

## **Humour: a therapeutic cure for the disease of Seriousity.**

*A reflection from a counsellor and a fan!*

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### **Introduction**

What a pleasure and honour to spend time being inspired by the wisdom of Moshe Lang as he celebrates 51 years as a therapist and shares his view on humour in therapy and indeed throughout his life and other people's lives. Moshe states he is deliberate and systemic in his thinking about the role of humour in his life. He enjoys the nuances of language, noticing the difference between the intended meaning and the potential humour of the literal. The Receptionist asks: "what did you say your name was?" and Moshe replies: "I didn't and it still is"...

Moshe describes his way in the world as seeing the potential humour in all things and often laughing to himself, even if the situation is not so funny. Is it any wonder this man became a family therapist when his earliest memory in his family was laughter: and that memory coming from his parents laughing at his mother playfully pretending to drop him as a toddler?! A funny story and a great example of how Moshe thinks, but how do we truly understand humour?

To define humour, according to Moshe, would kill it. He claims defining humour is slippery, but it brings a smile and is about cooperation, warmth and kindness. He states for example that pouring someone a cup of tea is kind but not humorous- slippery indeed. Humour is relaxing and allows us to join with each other as equals. Humour is context and relationship specific. Humour is both the antithesis and complement to seriousness.

### **"Seriousity"**

According to Moshe, while we must cultivate the capacity to see the deeply serious, the painful conditions, we would benefit from also seeing the funny side and learning how to laugh together. Moshe asserts that we perhaps suffer from too much "seriousity", which he described as a pseudo-seriousness; an inability to be light; and having a rigid stance. Seriousity is an affliction that can capture even the most insightful and skilled therapist.

Seriousity, if it were to be added in the DSM-V might be defined as an Axis I disorder- perhaps a phobia along the anxiety spectrum as a fear of being anything but formal and grave. Perhaps as an Axis II disorder, seriousity might be viewed as narcissistic or antisocial. See me mirror on the wall, I am the best and that is all? It would include such symptoms as:

- Consistently mired in problem saturation;
- Having a narrow view;
- Belief that gravity is not a sense of weightlessness but an attitude of solemnity;
- Displaying a sense of preciousness and artificiality;
- Considering what is heard in terms of its unfavourable consequences;
- Having a belief that curiosity did indeed kill the cat;
- And most importantly, a serious lack of humour.

Certainly life as a therapist is a serious business. People's traumatic experiences and state of emotional and mental health are not to be taken lightly. Moshe proposes however that we should ideally be listening across the spectrum from seriousness to hilarity in order to understand the client's story more fully. We may not respond across the range, but it offers more options. He further suggests that that looking for a little lightness to lessen the heat leads to possibilities. He explains that if we are free to be jocular, we are free to be creative.

### **The Benefits of Humour**

Humour allows for playfulness and creativity. Moshe told us the story of the young boy in therapy who was discussing his views on passing wind. Now a comedian would take that slice of toilet humour and give us a sketch on fart jokes that might make us laugh, but leave us with a bad smell. The young boy described passing wind as a musical skill: that is, he was able to play music out of his backside instrument. Moshe, rather than reflecting how rude, delighted in the creativity of the boy, describing him as a poet. Toot toot- beans the musical fruit?

Humour can help us to see the absurdity of situations; can reduce anxiety; and help us to connect to the inner child. Imagine a young Moshe, the first psychological arborist engaging with his first young client Peter, by following him up a tree. Moshe saw his opportunity to develop a therapeutic alliance by joining Peter where he seemed most comfortable, while Peter described Moshe as "a very strange and bizarre man who climbs trees", (Lang & Lang, 1986, pg.22).

In joining with our clients our job as therapists is not to collude but to listen, show we understand and hopefully offer the opportunity to explore different perspectives and options. Moshe adds that by using humour appropriately, we can be provocative, thereby opening up a range of possibilities.

In his stories are a number of examples of where Moshe offers the alternative perspective that what the client might see as a terrible situation, Moshe sees as a learning opportunity and a challenge:

- The husband who is asked against his personality type to 'pretend' to be romantic to his affection-starved wife, takes up the challenge and the pretence becomes real;
- The wife who screams and criticises to deflect her insecurity. The husband is challenged to respond by hugging her instead of fighting back. The wife is challenged to deliberately criticise... (Lang & Lang, 2007).

The above examples may look like a game of wits, not in the trivial sense but as a way to marshal the clients' skills and carefully navigate their own chessboard of life. Life of course is more than a strategic game; it comes with its joys and its risks. Using humour to help a client navigate their life can have its drawbacks.

### **The Risks of Humour**

Humour is not to be confused with silliness. It would be silly not to understand the seriousness of humour as an effective therapeutic tool. As with any tool, we must be aware of the risks. Moshe advises that the risks of humour include:

- making the mistake of laughing at rather than laughing with;

- using it as a guise to mask cruelty;
- being culturally inappropriate;
- miss-timing and thus falling flat.

The risk of a lack of humour might be graver. We might miss the opportunity to be curious, creative and observe alternative viewpoints. We risk seeming judgmental and rigid: the expert rather than person-centred. Imagine the poor client who tries to relieve their awkwardness with a little humour and is met with a therapist's straight-faced nod of intensity.

How damning an indictment on seriousness in our profession when the backside flautist also turned out to be the same young boy exercising his skills as a budding psychiatrist. Moshe explained in the story, *The Making of a Therapist*, (Lang & Lang, 1986) how our young hero Fred was asked to turn the tables during a family therapy session. Fred jumped at the chance and immediately took a clipboard and grilled his mother about her pregnancy, thereby taking an excellent case history.

Do we see this story as the horror of being parodied as a clipboard therapist or the making of Moshe as a creative practitioner? Add a 'U-you' to this story and Fred becomes Freud... Without humour in our practice, we risk burnout and of course being cursed with seriousness. Humour as the very fibre of our being is thus a powerful tool.

### **Humour within a Therapist's Toolbox**

The question arises however whether humour truly is a tool or a stance? Do we use humour in a calculated way; prepare jokes or jocular responses? Moshe proposed that we should not 'use' humour that way, but rather cultivate humour as a state of mind. He explained that it is not how humour is delivered but how it is experienced. Perhaps it is not how we practise humour but how we are humorous in practice. Moshe likens humour to empathy, in that we don't use empathy, we are simply empathic.

Humour, like empathy, requires authenticity. When we are authentic and attuned to our clients, we have an opportunity to respond to affect in a number of ways:

- to respond accurately, which supports therapeutic alliance but gives us nowhere to move;
- to amplify or intensify, which will either support insight and awareness or misfire and increase distress; or
- to de-intensify with the use of humour. This will either misfire and fracture the alliance or allow for brevity and therefore a well-timed lifting of a heavy burden.

A burden need not always be heavy. The burden of parenthood, the worry of raising children for example could be seen as the joy of watching children grow and explore the wonders of the world. We need not always be literal Moshe says, there is always another way of seeing things. Maybe the glass is not half empty after all? As Moshe states, it is all in the interpretation; how language and its nuances can create different meanings.

Moshe shared his experience as a new migrant with formal English as his second language and the hilarity of misunderstanding 'strine'. Like Nino Culotta in the book, *'They're a weird*

*mob'* (O'Grady, 1957), one man's confusion is another man's comedic genius. We can spend a session in complete confusion with our client due to language, with both parties failing to understand the intended meaning. Do we become frustrated and argumentative, or do we take a step back and laugh?

### **The Making of a Good Therapist**

The ability to laugh at ourselves and our human frailty may perhaps allow us to be kind to ourselves, to forgive, to give permission to identify our strengths and opportunities for joy. The horrified Moshe berated himself for losing unconditional positive regard by telling his client Tom in the story '*Violation*' (Lang & Lang, 1986), that he was being a stupid idiot. Rather than being hurt or angered, Tom saw the truth in the matter and this was a turning point in not only their therapy but in Moshe's idea of therapy in general. Moshe describes humour as the freedom to say honestly what is going on for us.

Honesty might help us to become more congruent, however Moshe counsels that congruence is a problematic concept not just for the therapist but for all human beings. We must strive to be appropriate and that congruence, like humour, is only one consideration when interacting with others. Moshe also suggests congruence might be a luxury. While we want to be truthful, we do not want to be hurtful. Do we lie and tell a mother that her newborn is beautiful when in fact the baby looks like a broiled cabbage? Perhaps we can merely share in the delight of their happiness with what might be a backside flautist protégé. We might not be truthful in our opinion but we become congruent in our joining and can share a laugh.

If we do laugh are we being good or bad therapists? Rather than upholding seriousness as the mark of professionalism, good humour according to Moshe has deep meaning and should be viewed as the crux of a good therapist. Perhaps career advisors of the future might conduct good humour DNA testing for budding therapists.

Moshe at his provocative best proposes that a person without humour might be best steered away from the counselling profession. He describes for example how in order to gain the excellent marks needed to pass a course in psychology a person will lock themselves away to study. This is important, but so is the development of good conversational and interpersonal skills. The qualities that make a good student might not be the same as the qualities that make a good therapist.

A good therapist, recommends Moshe, will cultivate not suppress humour. A therapist with good humour is comfortable within themselves and with others and makes people feel at ease. A good humoured therapist can admit their shortcomings and is not afraid of making mistakes or asking for forgiveness from their clients for their human failings. Not so much a '*mea culpa*' stance but more an apology for thinking we were wrong but we were mistaken?

### **Conclusion**

Why is humour so controversial when it has so many advantages? Moshe emphasises that if we are alert to everything from the very grim to the ridiculous, then we are hearing better and therefore the client feels truly listened to. Humour is way of engaging; it helps us to remember; it is as Moshe states, a wonderful pain reliever.

When dealing with conflicting demands in family therapy for example, humour provides a middle ground. Moshe maintains that through humour, intimacy can be attained. Couples who laugh together stay together, he stated. It is not a far stretch to suggest then that clients and therapists who laugh together learn to relieve the pain and develop new pathways of coping with adversity. Humour becomes the fibre that helps movement from adversity to freedom.

If we can learn to see the humour in life and figure out when lightness is appropriate we can revel in the jocularly of being part of the weird mob and thereby free ourselves from the constipation of the bowels of despair, otherwise known as seriousness.

## References

The body of ideas for this article was gleaned from both conversations with Moshe Lang and attendance at his workshop '*Humour in Life and in Therapy - a psychologist's humour is no laughing matter!*'.

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