaging
  - (using the situation to point out something amusing)

• Providing a corrective emotional experience
  - (showing how something could be looked at differently and humorously, not only in a negative way)

• Awareness of the person’s presentation
  - (Are they open to it, is it appropriate?)

• Increased connection to your own innate playfulness
  - (does something strike you as funny? Don’t force it if you don’t feel it, they probably won’t either)

https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1063&context=edissertations_sp2 A TWO-PAPER EXAMINATION ON THE INTEGRATION OF HUMOR INTO CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK - Stephanie Nathanson
Humor, (as well as pets), can affect your brain chemistry.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzKaOp383vA
But---he was kidding---cats work just as well (if not better!😊)

- Laughter may also confer medical health benefits. For the past forty years, studies have shown that good, hearty laughter can relieve tension and stress; boost the immune system, by reducing stress hormones and increasing activity among immune cells and antibodies; and help reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke, by improving blood flow and blood vessel function. Laughter and humor can be a tonic for the brain, as well. Triggering the brain’s emotional and reward centers spurs the release of dopamine, helping the brain to process emotional responses and enhancing our experience of pleasure; of serotonin, to buoy our mood; and of endorphins, to regulate our pain and stress and to induce euphoria.

the Harvard Mahoney neuroscience institute letter Spring 2010 Vol. 16, No. 2
Proposed links between humor and positive wellbeing are intuitive, as it makes sense that those with a good sense of humor will be in a better position to weather difficult situations; to enjoy more cohesive relationships; to find humor in all sorts of experiences, and to benefit from more positive mental and physical health (Martin, 2019). These ideas are supported by empirical research, and here are several examples:

- Engaging in a humor exercise is associated with a positive mood (Edwards, 2013) and positive cognitive appraisals (Maiolino & Kuiper, 2016).

- A sense of humor is associated with increased life satisfaction and a pleasurable and engaged life (Ruch, Proyer & Weber, 2010).

- Humor has been reported as among the top eight of 24 character strengths and is associated with increased life satisfaction, life engagement, and life pleasure (Samson & Antonelli, 2013).

- Adaptive humor is linked with increased stable positive mood and decreased stable negative mood (Cann & Collette, 2014).
An important caveat to the previously noted findings is that the type of humor a person exhibits also plays a key role in determining its impact. This idea is evident in Can and Collette’s study (2014), as positive outcomes were associated with self-enhancing humor.

Detrimental humor (e.g., sarcasm and self-disparaging humor), on the other hand, is believed to have potentially negative ramifications such as reduced relationship quality and low self-esteem (Martin, 2019). Therefore, it is suggested that the absence of detrimental humor is equally important to the presence of prosocial humor styles (Martin, 2019).

These findings have been supported by other research studies, such as that by Maiolino and Kuiper (2016), who investigated the ability of humor to predict positive outcomes.

The researchers found that greater wellbeing was related to affiliative and self-enhancing humor; whereas, reduced wellbeing was linked to aggressive and self-defeating humor (Maiolino & Kuiper, 2016).

Similarly, in their review, Stieger, Formann, and Burger, (2011) reported that self-defeating humor was linked to depression and loneliness; whereas, self-enhancing humor was related to beneficial outcomes.
• Hope may represent a powerful mechanism through which humor brings relief to patients, as evidenced in research addressing the impact of humor on terminally ill patients (Herth, 1990). The results of this study indicated that 85% of patients believed that humor helped them to deal with reality by empowering hope.

• The use of humor in medicine also has been studied from the perspective of healthcare workers. For example, among physicians who work with dying patients, humor has been reported as one of eight coping mechanisms used to handle the extreme stress involved in doing this type of work (Schulman-Green, 2003).

• Similarly, other researchers have suggested that gallows humor is beneficial for emergency personnel by providing an outlet for painful emotions and by enhancing support via group cohesion (Rowe & Regehr, 2010).

• Among nurses, humor has been related to lower emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and increased personal accomplishment (Talbot & Lumden, 2000), as well as greater coping efficacy and emotional expressivity (Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 2005).
Applied humor can be effective when it is situational. For example, help someone see that they are not alone in feeling overworked, even when their work is not the same.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkQ58I53mjk
Additional Health Benefits of Humor

- Increases heart and respiratory rates. After these initial changes, a person moves into a state of relaxation.
- Lowers levels of the stress hormone, cortisol.
- Laughing more means lower heart attack risk.
- A study found that laughter therapy effectively delays cardiovascular complications of type 2 diabetes.
- Watching a humorous movie led to improvements in cognitive function, including learning ability, delayed recall, and visual recognition in study that included 30 older adults.
How to encourage humor in ourselves and those we work with.

- Learn what makes you and others laugh
- Understand your audience
- Know the rules and boundaries
- Look for the joy in life
- Adapt other people’s material
- Look to place people at ease
- Write down the “funny” moments at work
- Laugh at yourself
- Place laughter quotes on a bulletin board
- Start a joke jar
- Try laugher meditation
- Smile
Tools to Use: How one can expand their sense of Humor

- Observe young people to learn how to find delight and amusement in the most ordinary of things.
- Increase your exposure to comedies, comic sitcoms, joke books, etc.
- Talk with funny friends
- Take a 5/10 minute humor break each day. Read, write, and/or listen to something funny
- If you hear a joke you really like, write it down or tell it to someone else to help you remember it.
Tools to Use: How one can Expand their Sense of Humor

- Remind yourself to have fun.
- Spend time with those who help you see the bright side. Whenever possible, avoid negative people.
- Avoid conversations, news, entertainment, etc., that frightens, upsets you or makes you feel sad, whenever possible.
- Be mindful of just “lightening up.”
Tools you can use. For yourself and those you work alongside and serve.

- **Comedy commute.** Listen to comedy or humorous recordings or podcasts on your commute rather than news. Listening to more comedy on your commute will expose you to a variety of types of humor, which will help you learn more about what types you enjoy. You might not know that you like funny stories, observational humor, satire, slapstick, or impersonations until you give humor programs a try.

- **Three funny things intervention.** Each day write down 3 things that happened that you found funny, amusing, or humorous. One of our AATH researchers found that people who daily wrote down 3 funny things that happened for only one week increased their overall happiness and decreased depressive symptoms for up to 6 months.[12]

- **Play the “what I could’ve said” game.** If you’re the type of person who always thinks of the funny thing you could have done or said after the moment has passed, that’s okay! Go with it. Come up with various humorous ways that you could have handled a situation or greeted a patient. The more often you do this, the more quickly your brain will start making these connections.

Paul Osincup, AMA Journal of Ethics July 2020 How to Use Humor in Clinical Settings

Know your audience

- Humor is subjective.
- It is influenced by age, gender, education, culture, spirituality, life-status etc. AND society and the times we live----thinks that were funny may not e anymore, and things that weren’t amusing, might be considered comedy today.

TRY SEARCHING “FUNNIEST VIDEO EVER” TO SEE JUST HOW SUBJECTIVE IT IS! WOW---violent, nasty, homophobic---some people’s funniest videos could be used in videos for what not to do in cultural competency, examples of microaggressions, domestic violence and intolerance.

- And this isn’t taking into account what most would consider inappropriate humor
To be or not to be---funny!
Remember---if you’re at work—it’s WORK!

- Use humor to lift other’s up, not bring them down
- Sarcasm is not a license to belittle someone
- Bad humor is not an acceptable excuse for bad behavior (Racist, Sexist, ageist and other discriminatory actions)
- Nor is inappropriate humor acceptable and must be gauged for the person/audience/situation i.e. Why Couldn’t they play cards on Noah’s Ark? Every comedienne jokes about their spouse and many others that you are thinking about right now!
Humor is subjective, and viewed through the same personal experience, education, age, cultural lens as is everything else. There can be faux pas.

Some things land with a thud. Not everyone will get the joke or appreciate it. (You’ve seen plenty of that just this afternoon! Even on this slide.) Move on.

Use facial expressions, body language and tone of voice to inform your behavior and response.

You might need to stop, clarify, apologize!
Strategies and Exercises

- **Three funny things**: At the end of each day, write down the 3 funniest things you experienced that day. Describe the feelings during each experience.

- **Count funny things**: As each day progresses, keep track of all the funny things that happen. Briefly jot down each one so that you can get a total at the end of each day.

- **Applying humor**: Notice humorous things that happen during a typical day and add new humorous activities. You might include watching a comedy movie or sitcom, talking with your funniest friend on the phone, looking up funny things on the Internet, or reading comics or jokes.
Strategies and Exercises

- **Collecting funny things**: Recall one of the funniest things you experienced in the past (recent past or distant past) and write the memory down in as much detail as you can.

- **Resolving stress with humor**: Think about a stressful experience from your day. Write about how it was - or could have been - resolved in a funny and humorous way.

So, before you go back to work...
(But don’t leave yet!)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fzYwVqr_q1s
Laughter is the most inexpensive and most effective wonder drug. Laughter is a universal medicine. 

Bertrand Russell

A good laugh heals a lot of hurts. 

Madeleine L’Engle

I have not seen anyone dying of laughter, but I know millions who are dying because they are not laughing. 

Dr. Madan Kataria

When I said “don’t make me laugh”...I didn’t mean it!
Any thoughts, comments, and of course...

BUT I HAVE ONE MORE QUESTION.
EVERYONE----Stay Safe, Stay Well and may you, your loved ones and your agency families have safe, happy and healthy holidays and New Year!