

Using Humor Professionally...With Clients, Patients and Customers

In matters of humor, what is appealing to one person is appalling to another. Melvin Helitzer

Rule 1: There is no such thing as "It is just funny." Among other things, humor depends on the people involved and their relationship.

Guideline 1: Know your client's sense of humor.

Humor can be a useful intervention if you can reasonably predict the outcome. Listening to the client with a focus on humor styles can help you tailor comments to fit the style and personality of the client.

Guideline 2: Let them lead.

Wait for them to smile, joke, or laugh and use it as an opportunity to join in.

Guideline 3: Make sure you have permission.

This will depend on your relationship. Are you equals? Is there understood empathy? Relationships with clients or patients can be inherently unequal, so the practitioner needs to be extra cautious in using humor. Watch closely for signs that you might have gone too far.

For example, two people at a cancer support group can joke with each other about losing their hair, but hearing a joke about this from an outsider, even a health care practitioner may not be perceived as humorous.

Is the relationship open enough for you to tell each other when you have gone too far?

Rule 2: Humor is only humor in context. It depends on where, when, why, and how (as well as who).

Guideline 1: Comedians have said that humor is tragedy plus time.

Humor gives perspective to difficult times, but if you are too close to the tragedy, attempts at humor seem cruel and senseless. You need some distance for humor to occur.

Guideline 2: Humor can hurt or heal.

When in doubt, don't. Everyone has a sense of humor, but it can vary depending on the people involved, the connection or lack thereof of to the humorous subject, the day, the circumstance, even the weather. If there is no laughter or amusement, it doesn't mean that your client doesn't have a sense of humor, or even that your humor might not be appreciated on another day. People generally use the same coping mechanisms during crises that they have used in other stressful situations.

Guideline 3: Be ready to apologize.

Even the best-planned intervention can flop. What worked wonderfully yesterday may bomb today. If you have a good relationship, even failed humor is an opportunity to sensitively explore the reason for the negative response.

Rule 3: Follow the AT&T rule—use humor that is appropriate, timely and tasteful.

It's best to make fun of yourself or institutions. Laugh with, not at. Humor is inappropriate when a person is trying to come to grips with any emotional crisis, or needs quiet time to rest, contemplate, pray or cry. Sometimes even a simple smile can be healing.