

## Humor in the Treatment of Depression

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**Received:** June 28, 2021; **Accepted:** July 15, 2021; **Published:** July 22, 2021

### 1. Introduction

The use of humor in psychotherapy has been reviewed many years ago (in fact, too many to count) by Shaughnessy and Wadsworth [1]. The use of humor continues to be contentiously discussed, first of all because there are different types of "humor". Seminal work was done by Shaughnessy [2], Peter and Dana [3] and Shaughnessy [4] as well as by Fry and Salameh [5].

We do not mean to mock, ridicule or make fun of clients or their problems. However, we can use mirth, fun, satire, sometimes sarcasm, cartoons, pastiche, drollery, gross exaggeration and other aspects of comedy to help clients see things from another perspective. This article will cursorily review a few examples of the use of humor by some well-known therapists, as well as a few not so well-known therapists and sadly by some unknown therapists.

Probably the first therapist to write about the use of humor was Albert Ellis [6] who wrote about fun in psychotherapy in one of his many books. Other therapists followed with their own types of comedic interventions, and some utilized humor homework (asking a client to try to find at least one cartoon a day that brought some joy or a smile to their face).

Albert Ellis used tapes to communicate his ideas to his clients and he would in his own inimitable fashion attempt to communicate some of his ideas in his own broken baritone by singing some song set to his own lyrics. He actually has a number of these songs to help clients gain insight into their irrational thinking, their inappropriate expectations, their unreasonable demands and wants and needs and their reliance on magical thinking.

His singing has been preserved and is available from the Institute for Rational Emotive Psychotherapy.

For those who have access to You Tube- there is a brief introduction to the use of humorous songs and Dr. Ellis singing one.



[Albert Ellis - Whine! Whine! Whine! - YouTube](#)

For those who want a number of songs that can be applied to various problems such as worry, depression, anxiety and other problems go to:

<http://spectrum.troy.edu/kness/Ellis-RET%20Handouts/Rational%20Humorous%20Addiction%20Songs%20by%20Ellis.pdf>

One example of a song that Ellis [7] has utilized to help his clients give up their irrational, illogical, unreasonable, unrealistic thinking is based on Stephen Foster's "Beautiful Dreamer".

Here is Ellis' version:

*"Beautiful hangup, why must we part? When we have shared our whole lives from the start?  
We are so used to- taking one course- Oh what a crime it would be to divorce!  
Beautiful hangup- don't go away. Who will befriend me if you do not stay?  
Though you still make me, look like a jerk-  
Living without you would take so much work!  
Living without you would take so much work!"*

There are many other songs on depression, misery, love slobism, whining and neuroses and they are available in cassette and paper format.

Some Seinfeld episodes on You Tube can clarify and exemplify cognitive distortions. For example:



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkPSSetOh04>

Watching old re-runs of Seinfeld and the antics of Kramer, George and Frank Costanza and Elaine can provide hours of fun, mirth, frivolity and pure enjoyment to the lives of many. And then of course there is Newman and the “Soup Nazi” (I hope I do not get in trouble referring to the chef who said, “No soup for you!”)

Many years ago, there was actually a brief monograph entitled the Ha-Ha-Ha Handout which was edited by Chuck and Mary Durham. It is not known what happened to poor Chuck and Mary but suffice it to say, their efforts were applauded by many, as their Humor Hypnosis and Health Handout was read by several hundred million people (well actually not several hundred million, but I am attempting to use humor here to keep the reader interested and entertained). Past copies of the Humor, Hypnosis and Health Quarterly are available from this author.

Harold Greenwald, who developed direct decision therapy years ago employed exaggeration, gross distortion and often challenged clients to think differently about their difficulties.

Greenwald [8] wrote about humor in psychotherapy and provided some sample interventions as well as concerns about the use of it in counseling.

Greenwald [9] also wrote about "the humor decision" in an excellent book edited by Fry and Salameh [5].

Viktor Frankl [10,11] also employed humor to help clients distance themselves from their problems. His methodology was called "paradoxical intention".

A quite mediocre therapist who has not received world-wide renown wrote about "Humor: The Royal Road to Wellness" [2] and attempted to review some of the main interventions used in counseling.

Gross exaggeration, and puns, which are often funny or punny, can also be used to lift the spirits of clients in deep depression.

## 2. Therapeutic Homework

Some clients can be assigned homework to "lift their spirits" and they are told to watch at least one humorous television show a week or to listen to at least one humorous record or watch one comical movie. Here the choice of movies is left to the client. Some may prefer the self-deprecating humor of Rodney Dangerfield in his movies (Back to School, Meet Wally Sparks and Easy Money). Other individuals may prefer the quiet comedy of Steve Martin, and still others prefer the contemporary comedy of Chris Rock.

Albert Ellis would often assign humorous assignments such as having clients call out the subway stops on the New York City subway, (42nd Street, 59th Street and Columbus Circle) to show clients that no matter how strange their behavior, life continues on.

There have also been attempts to use humor in the classroom. Shaughnessy and Stanley [12] have provided a host of interventions to help teachers help students read and enjoy books - which obviously do not need batteries.

Gonot-Shoupinsky FN & Garip G. [13] have been involved in the idea of specifically asking or telling clients to find something to laugh about during their daily routine.

Gonot-Schoupinsky FN & Garip are using fun, laughter, mirth, frivolity and joviality in their attempt to utilize laughter to enhance health and well-being in adults using what they term as "The Laughie".

## 3. Summary and Conclusions

This paper has attempted to provide a brief overview in terms of using humor to assist with mild depression. The reader is encouraged to investigate these endeavors with a competent mental health professional.

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