THE THERAPEUTIC BENEFITS OF HUMOR IN ADDICTIONS COUNSELING

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When Norman Cousins suffered from a debilitating illness of his immune system, doctors predicted that he would not be alive very long. In physical pain every waking moment, Cousins told his doctors that they were not God, checked himself out of the hospital, and prescribed comedy tapes as his medicine. Cousins discovered that, for every ten minutes he laughed, he had two hours of pain-free sleep. He lived sixteen years longer than doctors predicted, and his story is chronicled in the book, *Anatomy of an Illness*, which focuses the therapeutic benefits of laughter. According to research:

- Laughter releases endorphins in the brain that fight pain (this means that laughter is good for chemically dependent clients experiencing withdrawal).
- Laughter protects our immune systems.
- Laughter increases antibodies that fight infection.
- Laughter increases natural killer cell activity. Natural killer cells attack cancerous cells in the body.
- Laughter decreases stress.
- Laughter activates neurochemicals in the brain, such as dopamine and thus acts as an antidepressant.
The Therapeutic Benefits of Humor in Addictions Counseling

Laughter can also be utilized in addictions counseling to help reduce client resistance, increase rapport between counselor and client, and help facilitate recovery. Some of the therapeutic benefits of humor in addictions counseling include:

- Laughter is the great equalizer. Maya Angelou told Oprah Winfrey that only equals laugh with each other. Many chemically dependent clients enter counseling feeling that they have failed, which often leads to defensiveness. Laughter can be instrumental in decreasing that defensiveness.

- Laughter can bring the idealized counselor back to life. It is particularly helpful for counselors to occasionally tell humorous stories about mistakes they have made in their own lives. This can help clients not be so guarded about their own life mistakes.

- Laughter can decrease resistance to counseling. It has been said that the shortest distance between two people is a good laugh.

- Laughter can decrease cross-cultural tension in counseling. It is hard to laugh and hate at the same time.

- Laughter can facilitate bonding between counselors and clients.

- Laughter can facilitate self-disclosure by creating a friendly environment.

- Laughter can allow clients relief from painful experiences.

- Laughter can decrease anxiety about taboo subjects.

- Laughter can decrease stress and anxiety in counseling.
• Laughter can make the therapeutic hour seem quicker. Many chemically dependent clients report a great deal of boredom in early recovery. Therapy is more enjoyable when it moves quickly.

**How To Utilize Humor in Addictions Counseling**

Many counselors agree that the best humor by counselors is thoughtfully spontaneous, well-timed, and takes into consideration who the client is. The goals should be to lessen tension, increase client comfort, and/or help the client gain insight. The primary purpose of humor is to help the client. Approaches include:

• Planned spontaneity. The counselor said something funny that he or she was not planning to say.
• Exaggerations. Making a situation seem bigger that it actually is. As clients see humor in this, they may begin to relax and put things in proper perspective.
• Making fun of yourself.
• Repeating a funny line made by the client.
• Role plays and skits.
• The use of humor tools—movie clips, cartoons, anecdotes, signs, prompts, etc.
• The use of art.
• Taking the client’s” funny bone history”, asking questions such as:
  o “What makes you laugh?”
  o “Do you like to hear jokes or tell jokes?”
o “What kind of humor do you find unpleasant?”

o “What kinds of things make other people laugh that are not funny to you?”

o “What are the funniest movies you have ever seen?”

o “Who are your funniest comedians?”

**Five Types of Inappropriate Humor**

There are types of humor that can be harmful to clients and should therefore be avoided. They include:

- Laughing at clients.
- Cheap shots, i.e., making fun of U.S. presidents the way late-night comedians Jay Leno and David Letterman do.
- Putting down clients.
- Sarcasm directed toward the client.
- Racist and sexist jokes

**Conclusion**

Many readers may be wondering, “How do I become funnier as a therapist?” Norman Cousins suggests listening to tapes of your favorite comics, watching comedies (with your friends or your cat), spending time with your children or grandchildren (children laugh 400 times more frequently than adults). Abraham Maslow suggests that we should focus on striving for self-actualization. He indicates that individuals who move toward self-actualization take things and themselves less seriously, the end result being that we have a greater sense of humor.