

The Meaning, Use, and Misuse of Humor in Psychodynamic Psychotherapy

*Man alone suffers so excruciatingly in the world
that he was compelled to invent laughter
Nietzsche*

This seminar explores the meanings, implications, and usage of humor in psychodynamic psychotherapy. Utilizing the theoretical perspectives of object-relations theory and self-psychology as our clinical background we will explore humor within diverse clinical settings (individual, couples, family, and group).

The term “humor” embraces such phenomenon as wit, puns, jokes, merriment, laughter, smiling, cheerfulness, and sarcasm. A review of the available literature reveals that the therapist’s own personality structure, character/interpersonal style, sense of humor, experience level, training and theoretical perspective influences the understanding, value, interpretation and usage placed on humor in psychotherapy. Likewise, the client’s own personality structure, sense of humor, interpersonal style, and diagnostic presentation will dictate if and how a client will use and/or experience humor within psychotherapy. The interpersonal spheres within couples and groups are similarly richly peppered with “humor” as a means to both connect and disconnect.

It is suggested that the intersubjective field of the therapeutic dyad, especially the complexities of the transference/countertransference matrix, naturally includes both participants’ personality, personal history, and, as an innate human quality, our senses of humor. It will be argued that humor should therefore be considered, with appropriate thoughtfulness and respect, to facilitate insight, awareness, change, and healing.

Case examples are included to illustrate the positive and destructive uses of humor by both client and therapist. Specific interventions will be offered to further the clinical agenda. A literature review will be provided along with suggested readings.

Seminar Learning Objectives:

1. Participants will gain a richer appreciation for the relevance of humor dynamics, especially in terms of developmental object relational themes and the therapeutic relationship.
2. Participants will gain understanding of the influences of cultural variables in how humor is experienced and expressed.
3. Participants will gain practical intervention/interpretive skills to help client/clinician understand and utilize humor dynamics.
4. Participants will develop greater comfort with discussing, exploring, and utilizing humor with clients.