



How Humor Can Lead to More Effective Therapeutic Outcomes

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Focus

Improve your outlook and reduce harmful stress through humor. That's the message of this seriously funny workshop where you will get to practice applied therapeutic exercises that you can use every day to improve your wellbeing and the wellness of your clients and others around you.

Research has shown that accessing humor and laughter directly after a stressful situation reduces stress hormones and creates lasting, positive feelings. Muscles relax, breathing changes, and the brain releases endorphins, natural painkillers and happiness boosters. Having a sense of humor and being quick to laugh can have psychological and physiological benefits.

Frustrated by work? Troubled by feelings of insecurity? Angry at the guy who stole your parking space? Don't let these frustrations pile up and push you toward burnout. Mallori and Lodge will teach you how to laugh off difficult times, and as a result turn the negative impacts of stress into the positive benefits of humor.

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Empirical Background

- Humor and laughter help maintain well-being by reframing stressful events (Perchtold et al., 2019).
- Humor can also change the regular patterns created by past traumas, which can produce a shift in perspective and a desirable transformation for the client (Landoni, A. M., 2019).
- Comedy increases social engagement and improves retention of information (Coronel et al., 2021).
- Laughter can serve as a social reward that reinforces behavior and conveys affiliation and can communicate social norms (Wood & Niedenthal, 2018)

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Empirical Background

- ◊ Humor can function to reinforce the solidarity of groups. However, it can also segregate employees who were not part of the "tribe." (Taylor et al., 2021).
- ◊ Humor can reduce loneliness (Curran et al., 2021).
- ◊ Humor in therapy is useful for building rapport/therapeutic alliance, reducing defensiveness and assessing client cognitive/personality dynamics (Hussong & Micucci, 2021).
- ◊ Humor can be used to help communicate difficult issues, which helps clients cope with emotional and physical suffering, sickness, and loss (Dziegielewski et al., 2004).

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Empirical Background

- ◊ One study showed when clients laughed for 30 minutes, there were significant physical and mental benefits (Manninen et al., 2017).
- ◊ Research has shown that using humor and laughter directly after experiencing a stressful situation produces a reduction in stress hormones and creates lasting, positive feelings. In fact, when practicing humor, muscles become more relaxed, breathing changes, and the brain releases endorphins, which are the body's natural painkillers (Whalen, 2010).
- ◊ Having a sense of humor and being quick to laugh can have both psychological and physiological benefits (Cousins, 1979).

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Boundaries

- ◊ Let's begin with a paradox, which is a situation that has contradictory features: Humor and laughter are desperately needed today. Humor and laughter are very risky today.
- ◊ Therapeutic humor isn't about us delivering jokes and telling you what is funny. If we do that, it will alienate a large percentage of any audience, especially these days. It's about us inviting you to find your own funny. Evoking humor can safely help everyone access more joy in life.

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Psychological Safety

- ◊ We have done our best to design an open and positive learning environment for you today. Our goal is to create a safe and supportive space where everyone can make jokes and be creative at their own pace. We will not be making jokes that "other" or "punch down." Instead, we will be exploring the warm, healing, and absurd side of humor.
- ◊ We believe that it is important to uphold a learning culture that embraces error and experimentation without fear of penalty and to establish psychological safety for all participants. Therapeutic humor can be a stepping stone towards creating psychological safety and we look forward to modeling that through collaboration and inclusion.

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Warm Up Activity (1)

Funny Word: Share the funniest word you can think of. Write a sentence that could use that word, but doesn't. Write another sentence using the funny word.

Example: Gobbledygook
 "I feel like I am not making sense right now"
 "I feel like that was all gobbledygook."

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Warm Up Activity (2)

Joke-Off: Find a partner and take turns reading corny jokes that we have provided. Try to make your partner laugh by experimenting with *how* you tell the joke.



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Exercise 1: Pile-o-Punchlines

What

Punchlines are absurd statements that can add humor and diffuse tension when placed at the end of any sentence. What's really interesting is that these punchlines can spark laughter even if they are non sequiturs, which are conclusions that may not logically follow from the previous statement.

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Exercise 1: Pile-o-Punchlines

Examples

Examples - I guess I won't get my deposit back, I blame public libraries, Uh-oh someone spilled the Spaghettio's, That's the most dangerous game, And then the sun exploded, Asking for a friend.

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Exercise 1: Pile-o-Punchlines

How

Please share a few of your own (absurd, silly, ridiculous) punchlines that you find funny. Of course, there are no wrong answers!

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Exercise 1: Pile-o-Punchlines

Why

This exercise helps to establish a social contract within your community. Any community can work together to come up with a list of punchlines, like we have done here. Then we all agree that whenever someone says a punchline from the list, at any time, it is an invitation to laugh. These become low barrier, non sequitur, inside jokes. After establishing some funny punchlines, we all have a resource to use whenever it seems helpful. For example, I might say, "I've had a really tough day...I blame public libraries!" We can all laugh and it immediately releases the tension of that frustration.

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Exercise 2: The Comedy of Complaints

What

Many times when you complain, you take a problem, exaggerate it, and relive it out loud. Complaining floods your brain/body with cortisol, which is the stress hormone. What's more, complaining also increases the stress levels of everyone around you. It can be a really unhealthy behavior. If you wrap all your frustrations in humor, you no longer complain, you tell jokes. Jokes can make everyone laugh, and when we laugh, it instantly reduces stress, which can be a very healthy behavior.

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Exercise 2: The Comedy of Complaints

Examples

- Doing my hair takes too long and makes me sweat / *And yes, I knew my pants were off*
- Remembering my wifi password is impossible / *Thank god magic is real*
- My kids take their seatbelts off before I put my car in park / *I guess I won't get my deposit back*

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Exercise 2: The Comedy of Complaints

Example Memes



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Exercise 2: The Comedy of Complaints

How

1. Write a one-line complaint (e.g., It ticked me off that my husband refused to take out the trash).
2. Plug in a punchline from the Pile-o-Punchlines that gives you the biggest laugh (e.g., It ticked me off that my husband refused to take out the trash / *I'll explain at headquarters next week*).
3. Create a meme for your funny complaint.

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Exercise 2: The Comedy of Complaints

Why

When we write down our feelings, we tend to understand them more clearly. And if we struggle with stress, depression, or anxiety, creating a journal of those narratives, especially if we are wrapping them in humor, can be beneficial. It can help us gain control of our emotions and improve our mental health.

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Exercise 3: The Comedy of Contradictions

What

Our lives include an endless series of situations that we feel conflicted about. We regularly face paradoxes (double binds, contradictions, ambivalences) with contradictory features. Now, it's not about judging which side of a paradox is right or wrong. It's about acknowledging that our lives are replete with these double binds, and then doing the work to accept that both sides can exist together.

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Exercise 3: The Comedy of Contradictions

What

It's actually really difficult to accept an internal contradiction (e.g., I love my job 😊 / I don't want to work 😞). Many of us want to think that there are right and wrong ways to be, and we effectively tell ourselves that half of our feelings are wrong because they contradict how we think we should be. That negative self-talk can put (or keep) me in a state of discontent.

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Exercise 3: The Comedy of Contradictions

What

One of the best ways to practice the acceptance of these ambivalences is to write them down and then add a non sequitur punchline.

I love my job 😊 / I don't want to work 😞 / PUNCHLINE HERE

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Exercise 3: The Comedy of Contradictions

Examples

- I can do anything I want / I chose to do nothing / *That's why we can't have nice things*
- I want my kids to be self-sufficient / I do everything for them / *I guess I won't get my deposit back*
- I want people to be vulnerable with me / I don't want to tell people my secrets / *So I got married*

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Exercise 3: The Comedy of Contradictions

Example Memes



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Exercise 3: The Comedy of Contradictions

How

1. Write a paradox that you struggle with in your life (e.g., I love my husband 😊 / My husband drives me nuts 😞).
2. Choose a punchline from the Pile-o-Punchlines that gives you the biggest laugh (e.g., I love my husband 😊 / My husband drives me nuts 😞 / *Thank god for bleach 🧼*).
3. Create a meme for your humorous paradox.

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Exercise 3: The Comedy of Contradictions

Why

Our lives are filled with ambivalences and if we can write them down and laugh with them, it can help us accept them. Acceptance can stop the internal conflict and bring forward peace and contentment.

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Exercise 4: So I...

What

Humor is often made up of two parts; a set up (premise) and a punchline (twist). The premise is not funny but sets up an expectation. The twist is a surprising, unexpected conclusion. If it's a successful surprise, it will spark laughter. One way to do this is to first think about what would be an expected response, then think about what would be an extreme response, and finally, take it one step beyond extreme and think about what would be absurd. Unexpected absurdity often sparks laughter!

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Exercise 4: So I...

How

I drove all the way to the grocery store and realized I forgot my wallet, so I...
...went home, grabbed it, and headed back. (expected/not funny)
...gave up and went home; maybe I'll try again tomorrow. (extreme/not funny)
...shook down some girl scouts for 20 bucks and it's totally okay because I used to be a Brownie. (absurd/funny)

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Exercise 4: So I...

Example

One of my students turned in a paper that was clearly written by his mom, so I...

...graded it anyway (expected/not funny)

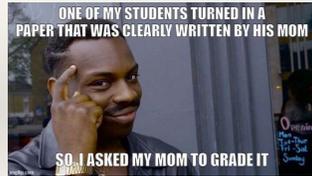
...tore it up and threw it away (extreme/not funny)

...asked *my* mom to grade it (absurd/funny)

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Exercise 4: So I...

Example Memes



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Exercise 4: So I...

How

1. Write a complaint in this format - My kids take their seatbelts off before I put my car in park, so I...
2. Finish the sentence with an absurd punchline.
3. Create a meme.

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Exercise 4: So I...

Why

Frustrations make for excellent premises because they bring a lot of tension to our lives. The more tension that can be built in the premise, the bigger laughs can be achieved in the punchline, which is designed to release the tension.

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Exercise 5: This, That...and Tacos

What

In comedy, the rule of three is also called a comic triple. The third element of the triple is often used to create an effect of surprise, and is frequently the punchline of the joke. One way to generate a surprise is to make sure elements one and two are expected/logical. Then we break that expectation by making the third element absurd (wildly unreasonable, illogical, and a caricature of reality).

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Exercise 5: This, That...and Tacos

Examples

I really need to find a man who is kind (expected/logical), one who listens (expected/logical), and a third one who does not know the other two (unexpected/absurd).

When things feel overwhelming, remember: One thought at a time (expected/logical), one task at a time (expected/logical), and one 67-ounce bottle of Diet Coke at a time (unexpected/absurd).

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Exercise 5: This, That...and Tacos

Example Memes



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Exercise 5: This, That...and Tacos

How

1. Write a complaint in this format - Doing my hair takes too long and makes me sweat because...
2. Finish the sentence with a comic triple.
3. Create a meme.

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Exercise 5: This, That...and Tacos

Why

Remember that humor can reverse negative thinking by reframing our stressors. We can do this by absurdify-ing the third element in any list.

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Exercise 6: Shall I Compare Thee?

What

Many times humor takes the form of comparing one thing to something surprisingly similar. We can generate that surprise by pointing out the most absurd/ridiculous comparison; one that is wildly unreasonable, illogical, and creates a caricature of reality.

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Exercise 6: Shall I Compare Thee?

Example

"The sea was angry that day my friends, like an old man trying to return soup at a deli." - George Costanza

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Exercise 6: Shall I Compare Thee?

Example

Arguing on Facebook is like...

I ask myself two questions:

1. How does this make me feel? (frustrated because it is pointless)
2. What absurd scenario might make me feel the same thing?

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Exercise 6: Shall I Compare Thee?

Example

Arguing on Facebook is like...

- ...trying to change someone's mind by calling them birdbrained
- ...yelling underwater, nobody can hear anything
- ...stabbing a rock with a butter knife, there's no point

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Exercise 6: Shall I Compare Thee?

Example Meme



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Exercise 6: Shall I Compare Thee?

Example

1. Write a complaint in this format - Trying to remember my wif password is like...
2. Finish the sentence with an absurd comparison.
3. Create a meme.

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Exercise 6: Shall I Compare Thee?

Why

According to research, when humor is used to communicate difficult issues, it can help us cope. We can do this by comparing any frustration to something surprisingly similar.



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Exercise 7: Punch This Line

What

As we already know, humor is often made up of two parts; a set-up (premise) and a punchline (twist). The premise is not funny but sets up an expectation, creating tension. The twist is a surprising, unexpected conclusion. If it's a successful surprise, it will spark laughter.

One way to do this is to first think about what would be an expected response, then think about what would be an extreme response, and finally, take it one step beyond extreme and think about what would be absurd (wildly unreasonable, illogical, and a caricature of reality).

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Exercise 7: Punch This Line

Example

I got to the wellness center today and realized I forgot my headphones.

Oh well. (Expected)

Well, I ended up standing in the parking lot for 10 minutes and then finally decided to go home and grab them. (Extreme)

I guess I'll just listen to old guys breaking wind for an hour. (Absurd)

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Exercise 7: Punch This Line

Example Meme



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Exercise 7: Punch This Line

How

1. Write a complaint in a full-sentence format - It bothers me when people have their dogs off the leash.
2. Write a punchline.
3. Create a meme.

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Exercise 7: Punch This Line

Why

Remember that frustrations make for excellent premises because they bring a lot of tension to our lives. The more tension that can be built in the set-up, the bigger laughs can be achieved with the punchline, which is designed to release the tension.

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Exercise 8: Punching Up Paradox

What

One of the best ways to practice the acceptance of any paradox is to write it down and then punch it up. This effectively transforms the ambivalence into a joke.

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Exercise 8: Punching Up Paradox

Examples

<p>Paradox:</p> <p>I want my partner to be able to read my mind.</p> <p>Nobody can read my mind.</p>		<p>Paradox:</p> <p>I don't have enough.</p> <p>I have more than enough.</p>	
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Exercise 8: Punching Up Paradox

How

1. Write down a paradox.
2. Punch it up.
3. Perform it for the group and/or create a meme.

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Exercise 8: Punching Up Paradox

Why

Remember that our lives are filled with ambivalences and if we can write them down and laugh with them, it can help us accept them. Acceptance can stop the internal conflict and bring forward peace and contentment.

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How Will You Use These Skills?

Please share one serious way you will use these exercises and one absurd way to use these exercises.

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