

Increased Internal-Control Using Humor With Lifestyle Awareness

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In a recent best-selling book, Dyer (1976, p. 214) states that "perhaps the single most outstanding characteristic of healthy people is their unhostile sense of humor." An investigation by O'Connell (1960) indicated that the well-adjusted person has a greater appreciation for humor than the less-adjusted person. From a clinical perspective, some practitioners, e.g., Shelton & Ackerman (1974), advocate the therapeutic use of evocation of humor as a state incompatible with anxiety and Ellis (1976) emphasized humor as a means of challenging irrational beliefs. Recently in Wales, the world's first International Symposium on Humor was held. Adler made frequent use of humor (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) and those endorsing Adlerian ideas (e.g., O'Connell, 1975; Olson, 1976) employ humor in psychotherapy.

The ability to find humor in and to laugh at one's own biased expectations of self, others, and life, when these notions are working to one's disadvantage, would seem to enhance personal growth. This ability could well exist less frequently than is generally imagined, e.g., O'Connell's (1969) findings suggest that the ability to produce humor was not closely related to its appreciation. Possibly the ability to generate self-humor can be encouraged and learned by a continued exploration and development of creative therapeutic approaches. Kadis & Winick (1973) have found selected cartoons to be an effective means of facilitating the therapeutic process. They define the cartoon (p. 106) as "a stylized drawing, often of people in a social situation, which exaggerates their foibles." Shulman (1973) has used dramatic confrontation in group psychotherapy by having group members respond to another member's lifestyle demands on them in an exaggerated manner, e.g., treating a member like an inadequate baby or another member like a splendid princess. Related to these approaches, the focus of the present investigation is on the absurd exaggeration of individual lifestyles, using masquerades and photography, as a means of increasing self-awareness and self-acceptance. The emphasis here is on a technique employing humor which may be helpful in the practice of counseling and psychotherapy.

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Alfred Adler developed a concept for understanding the individual that he termed "life style." This term may be understood to mean the pattern of dimly-conscious guidelines or goals a person uses for interacting with others and for measuring self-worth. Adler contended that everyone strives toward a subjectively determined ideal of respect-from-others which is a function of the early childhood conclusions drawn about self, others, and life. These conclusions or notions are, of course, biased by variables unique to each person such as family values, birth order, interaction patterns, parental modeling, and other childhood experiences. These somewhat biased notions continue to guide an individual through life and upon them goals and behavior are based. The life style, or "cognitive map" (Mosak & Dreikurs, 1973 p. 74), creates self-reinforcing biased expectations and accompanying selective perceptions which work well for the individual some of the time, but not as well on other occasions. An increased awareness of these biased expectations that underlie one's goals and behaviors can be helpful as a person moves through his daily life. The therapist relies on the selectivity feature of memory as reflecting indications of childhood conclusions that presently are being used as guidelines for coping.

The process of helping a person to increase this level of insight in everyday life frequently can be quite challenging and difficult, as is the case with most cognitively-oriented therapeutic approaches. The following quasi-experiment was an exploration of a humor-based method for enhancing self-awareness and self-control, as well as an effort to lend credence to this technique from a practitioners vantage point. The research hypotheses were that (a) internal locus of control would increase and that (b) negative feeling states related to self would decrease, when the subjects had been involved in self-directed-humor exercises.

Method

The experimental group consisted of nine students enrolled in a seminar emphasizing the use of the Adlerian life style approach in counseling. The selection of the control group of nine, also from the same graduate program, was based on the matched variables of sex and demonstrated scholarship. Three males and six females comprised each group.

Four weeks prior to the completion of the seminar, both groups were given a variation of Rotter's Internal-External Control Scale (Rotter, Chance & Phares, 1972). Rotter's scale indicates the degree to which an individual feels in control of his own destiny or feels controlled by external circumstances. This variation consisted of changing the forced choice nature of the fifty-eight items to that of a semantic differential in which the respondent was asked to circle the number (1-9) which best represented the degree of believing or disbelieving each statement. This format was changed in order to reflect more sensitively pre-post test changes in locus of control. The groups were not significantly different upon pre-testing ($t = .38$).

The second criterion was frequency of negative feeling states. Each day for one week, the subjects, using wrist golf counters, were requested to tally negative emotions or mental states (e.g., anxiety, anger, confusion, etc.) they would prefer experiencing less strongly or less often. After the subsequent two week period, at which time the experimental group engaged in their self-directed-humor exercises, both groups repeated tallying negative feeling states for a one week period. In a three-month follow-up, both groups were asked to again tally negative feeling states for one week and to retake the modified Rotter Scale.

On the evening prior to the beginning of the two week experimental period, the experimental group assembled for the photographing of the life style masquerades. The determination of each individual life style was the result of group input using the format developed by Dreikurs (1967). Preceding this period, feedback was expressed by the group in the Adlerian framework of biased notions about self, others, life and of goals and behaviors used to implement these notions. In the determination of a group member's life style, the individual had the responsibility of ultimately deciding which of the suggested life style characteristics were accurate. The choice of the exaggerated life style masquerade was likewise the result of group-individual interaction with the individual making the final costume choices. During this evening, polaroid photographs were made of each of the masqueraded group members.

Highlights of the self-serving characteristics of each life style and of the exaggerated masquerade features were as follows: (a) life style: to be "gooder than good" along with charm, achievement orientation, and the use of silent suffering as an approach-avoidance motivator; masquerade: a prima donna pose and a charming, solicitous smile, a basket of overflowing goodies, a huge sunburst, and an umbrella embellished with her name; (b) to be a mysterious observer-sage while obtaining special treatment through subtle tactfulness: a seductive pose, an all-knowing facial expression, clad in many veils and in fareastern attire; (c) to be on top of others by out-doing them, along with attempts of intellectual superiority and grandiose intimidation: perched atop a ladder in a matador's outfit, complete with sword in one hand and a book in the other; (d) to please others in an ongoing effort to measure up while expecting tender-loving-care in return: midway up a ladder, clothed in a choir boy's robe and a halo, clutching a yardstick and a picture of an attractive, understanding woman; (e) to maintain autonomy of self through achievement, control of others, guarding private sensitivity: stepping upward, grimacing from a mouse trap on one hand and having puppet-like controlling strings in the other hand while wearing a blouse imprinted with a computer keyboard; (f) to be recognized as a charming queen by using sweetness, generosity, and propriety: a regal pose and a smile complemented by a queen's crown, basket of gifts and sugar in one hand and a pair of binoculars in the other; (g) to collect and savor the pleasures of life, sometimes through smooth and clever manipulation: slouched in a chair while wearing a

yachtman's hat and smoking a pipe, a game box in one hand and girlie magazine in the other; (h) to drive and strive for a place of importance in the eyes of others, particularly through the use of attention resulting from achievement and from sharing knowledge: leaning forward and beckoning attention, clad in a racing cap, scarf, gloves, and with a red heart on a eye-catching outfit, plus a scholarly book in hand; and (i) to be recognized as gallant and strong, especially by handling more than one's share and by being independent: a Caesar-like pose with head tilted back, wearing a cape, sword, and flowers while holding a football helmet on which a message proclaims, "Let me . . . I can manage."

With the polaroid photograph attached to a cardboard fold-out resembling a passport, each person was instructed to complete a prescribed procedure before each meal for two weeks. The procedure was first to record on the fold-out the number of situations in which negative feeling states were experienced since the last meal. Then, for each situation, the person was requested to look at the exaggerated self-ideal picture and try to figure out how the life style contributed to the unwanted negative feeling or mental state. The emphasis was placed on exploring the "shoulds and should nots" that were at work. The number of situations in which the life style was discovered to be working to one's disadvantage were then recorded on the fold-out. Finally the individual was required to:

Select one situation (from those in which you discovered your life style at work) that you would like to change *the most*. Then *vividly imagine* yourself during this situation pausing or really laughing at yourself for letting this self-ideal work to your disadvantage. *Picture yourself* actually smiling or even uproariously laughing and saying to yourself subvocally, "You're still OK (John), even when you don't make these exaggerated expectations of yourself."

If the individual was unable to identify a situation in which a negative feeling was experienced and it was suspected that things since the last meal really were not that satisfactory, the person was to *punish himself* for lack of awareness by not drinking any liquids with the meal.

Results and Discussion

In regard to increases in internality, based on the Locus of Control instrument, there was a significant difference (p. 10, $t = 1.52$) between the experimental and control groups on the post-testing. The results were significant even when the individual with the highest increase in the experimental group was assigned the mean value for the remainder of the group.

Aside from the statistical restrictiveness resulting from the use of a small sample in this investigation, this modest level of significance would seem to be noteworthy in view of the apparent difficulty in changing such a global criterion (locus of control) in a relatively brief time span.

There was no significant difference between the experimental and control groups in decreasing negative feeling states. This lack of significance characterized the pre- and post-comparison ($t = .009$) and the pre- and three-month follow-up comparison ($t = .414$).

The possibility exists that either an extended period of the humor exercises or specific structured homework assignments were needed to decrease the overall frequency of negative feeling states. Another influential factor is that none of the individuals engaged in this experiment for the expressed purpose of solving personal problems. Yet, from the perspective of ongoing daily functioning, the heightened awareness of the contribution of one's life style to personal problems, accompanied by an increased humorous acceptance of self, may well have been beneficial. For instance, from a practitioner's perspective, it is interesting to note that the experimental group found that 73.4% of the negative feeling states ($N = 634$) which were recorded during the two-week period could be related to the exaggerated life style characteristics.

The procedure of humorously exaggerating individual characteristics through masquerading to enhance self-acceptance and other-acceptance can be used in many types of group approaches. An atmosphere of cohesiveness and trust greatly facilitates this process. Furthermore, the participation of the leader in the exaggerated masquerade is desirable. As can be imagined, the gathering for photographing the masqueraded group members is highly charged with a spirit making and gemeinschaftsgefühl.

Additional uses of this method of using humor (Kadis & Winick, 1973) could be to: penetrate resistance, reduce anxiety, reflect one's own life situation, avoid the maneuvers of a group member whose verbosity is unproductive, communicate to a person who responds to visual images rather than verbal input, and illuminate an individual's self-defeating defenses. Thus, this facilitative use of humor would seem to be a useful technique for the practitioner in both individual and group settings.

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