

What a pleasure to spend a Friday afternoon 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. Moshe asserted to his raptured audience that we perhaps suffer from too much "seriousity", an affliction that can capture even the most insightful and skilled therapist.

Seriousity, if it were to be added as an Axis I disorder in the DSM-V might 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
- Considering what is heard in terms of its unfavourable consequences
- 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 suggests however 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.

Moshe told us the story of a 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 of 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?

Jocularity is not to be confused with silliness however. 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 suggests that the risks of humour include:

- making the mistake of laughing at rather than laughing with;
- being culturally inappropriate;
- mistiming and thus falling flat.

Jocularity: a therapeutic cure to the disease of Seriousity.

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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. Without humour in our practice, we risk burnout and of course being cursed with seriousness.

Humour allows for playfulness; connecting to the inner child; can reduce anxiety; can help us to see the absurdity of situations. 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. Humour or jocularity is thus a powerful tool.

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 proposes that we should not 'use' humour that way, but rather cultivate humour as a state of mind. He likened 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;
- 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 stated, 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", 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?

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

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