

## Clinical Corner – Psychotherapy Can Be Fun (by Dr. Matt)

One of the major questions facing researchers in the fields of psychology is: Why does this work? What factors help people to change?

While we are still searching for the complete answer, I might be able to shed a little light on it. I believe that one of the things which affects people in a positive manner is learning about themselves and each other in a fun, upbeat manner.

I remember a young boy I was treating from Long Beach (I'll call him 'Rick'). He was nine years-old and his mother had brought him to see me complaining that he never really spoke to her, didn't listen to her, and feared she had lost touch with him. During our session it was apparent that he enjoyed talking about some topics, like sports, his friends, games, and so forth; but shied away from others, such as chores, school, etc. (funny how so many kids shy away from these topics). When I watched Mom and Rick, it was apparent that they really did want to communicate with each other, but just could not find a way.

One day I suggested we have our session out on the basketball court. Mom told me "No way", but Rick really wanted to. We struck a compromise where I would play with Rick and Mom would stand on the sidelines and we would all talk throughout. This was fine until Rick and I devised a plan to get mom involved. Every once in a while the ball would 'accidentally' roll over toward Mom. We would ask her to pick it up and throw it back. With a little encouragement she began to throw it at the basket (OK, she was no Michael Jordan but she was trying). Anyway, before long she and Rick were throwing the ball and shooting and I was seeing bench time. When the hour was up we all walked toward my office. Mom said, "Dr. Duggan I would like to see you for a moment in your office, privately". I thought, "Uh-oh. Mom is upset because she did not want to play and we got her involved". When she sat down in my office she had only one thing to ask – "Do you know where I can buy a basketball and basket"? She told me she had not had that much fun with Rick since he was two or three. She did not even realize she could enjoy doing things like this with him. She felt accepted by him and loved it.

As she left with the address of a sports store in her hand, I thought how silly I must have sounded out there, chiming in with what I thought were insightful comments. Mom and Rick could not have cared less. They were building a communication bridge with fun as the medium. Rick could see his mom in a different light other than someone who kept reminding him of his deficiencies (homework, chores, etc.). He could at the same time show-off to her by doing something he was proud of, while also teaching her something she did not know. Mom, on the other hand, had the courage to delve into a world (sports) where she did not feel confident and adopt the role of learner.

While that session did not totally change the situation, it went a long way to helping Rick and Mom learn to like, respect, and communicate with one another. We used that session as a touchstone in the weeks ahead. Not surprisingly, as the fun returned to Rick's and Mom's relationship, verbal communication and working out problems returned as well.

Therapy not only can be fun, sometimes it is essential if people care going to learn to enjoy one another and re-establish a positive relationship.