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Feature Article

Humour in Couples Therapy and its Teaching

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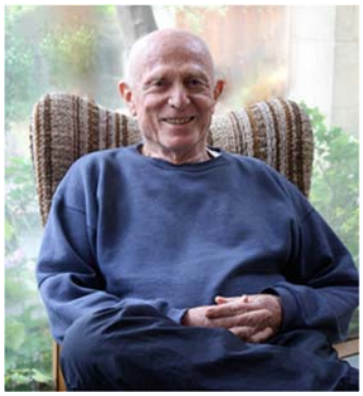


Moshe Lang is a master in the art of therapy. In 52 years of practice as a child psychologist, family and couples therapist, clinical supervisor, teacher and writer, he has spent around 50,000 hours with clients. It is a sobering experience to watch someone counselling or teaching who can admit to mistakes, be highly self-critical and reflective to keep improving, and yet make it look so easy. Biddulph (2012) quite rightly suggested that while novices might get weighed down by technique and the pressure to make a good impression, old masters keep it simple and are more human.

It was a beautiful mid-autumn sunny Saturday afternoon and Moshe Lang was presenting a workshop on Couples Therapy. While participating I continued my journey with Moshe to demystify and deconstruct the role of humour in therapy. I had written about this subject, (Florent, 2016), after I first met Moshe in 2015 at his workshop 'Humour in life and in therapy - a psychologist's humour is no laughing matter!' It struck a chord to consider that humour is central not peripheral to mental health treatment (and frankly to life) and helps us to connect more deeply. By listening to our client's story across the spectrum from seriousness to hilarity, we may respond across the range, but we gain more insight and understanding (Florent, 2016). As Humanists, we could become Humourists.

To be human is to have humour

According to Moshe, as humans, any interaction that includes the use of humour with wisdom enhances everything. Humour is under-rated as a teaching, therapy and communication tool. It is misunderstood by many professionals. There is a discrepancy between what we are taught and how we practice. Psychology is taught as a science and the seriousness of the professional stance marks a specialist. But beware, a specialist might be special but to whom?

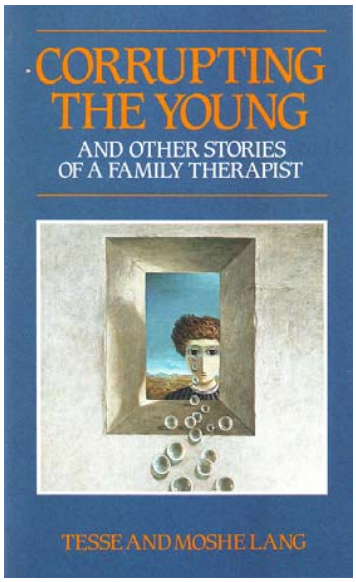
The mental health profession is a serious one and we all struggle at times to assert our humorous selves in case we are ridiculed or seen as less worthy or even worse, not funny. We should take note from the father of psychodrama Jacob Moreno who saw humour as so important he requested that his epitaph declared 'the man who brought laughter to psychiatry' (Johnson & Emunah, 2009). Humour is the opposite of seriousness and therefore if we laugh it might seem we are not taking things or you seriously. As well as being its opposite, humour is the facilitator of seriousness. As Moshe is fond of saying, "This is too serious a subject not to use humour". Without humour, the seriousness might be too dark, painful, intense and anxiety provoking. We need to bring in a light touch at times in order to look at the issue and tolerate the intensity.

Humour is an important tool as an intensity regulator, which is particularly pertinent in couple and family work when communication becomes problematic or destructive. Often clients can be stuck in their story and seem to have no capacity for lightness. Humour can help to increase insight and promote objectivity. It can change the narrative from melodrama to a comedy of errors as emotions are re-adjusted, enabling us have a fresh perspective (Madanes, 2015). Gottman and Gottman (2015) discuss that couples who will not fare well are often bogged down in what they describe as the 'Four Horsemen' of relationships: criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. They suggest that relationships that are likely to succeed use humour during conflict by expressing empathy and understanding with a smile or saying something funny to make a small repair.

Moshe did not ask his participants to pay attention to humour he merely stated that humour was important. It led me to wonder whether anyone would take up the subject as a lens for the workshop or merely accept it as a passing comment. Humour is an effective engagement tool, which was clearly evident as Moshe introduced his workshop and discussed his history and publications. He began by telling his audience that his former partner Brian Stagoll once introduced him by saying, "I'm sure Moshe is looking forward to hearing what he has to say!"

The right to write about humour

Moshe is a storyteller and uses this gift well in his writing and teaching. He told humorous stories about bringing his books to print, which highlighted how language and its nuances are so important. His first book was a series of short stories about his early years as a Child Psychologist and Family Therapist. It was published in English with the title, 'Corrupting the Young and other stories of a family therapist' (Lang & Lang, 1986). In France it was then published as 'Families I Love You' (Lang & Lang, 1989). The Hebrew version in Israel was titled, 'How to stop a nagging mother' (Lang & Lang, 1989). Moshe told his audience that it wasn't a surprise to him that the sales of the book in Israel were poor as no one believed that what the title suggested was possible.



The laughter did not end there. Moshe's mother was still living in Israel at the time…

When the publisher proudly gave Moshe's mother a copy of the book, she was shocked and couldn't read it as she thought Moshe had written about her. Moshe recalled how he was unsure of the Hebrew translation as he felt it was too formal and stiff. One day, his cousin visited his mother and brought along her 10 year old son. As the boy became bored with the adult conversation, he was given the 'shocking' book to read. One of those stories featured Moshe building rapport by climbing up behind the young depressed 'Peter' who felt more comfortable having therapy up a tree. Before long, laughter could be heard and when Moshe's mother asked the boy why, he described the story of 'Peter'. It was only then that she realised the book wasn't about her. Moshe had his feedback that if a 10 year old can enjoy it, the translation was at the right level to make the book a good read.

Another well received book by Moshe is divided into four sections of therapy: children, couples, relations and his work with holocaust survivors. When deciding on the title, Moshe suggested "The Long Shadow". To him it connoted the shadow of the holocaust and also reminded him of his childhood dream of becoming a detective and shadowing people. The publisher however had the contractual prerogative to determine the book cover. At the time, research showed that books with positive titles sold better and so the book became 'Resilience: Stories of a Family Therapist (Lang & Lang, 1996). A year or two later Moshe was negotiating the publication of the book in Israel. The publisher insisted on one condition: that Moshe agreed to the change of title to 'The Long Shadow'…

Moshe's message was that by writing, we can reflect and learn more about our practice, and that there is always a funny side. As a teacher, his sense of irony had the participants relaxed and in good humour, ready to learn.

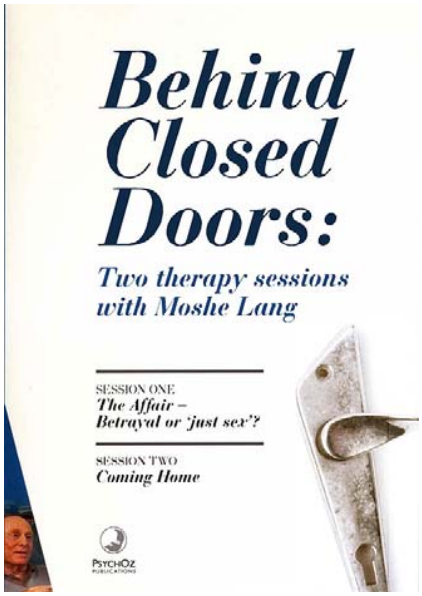
Setting the scene for learning

The workshop focussed around the training tool: 'Behind Closed Doors' (Lang, 2012). It is a package of two educational DVDs with a manual developed by Moshe to demonstrate his approach to therapy. "The Affair" showcases Couples Therapy (which was to be the focus of the workshop) and "Coming Home" displaying Family Therapy with mother and son. The clients are professional actors from Playback Theatre who are highly skilled in improvisation. The actors and Moshe are given a brief outline of the issues that brings them to therapy. Moshe treats the actors as real clients so that the session is as close to real therapy as possible.

In typical Moshe style, he gave his participants options of how the workshop might progress. We were the experts in how we like to learn. We could be as intense or as relaxed as we wish. As the sun streamed in though the hallway, Moshe suggested we can watch the DVD and then:

- have a group discussion or small group intensives; or
- replay the DVD in slices and stop to unpack the therapy; or
- engage in a live 'second session' and workshop interventions, or
- we could simply watch and then go for a walk in that oh so inviting sunshine.

Sultanoff (1992) asserted that humour builds relationships and can bring people together. In therapy, humour creates a bond between the therapist and the client. Moshe's offer of learning opportunities was a very clever technique of using humour to gently invite everyone to participate.



Firstly Moshe addressed the importance of the client having autonomy. It began with an explanation of how the filming was set up. The producer and director Tarni James was concerned about whether the actors needed a script, more information about how Moshe works or what might happen in the session. Moshe asked us to guess how he responded to the request, playfully asserting that no one had ever guessed correctly so far. Being good problem-solving therapists, the group entered into banter with Moshe: offering suggestions, creative solutions and even mini formulations. There was laughter as wrong answer after wrong answer was offered. One brave participant went against the grain and suggested that Tarni could ask the actors to decide what they needed and she won the prize. Moshe tossed her a copy of one of his books and as this winner caught her reward Moshe commented, "What a catch!" Moshe's first lesson of the day: our clients are the only ones who can answer what they need so why not ask? We are not the experts on their life and we need to be careful not to assume or impose our ideas. A good therapist always maintains a stance of curiosity.

The participants then watched the DVD without interruption and as the second half of the workshop was to be a live 'second session' with the fictional couple there would be no opportunity to reflect on the use of humour so allow me to do so now.

Deconstructing the humour of "The Affair"

In "The Affair" Alex and Andrew are a couple with a six month old baby, Lily. They suffered the pain of a miscarriage before Lily, which they say at the time brought them closer together. It also seemed to have increased Alex's fears of never having a successful pregnancy and therefore never being a mother. During the pregnancy with Lily, Alex became highly anxious and as what she described as "too careful". She feared exercise and sex might do harm and wanted to do the best for their chances of having a family. Andrew described sex as part of the couple's intimacy, a "way for us to find our way back together". For him, Alex withholding sex was a rejection and he felt the couple became more separate. The couple came to therapy because it turns out that Andrew had an affair during the pregnancy.

It was a very serious and often at times a painful session with humour adding some levity at pertinent points. Alex brought great intensity while Andrew used humour. If Moshe was only serious he would lose Andrew, whereas by balancing seriousness with humour he was able to connect with the couple as individuals and as partners.

After spending time gathering information and getting to know the couple Moshe asks, "How can I best help you?" The couple laugh and say "We thought you would tell us!" Moshe doesn't laugh with them but rather allows the story to develop further, which includes Andrew beginning to tentatively articulate his goals for therapy. If Moshe had laughed would that have impeded the session at that point? I wonder if it would have given Andrew a little break from the intensity and an invitation to be more himself.

The session progresses with Alex talking about her fears for this second pregnancy after her first miscarriage and how her anxieties might have affected Andrew. The couple also talk about how the grief of the miscarriage brought them closer together; as Andrew said, "We hung in there, we won really…" Moshe summarises the couple's experience from miscarriage to getting pregnant to having Lily:

> *"You get pregnant straight away and so the very thing that you are keen to have happen to you, happens to you. And a year later or thereabouts you are in this room being miserable as hell".*

The couple laugh with Moshe. The humour here brought a moment of levity in what had been a very heavy session so far. I wonder if it also gave permission for Andrew to engage in a different way as he seemed to talk more freely.

Moshe then asks the couple what they could have done differently. Andrew responds by saying he would have liked to have listened to Alex's fears more and that instead of looking for relief outside the marriage he should have used what he coined as "Mrs Palmer and her five daughters" (masturbation to the unfamiliar). Here begins a banter between Andrew and Moshe about "Mrs Palmer" and while Alex somewhat objects to what she describes as kindergarten humour, it ends with everyone laughing. Moshe tells the couple that "maybe the good news is you can still laugh together". According to Moshe, humour is a way of interrupting the vicious cycle: in this case Alex criticising and expressing her pain, making Andrew feel guilty and withdraw, resulting in Alex offering more criticism. When Andrew laughs with Moshe and Alex joins in, the couple are brought closer together and the vicious cycle is de-escalated.

Moshe told me that the interaction with Andrew was wonderful example of turning a disadvantage into an advantage. Having never heard the expression before, Moshe's ignorance provided them with an impetus to laugh together. Also in that exchange, Andrew became the expert which levelled the playing field. Moshe stated that couples therapy is a juggling act. We need to speak to the individual in their own language and in that moment of the session, Andrew's language was humour.

When Giselle Solinski (2013) reviewed the DVD, she highlighted Moshe's use of humour with Andrew, suggesting he was able to introduce something risqué into the conversation that lightened the mood. Moshe believes that therapy and humour cannot be prescriptive. Humour was not introduced by him as the therapist but rather that he was responding to what Andrew brought to the session. Giselle further questioned whether "a female therapist would have been given the same opportunity" (Solinski, 2013, p. 269). I am not totally convinced that gender would impede Andrew's use of humour so much as whether a female therapist would allow that kind of humour to emerge and respond in kind. If I am authentic, hopefully the client can also be comfortable to be himself, despite my gender. If Andrew could laugh with a female therapist, then his humour is normalised and either Alex can learn from that interaction or might end up feeling the therapist is selling out to the enemy.

The use of humour is a balance of opportunity and risk. It requires appropriate judgement of whether not using humour at all is more dangerous than the risk of using or responding to it. It also requires confidence to let go of a superior stance, which is the goal of good person-centred practice.

Some assert that humour should only be used by the very experienced therapist as what Moshe did in his session was "dangerous". Indeed when Edwin Harari reviewed this DVD (2012), he likened a skilled therapist like Moshe to a skilled violinist. A violinist would practice scales and techniques for hundreds of hours and years until it becomes embedded as part of the musician. Similarly, an experienced therapist has practised for hours and internalised skills and techniques until practice becomes almost instinctual. Harari cautioned that a novice therapist should not introduce humour into therapy until after many hours of 'practising scales'.

It highlights the perennial question of when should a therapist introduce humour into their practice as one way of responding? Moshe asserts that humour should be cultivated from the beginning as a state of mind. Humour is like empathy, in that we don't use empathy, we are simply empathic. I suggest that perhaps novice therapists can cultivate their use of humour by first observing how their over-seriousness might be impeding rapport and over time, developing a sense of self and confidence. When I put this to Moshe one day he responded:

> *"I think the novice needs to hurry up and not be a novice!"*

Let's not be novices and engage in an affair of learning

There was much casual discussion about the dilemmas and issues between Alex and Andrew during the workshop break, how we might have interacted with them and what interventions we might have used. Interestingly, I noticed that no one pointed out Moshe's use of humour… However we were to witness more of his humour as a teaching tool during the live 'second session'.

Moshe scratched his head and shrugged his shoulders like a silent movie comedian as he turned to the only male participant in the room who laughingly volunteered to play the role of Andrew. Moshe then said to the participant, "I invite you to be Middle Eastern and choose your bride!" Two very generous participants were now ready to play the roles of Alex and Andrew attending a follow up session with Moshe. There was no background preparation other than what had been observed in the DVD. As Helena Phillips (2012) pointed out in her review of the DVD, we learned about Moshe's style of gathering history; getting to know the couples' strengths, weaknesses; information about their relationship and sex life. Helena lamented that what the viewers did not witness was how to manage when as therapists we are in the middle of a couple's chaos and perhaps wishing we weren't. What a shame Helena that you weren't at the workshop to see what happened next for the couple!

As Moshe began the 'second session' with Alex and Andrew, his skills of respecting the clients as experts in their lives were clear. He asked them how the passing week had been and whether they had any thoughts about the first session. He also asked the couple what would be most helpful to talk about today. He used this same technique with his audience, showing that as teacher, he was interested in his students' perspectives to help them to become their own experts. A key proposition in the teaching of family therapy is that it should parallel therapy itself, promoting openness and disclosure (Stagoll, Lang & Goding, 1979). The therapist's first task is to provide a safe space where the family can explore and experiment with different ways of relating to each other in the immediate present. Similarly, the teacher's task is to create a learning environment that is open; where students can try out something new and develop experiential awareness of how powerful the here and now process can be (Stagoll, Lang & Goding, 1979). As therapist and teacher, Moshe certainly upheld the tenet of "do it and show it rather than talk about it" (Stagoll, Lang & Golding, 1979, p.37).

Throughout the session, Moshe would stop at pertinent points and ask the participants to feedback their thoughts, concerns, formulations and challenge to create a response to the couple as a way of learning the nuances of couples therapy. Serious discussion and some debating would occur and he would then either use one of the participant's responses or offer to the couple his own response. Moshe constantly used the technique of summarising, reflecting back what he had heard as a suggestion, and then asking the couple where they would like to head next. It was an excellent example of how to use feedback effectively to negotiate treatment that created a sense of collaboration. This occurred both with the couple and with the workshop participants.

As the session progressed it became clear that 'DVD Alex and Andrew' were not the same couple as 'workshop Alex and Andrew'. The workshop couple came with the same issue as in the first session but it played out so differently. The intensity between them was heightened and almost antagonistic and abusive. That we were in the middle of chaos was clear. The central issue was no longer the same. It was almost as if baby Lily had never been born. It was interesting how Moshe seemed to time the session pauses to reduce the force of emotion rising in the workshop couple and indeed in the audience. His use of humour was important here to regain perspective. If the couple came out of role to join the observing team, Moshe would offer a quip along the lines of, "No you're the husband, and you don't get to speak."

Brian Cade (1982) discussed the problem of reflective teams becoming mired in the family's pain and despair as transference of the affect-laden session occurred. He asserted that when the observing team began to use what he coined as a 'manic defence' by using humour and considering the absurd, the team became more objective, constructive and creative in finding ideas for therapeutic interventions (Cade, 1982). While Moshe did not ask the participants to use humour to find solutions for the workshop couple, he demonstrated therapeutic humour as a teaching tool to release the possible emotionally fraught transference from the workshop couple to the audience.

At one point for example, Moshe put his hands to his head and laughing exclaimed, "I am seeing a totally different couple and it's doing my head in!" This opened up a lively discussion about not making assumptions about our clients and that while we can be prepared for a session there is always the possibility that it will take a surprising direction or detour. There was also a light but quite serious underlying warning to be careful about pathologising and that rules are made to be broken.

The rules of Couples Therapy are that there are no rules

Moshe did not flippantly flout the theoretical rules of Couples Therapy, he asserted that we need to keep abreast of what the couple might want and need and keep asking what would be helpful. He taught that the contract between the therapist and client is constantly negotiated over time and minute by minute, "What would you like to tell me?" This was highlighted when 'workshop Andrew' was given the opportunity to be heard as that was his goal for the session. Moshe asked his audience about their thoughts of conducting this part of the session as individual counselling within the couples therapy. Participants were rightly concerned about the impact on the 'silent witness' as focus was placed on the other person; whether this was ethically and clinically sound; and how to bring the session back to couples work.

Moshe challenged us to think about weighing up the desperate need of Andrew in that moment and whether not allowing him to unpack his thoughts would hinder his progress. Moshe also wondered whether having Alex silently witness Andrew's individual therapy might help her to understand her husband as never before, which in turn might help the couple overall. The next part of the session did indeed help the couple to make a connection of improved understanding of each other's issues.


Image courtesy of cbenjasuwan freedigitalphotos.com

Max Cornwell (2013) reviewed the DVD and noted how the session highlighted the way in which Moshe's approach encourages a sense of hope, creates an atmosphere of shared understanding and respect. He also noted that Moshe's style of engagement allows for the space to think and plan (Cornwell, 2013). It was mind boggling to watch this master at work, taking what seemed like enormous risks, but by constantly asking his clients for permission to proceed, and using a little silence to remain thoughtful, chaos was turned into order. The work appeared effortless even though you could see how hard Moshe was working to support both the couple and the audience in the learning. Without rules, there were still rules and Moshe encouraged us to be reflective about our practice; to learn to be comfortable in what we know and confident to try something new; and to not get mired in diagnosis and textbook interventions.

The rules of diagnosis

'Workshop Alex and Andrew' were de-roled and the rest of the workshop focussed on group discussion and debriefing. This section of the workshop made a story Moshe had told earlier about his books pertinent and on reflection oh so very clever. He had related the tale of 'Food for Thought' from 'Corrupting the Young' (Lang & Lang, 1986): A man had presented at Royal Melbourne Hospital with a bag of sandwiches. Having declared that the food was poisoned he was sent to psychiatry. Moshe was sent to assess the man who insisted that his landlady was trying to poison him and he knew this to be true because she had a look about her face. Moshe diagnosed the man with paranoia and when asked by his supervisor Dr Jeffrey if he was absolutely sure, Moshe was certain he was correct. Dr Jeffery then asked Moshe to eat the sandwiches. Moshe declined (Lang & Lang, 1986). Buyers beware…

Moshe smiled at us and in a slightly good-natured teasing way insisted his audience, as mental health professionals, now use science and diagnose Alex. I couldn't help but laugh internally as not one person gave a worthy DSM-V diagnosis and case formulation. Again, Moshe's delicate use of humour assisted with keeping his audience curious and contemplative. He continued to use humour to lighten the intensity of the discussion when it had the risk of moving from thoughtful reflection to naming, blaming and shaming. Ironically, I cannot pinpoint at this stage exactly what Moshe said or did that was humorous. He has said to me in the past that humour is fleeting; it is like air. We know it's there but we cannot paint it or describe it. Perhaps then my humour diagnostic tool floated away. To my chagrin, most likely I was so focussed on thinking about an accurate formulation as a serious therapist, I lost my humorous way.

Conclusion

As the workshop ended and the sun was beginning to set, no one regretted not taking up Moshe's offer of going for a walk. Embracing the nerve-wracking challenge of working in-vivo seemed a most unlikely way to spend a Saturday afternoon and yet made for some incredible learning, experimentation, personal challenge, and space to make mistakes as well as witness some victories.

The challenge in the history of therapy and even of therapists is to decide how close and personal or impersonal are we willing to be. The most successful therapists and supervisors or teachers create opportunities for feedback from both the clients/students and the therapist. To keep a client (and indeed a student) engaged in treatment it is important to accurately identify when they are *not* responding to our therapy and address the reasons for the lack of change so that we can find a new direction (Duncan & Miller, 2008). This means we need to allow ourselves to be vulnerable and robust enough to handle whatever the client brings and reflects about the therapy during and at the end of every session. Duncan & Miller (2008) encourage the use of standardised measures such as the Client Directed Outcomes Instrument to obtain feedback in the early stages of therapy about what is working or not. The vital lesson is to create an atmosphere of mutual reflection where we can gain important information about the client, our alliance and whether our approach is working (Duncan & Miller, 2008). This is pertinent in our use of humour as if both client and therapist enjoy the interaction there is a feedback loop of shared laughter or smiles.

Moshe told me after the workshop how angry he was with himself, that he did a bad job of teaching and made poor choices. The participant feedback told an entirely different story. Moshe was described as brave, inspiring, provocative, knowledgeable and wise. Participants commented on the negotiating process and collaborative style and enjoyed the interactive nature of the workshop. Moshe had to concede that he got it wrong and is always learning.

I would have liked to see Moshe overtly challenge his participants to take the risk of using humour to manage the chaos and discuss where it would have been appropriate. However if they were watching, the balance between seriousness and humour was evident. Life and frankly therapy and learning without humour are bland; it needs a little salt and pepper. When cooking we can bring out the flavour of the food with seasoning. It requires a delicate touch however as too much salt just makes you thirsty and too much pepper will make you sneeze all over your dish. On the other hand, not all dishes need seasoning. We also need a little dessert in our lives. Too many stringent rules however and we risk training our humour palette to resist the joys of a taste sensation.

When Moshe was asked how he has changed over the years, he reflected that when he was young he tried to hide how scared he was and that hopefully his ignorance wouldn't be discovered. Now older (and wiser) he can openly say when he doesn't know. Moshe has described this interaction as his client becoming the expert and he "the dummy". He can use his unfamiliarity about such expressions as 'Mrs Palmer and her five daughters' to open up a conversation between himself and his clients/students. Lyn Hoffman (1994) described Moshe as being able to find the finer meaning in any problem. She stated that in his writing, Moshe displays intelligence and humanity. This is also true in Moshe's teaching and practice of Couples Therapy.

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