

USING HUMOR IN PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH OLDER ADULTS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY by *Deborah Leila Cohen Levine, 2009*

This is an exploratory study examining when, how, and why psychotherapists use humor in treatment with older adults and the impact on both clients and therapists. It seeks to bridge the gap between the small body of literature regarding the use of humor in treatment, and the writings regarding older adults and humor. The eight participants report that in their experience, humor is effective in establishing and enhancing the therapeutic relationship, assessing client functioning and client progress, making interpretations, reframing, developing, and strengthening coping skills. They indicate that the use of humor may be problematic if therapists only use it to create a comfortable atmosphere or for their own pleasure; if clients use humor to avoid looking at certain issues or to entertain the clinician; or if the humor insults the client or otherwise creates a breach.

The participants see older adults as individuals but are aware that as a group they suffer from many loss-related circumstances: physical abilities, relationships, roles, finances, and meaningful activities. While the participants generally consider older adults to be more open to humorous exchange, they also acknowledge that life circumstances may contribute to greater isolation, loss of resiliency, or depression. The participants' descriptions of their experiences using humor in treatment with older adults point to the power of humor in creating attunement in the therapeutic relationship and "moments of meeting" that enhance positive affect and reduce negative affect.

The clinicians in this study are highly experienced and close in chronological age to older adulthood. Humor is also provisionally seen by the participants as helpful in preventing burnout when dealing with client circumstances that may engender painful countertransference experiences.