

Talking to Change: An MI Podcast

Glenn Hinds and Sebastian Kaplan



Episode 21: MI & Therapeutic Humor, with Mallori DeSalle, MA, LMHC, NCC, CMHC, MATS, CPS

Glenn Hinds:

Hello again everybody, and welcome back to Talking to Change, a Motivational Interviewing podcast. My name is Glenn Hinds and I am in Derry, Northern Ireland. And as always, I am joined by my very good friend Sebastian Kaplan in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Hi, Seb.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Hello Glenn. Good morning.

Glenn Hinds:

Good morning to you, too. Today's conversation we are expanding even further than before into the world of therapeutic humor in Motivational Interviewing. And our guest today is our friend Mallori DeSalle and we are looking forward to this conversation, but before we get into that talk with Mallori, Seb, maybe you want to introduce us to the social media platforms and how people can contact us.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Certainly, thank you, Glenn. Twitter, you can contact us @ChangeTalking, on Facebook the page is Talking To Change. We've recently started an Instagram page and that's called Talking To Change Podcast and any email contacts people are wanting to make, that's possible at podcast@glennhinds.com, and as always we welcome questions, comments, feedback, ideas for future episodes, all of the above.

Glenn Hinds:

Fantastic, thanks man. So as I say, our guest today is Mallori DeSalle. It's fantastic to see you Mallori. Thanks for coming.

Mallori DeSalle:

Thanks for having me Glenn and Sebastian.

Glenn Hinds:

So before we actually started recording this episode, we had gone about 10 minutes into conversation before we realized I hadn't pressed start on the record button, so it's quite appropriate that we're talking about humor, because I was a butt of a joke before we came on live. So Mallori, as we do with all of our guests, we're really interested to find out about who you are and more particularly, how you found your way into the world of Motivational Interviewing and then began to explore this idea of using therapeutic humor and the practice of MI.



Mallori DeSalle:

Yeah. Well thank you for having me, both of you. I'm looking forward to sharing this conversation together. Like you said, Glenn, my name is Mallori DeSalle and I am in Bloomington, Indiana, which is right in the heart of the United States. I work at Indiana University in the School of Public Health. Though I am a mental health counsellor, my primary role is working across all sorts of different disciplines of work; physicians, medical professionals, teachers, police officers, and helping them learn how to integrate Motivational Interviewing into their work. And I started using humor in my training, and in my treatment, and people were surprised, "Why are we laughing?"

Mallori DeSalle:

So I'm excited to share that conversation with both of you about that today. And MI, now I jokingly say that, "You cannot spell Mallori without MI," so it's a big part of who I am, but it really found me without me expecting it. I was volunteering as a therapist on campus because I was just doing a desk job at the university at the time. The program said, "We use this thing called Motivational Interviewing." I said, "Cool, what is it and how can I learn it?" They said, "Well, we just do it."

Mallori DeSalle:

So I watched a few people and I said, "Are you sure? Because this doesn't look the same anywhere." And so I started looking into it and I started attending trainings. What I realized is that they weren't actually doing Motivational Interviewing, so I became a trainer and then I started delivering training to them so that they could actually deliver an evidence-based effort in using Motivational Interviewing. Then my desire to share that grew and grew and I created a job. It's continued for the last eight years now. So it's worked out and now it's just who I am.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Yeah, and integral to your name as you said. So what was it though, when you first heard the term Motivational Interviewing, and you were curious enough to try to understand and observe it? Something kept you going though and to find out more about it and ultimately to discover, "Wait a minute, what I'm reading about MI is not what I'm seeing people do." Talk a little bit more about that part.

Mallori DeSalle:

The program that I was working in was a mandated substance use program for students who were referred on campus because they were in trouble. And I saw the therapist giving so much information, "Did you know that blood alcohol concentration applies here to the brain?" And I saw the student's eyes roll slowly into the back of their head. Then I saw interns say, "This is the most boring internship I've ever attended." And I thought, "Yeah, it is." I was trained with Carl Rogers, person-centered counselling. That was the style of treatment that I learned about.

Mallori DeSalle:

And so I wasn't having this same kind of exchange with students. I rarely gave them information and when they said, "Well, we're doing MI," I just realized maybe you're not. Maybe what I'm doing is a little bit more like Motivational Interviewing after I started reading it. And then I took an MET, Motivation Enhancement Therapy, online class and realized I'm doing more of that, but I need to learn the foundation of Motivational Interviewing first. So started going to a training offered by a MINT member named George Brenner in Indianapolis. That's where I realized, "Boy, I have a lot more to learn."

Glenn Hinds:

So there was something unappealing about what you were being offered as an introduction to Motivational Interviewing and certainly what you were previously doing which was Rogerian practice was more of what you wanted. When you did the MET it sounded like the connection started to be made and that enhanced your curiosity enough for you then to go talk to someone who knew a bit more about MI. And it sounds like that in itself enlightened and lit up your curiosity enough for you to delve further into it?

Mallori DeSalle:

That's exactly right. I felt really fortunate that at the time my desk job allowed me to continue learning. I was really supported by my colleagues and by my leadership to continue growing, because they saw MI was influential in change. And when I learned more, actually the outcomes with my students that I were seeing, it changed a lot, and I was able to model that for interns and colleagues. And then they saw things change, so it made me just get fired up inside and just know I was onto something.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Yeah, and seemed to spark change within the organization, too, as people got curious about what you were doing and the results that you had.

Mallori DeSalle:

Absolutely.

Sebastian Kaplan:

And so your clinical work was largely young adults, college students, some interaction with people that are using substances and maybe got into trouble for that. And we'll be talking about humor today, of course, in relation to MI. What's your, I guess, humor story, where did that begin for you?

Mallori DeSalle:

To be honest with you, it's an evolution. What I would tell you is that for a long time I saw myself as a goofy, hard to take serious person and I saw it as a flaw. As an early trainer of Motivational Interviewing I found myself constantly falling into the expert trap where I was trying to prove to the audience that I knew what I was talking about. And I



felt disingenuous because I was putting ... The metaphor that I've used is a mask, I was, "I know what I'm talking about and I'm really serious and you should take me seriously."

Mallori DeSalle:

People sort of said, "Okay, but you look young and I don't really believe you." And then when I started being myself and showing humor and engaging using laughter and really, just telling my truth, letting laughter be okay, I realized that the room accepted me more. And they felt safer because they didn't feel that I was going to judge them. And then I was more intentional about using it and I sought out some learning to learn about how to apply it with purpose and not just accidentally.

Glenn Hinds:

So there was an effort to be serious about a serious subject, but the audience didn't appreciate you not being yourself. They responded much more purposefully when you were authentic and they saw much more of who you were. And that sounds like that in itself was quite a big risk for you, given the fact that you considered, inverted commas, your goofiness as a flaw. And then I imagine that it was very positive experience given the fact that people then responded to you in a way that was connecting with you and that they found your interactions much more beneficial and more real for them.

Mallori DeSalle:

Yeah, it was really a shock to me, because as a small person, I have a small, short stature, I am young. Well, I'm getting older, but I'm relatively young. I appear young and I remember being told as an early clinician, "Your youthfulness will work against you. People will not believe that you know what you're talking about." And I embedded that into my fabric and thought, "I am not worthy."

Mallori DeSalle:

And when I realized that actually I am worthy and my humor, my ability to observe and react and to laugh and help people feel safe, that they can laugh at their learning. It actually created both self-acceptance and acceptance of the learners. All of a sudden everyone felt different about Motivational Interviewing, about themselves, and it inspired more than just laughter, but just self-acceptance.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Yeah, so the humor, it seemed to operate for you in a couple ways. One was to embrace the humorous part of you and allow that to come through, whether it's in trainings or in your clinical work. And I would imagine also you, yourself, responding to this feedback that you're sort of doomed to be young looking or youthful-

Mallori DeSalle:

Tragic, right?

Sebastian Kaplan:



Right, and I would suspect, knowing you and knowing how important humor is to you, that you relied a bit on humor to kind of work through that yourself and to get to the other side of that.

Mallori DeSalle:

Yeah, you know when you are searching out for what you're good at as a human ... You know, this is a little deep for a humor conversation, right? When you're looking for what you're good at, you want the world to validate that, and yet your internal message is really the most important. And what I realized was that I was relying on the laughs and the audience, if you will, too much and when I really started to be myself ... And they say about comedy that the only important person in the audience is yourself. If you make yourself laugh, then it's a good joke.

Mallori DeSalle:

I realize that that's actually so true and it's important to pay attention to. And that when you do that as a professional trainer it also is helpful that you're modelling that for the professionals in the room, no matter the field. Because they, too, have to be authentic with their client or with their consumer. And when they are authentic they serve the other person so much better. I just happen to be living that through humor. Other people, it won't be humor and that's okay. It's about more than laughter, it's about allowing yourself to shine in whatever way that comes through.

Glenn Hinds:

Comfortable with yourself and enjoying yourself, enjoying what you're doing that included that aspect of yourself which is about fun and about humor. And when you give yourself permission to connect with that in a very positive way that then, in some way, give people permission to be authentic in whatever version of themselves was real for them, whether that was humor-based or other ways. I suppose in some ways, again, it's back to that idea of you being vulnerable by being true to the audience and that's what you attempt to model to the practitioner to then model to their client or patient.

Mallori DeSalle:

Yes, yes. And so one of the things that I've changed in my work now as a facilitator of Motivational Interviewing is how I introduce myself. I introduce myself, of course, I usually have a slide with my hundreds of credentials after my name, unnecessarily, and then I say, "A couple of things you won't find on my business card, but that really inform who I am is I like to LOL, laugh out loud. I am an MOM, or a mom, and I also live with anxiety and depression." And I say, "So not only am I a therapist, but I have therapist."

Mallori DeSalle:

And I normalize that because I also say, "Each of you are also patients as well as professionals and so am I." So that we can become human together and that's just one way that I introduce humor right away is I just kind of introduce how the credentials are necessary, and yet we can add credentials that have other meanings that are important to us.



Sebastian Kaplan:

Yeah, so very early on people that are learning from you are experiencing you authentically, you sharing personal parts of yourself and modelling this humorous side of you, that we will continue to talk about today.

Mallori DeSalle:

Yes, it's important that they see that I'm going to be honest and that if I have to teach them a new skill, I'm inviting them to be vulnerable. It's very vulnerable to be practicing therapy for 20 years and then go to a training and be asked to try something. Many of us feel judged when we're in a training, because we fear we'll do it wrong. So I try to give them a piece of vulnerability right off the bat, right away so that way they know that if I'm going to let them know about me, then I won't judge them either.

Glenn Hinds:

So again, it's back to that ... your authenticity and invitation of safety for other people and as today's podcast is around the humor, the question bubbling around in my mind is when you're talking about humor, what does that mean?

Mallori DeSalle:

So humor is ... Many people have different definitions of what humor is and what laughter is. Humor is anything that ... It could be absurd, or ironic, or anything that makes you go, "Huh, I didn't expect that." Laughter is sometimes a response to humor, but laughter is also a physical movement of your body which is why there's actually therapy called laughter yoga where you're making your body laugh, but it's not because of humor and it increases the oxygen in your blood. It increases several neurotransmitters and I actually talk about that in training when I say, "I'm going to invite you to laugh today."

Mallori DeSalle:

Laughing is a part of how we allow ourselves to learn if we make a mistake. And the benefits of that are you get serotonin in your brain. Then I make jokes all the time, I say, "Serotonin, it's the well being." I said, "Serotonin's my spirit animal, anyone else?" And I tell them about how it decreases cortisol which is the stress neurotransmitter. It increases dopamine which I tell them is the remember me neurotransmitter which is why you want that in a learning, because you'll remember what you're enjoying. And I say it also increases oxytocin which is the trust neurotransmitter. So when we laugh together you will trust your colleagues in this training more which is important when you're learning a new concept. So we start talking about the neurology of humor right away so that they know it's okay to laugh if we make a mistake. It's okay to see failure as a learning and as a laughter opportunity instead of as a judgment.

Sebastian Kaplan:

So I suspect that just about everyone listening will have had the experience of laughter, and finding humor in things, and being in situations that they find amusing, whether it's training, or a comedy festival, or something like that. And so this is, I suspect, also that



few people know all of the different ways it changes us internally and increases this hormone or this chemical, it decreases this neurotransmitter. So there's some science to why laughing feels so good, besides our own lived experience. Mallori, how would you say you incorporate that clinically in maybe an intentional, planful, way? I imagine humorous moments arise and those come in an unplanned way, but perhaps you do it with a bit more intention, too, sometimes?

Mallori DeSalle:

Yeah, it's an important thing to bring up, because not all humor is therapeutic. And so I'll just start with that, but some humor can be hurtful and sarcasm, for instance, is not a great way to use humor. Humor used therapeutically, with purpose, when you use it to alleviate, even for a moment, the pain that someone is experiencing. And so you have to be intentional when doing so, because there are times therapeutically, as a clinician, that it's important that your client sits in discomfort.

Mallori DeSalle:

So I was actually mulling this over the other day, really thinking about it, is this a righting reflex or an effort to fix the situation by adding laughter? And I think that that is where your clinical judgment comes in, because sometimes our clients can be given a reflection where they see something in a new way and that's how I see laughter therapeutically. It's where you invite them to look at, perhaps, a painful situation or a situation that is just so absurd and let them laugh about it, so that even for a moment their brain can have a break from the pain. It doesn't change it, it doesn't fix it, it doesn't remove the pain. It gives them a respite or a reprieve for moments.

Glenn Hinds:

So it sounds like it's that as with any therapeutic intervention the practitioner needs to be considerate and almost artful in their use of humor. And that its motive is to be a benefit to their healing, rather than potentially a righting reflex attempt to stop the pain or to make the plan or practitioner feel less uncomfortable. And I wonder, given your journey with the introduction and the practice of MIR, or therapeutic interviewing practice, what sort of things have you sort of noticed yourself do over the years to become more artful in your use of humor and practice?

Mallori DeSalle:

Well, I think much like with Motivational Interviewing, how there's the four processes with engagement, focusing, evoking, and planning, you use humor uniquely in each of the processes. Certainly in engagement you can use it for rapport building. And so it doesn't even have to be about the presenting concern that your client might have, but it can be about the weather, or about the holidays, or about a shared topic. So you can make a joke or a pun. And actually, there's a saying amongst a group of people that I'm learning with about humor, that you don't have to be funny, you just have to see funny. So it's not even about you be a humorist, it's about inviting your client to find things that are humorous, or ironic, or absurd and letting them create the humor concept. And that might look differently depending on where you're at in your change conversation, or



what treatment mechanism, or intervention you're using. But it could be all sorts of things.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Yeah, I'm glad you're bringing up humor in relation to some of the specific MI concepts that we talk about on the podcast, and have been learning, and the listeners have been learning about. Do you ever find clinically that people are maybe closed off to humor? And, well, to use the term that is very commonly used in and central to SAMI, ambivalent, about experiencing humor? And part of your work is to explore that and maybe open them up more to those experiences?

Mallori DeSalle:

It makes sense if someone feels ambivalent when they're communicating with a clinician, or sitting in a training, or having a conversation where there is discomfort. It just makes sense and using humor may not work with every person, just like every other therapeutic skill has times where it's more and less effective. So you certainly would be thoughtful about when to offer a joke or when to use a reflection that has a humor bend. What is necessary for humor to work is actually really similar to the spirit of MI in so many ways, because you need to have a partnership, an equal foundation, in order for a joke to land or for a pun to be understood. If one person is one-up, or acting like an expert, and they use a technical term for a pun, then it won't get a reaction.

Mallori DeSalle:

So sometimes laughter therapeutically is a great way for the professional to really check themselves, "Am I showing empathy? Is this joke actually poking fun at my client or is it a shared experience? Am I partnering with them? Am I showing compassion to them?" Or am I kind of being judgemental with my humor and saying, "Oh, so you know, it's so hard to get to treatment today." Is sarcasm coming in? So in some ways it is a thermometer, it's a way to measure, "Am I really relationally connecting with my client?" And if so, then you might see a different reaction, or it might tell you, "I need to go back to engagement again so that we can connect again relationally."

Glenn Hinds:

And that idea for the barometer, what strikes me is that notion of being light-hearted as a way of being humorous, but also almost like being light-hearted in your relationship. The intention of your heart, the intention of the connection, the intention of the spirit of who you are, being in light in your touch almost in the dance in the relationship that you're having with this person. That you're using it in a way that is about connection rather than being funny. You're not there as a comedian, you're there to be helpful. And you're almost like taking the temperature of the room to see, "Is this going to be useful for this person?"

Glenn Hinds:



It's one of the tools that you have in your toolbox to be of benefit to this other person. But the intention that rises from your heart with anything else, your light-heartedness and your reflection, your light-heartedness and your empathy, your light-heartedness and your use of humor, or using a pun to ... I imagine in some ways that the idea's that you're helping to lighten their experience of their own heart, as well in a painful place, that there is some beauty in where you are and it might express itself in a laugh.

Mallori DeSalle:

Exactly, exactly. It honors the truth and it allows them the freedom to look for new ways to cope with whatever they're experience is. It might be that now they ... You might be talking about anxiety and they may be struggling with ways to manage it. But you have a joke book in your office and when they're reading the jokes they don't feel as anxious, and so they might be laughing, walking out feeling a little less anxious. And then they see a joke on the internet and say, "You know what? I read this joke and it really was great for me." That's therapeutic humor. These small moments can make big impacts and the interesting thing is about laughter is that it's catharsis much like crying is.

Mallori DeSalle:

It gives the body the same type of release. And so one story that I share when I'm training is actually the story of a very scary time for me, but it's the time I was in Ireland, I believe both of you were at the MINT forum at the time, when I went to bed and I woke up and found myself lying on the floor of my hotel bathroom with a head injury. And I have no memory of that night except for ... Well, I had a memory of the night, but I went to bed knowing, "Okay, the alarm is set for 6:00. Let's get up, we're start the forum." And that was a trauma to me. And I told that story and then I add little jokes in there, because it's such a serious story that sometimes it can be too painful for the audience to hear and hard for me to share.

Mallori DeSalle:

I say things like, "When my friend Katie and I were in the ambulance, I said, 'I don't care which hospital you go to, as long as the coffee's good.'" And Katie is another MINT member, Katie Brogan Hartlieb, and if you ask her, she will tell you I did say that to the ambulance driver. And the ambulance driver said, "Is she okay?" And Katie said, "No, this is a good sign. This is a good sign." And I say to the doctor, "I had two drinks. I had a glass of Shiraz and a Coors Light. Listen, I know in Ireland Coors Light is a sin." And then I said, "And the doctor didn't laugh, but I thought it was a good joke, right?" And then the audience goes, "Guinness, you should have had Guinness and it would have been fine." I know.

Mallori DeSalle:

So that scary trauma was awful, but because of that I realized I wasn't feeling a whole lot of emotions throughout that whole trauma. And when I came back to the forum I actually saw another MINT colleague of ours, Mats Hogmark, from Sweden and he showed me empathy. And it was the first time out of that experience I cried. It had been about eight hours and I hadn't cried. And then the next thing I did was crack a joke.



Glenn Hinds:

So, the protective nature, the protective aspect of your own sense of humor was protecting you from the experience until you had some relief and some healing. But it also sounds like you were also endeavoring to lighten the burden of the people who were there trying to support you.

Mallori DeSalle:

Yes.

Glenn Hinds:

And then when the empathy came along you felt safe. Then the emotions were able to arise. And it sounds like, again, there's a fine balance that needs to be managed in any relationship that the humor could have been kept going and anyone listening to you... it could have just stayed in a humorous vein. But it was really important that Mats took you to another place which was he understood what it was like for you, and then you were free to feel the pain.

Mallori DeSalle:

Yes. Without the darkness there is no light. So once I realized that I was using that to not feel, I released my fear, my sadness, and then I started to heal. And that's when I realized that humor can be helpful, but I have to use it with intention. So, after that experience I learned a lot more about therapeutic humor versus just putting on a show and learned more about authenticity.

Mallori DeSalle:

So, I often, in my trainings, refer to ... It was the crack that healed me. I'm still working on healing, mind you. But it was an important turning point in my development.

Sebastian Kaplan:

So we've covered some benefits of humor in clinical contexts, be it this catharsis that you described akin to crying as a facilitator in discussing painful memory. That adding a humorous piece here and there can help a story unfold. Some physiological benefits with neurotransmitters, hormones, and things that are either suppressed or released. And even as what you just said, Glenn, is lightening the burden some for another person. This may be a caring element to it for another.

Sebastian Kaplan:

And it's making me wonder about the ways that you notice that humor becomes a barrier, perhaps, to someone's healing or, at least, sort of almost like a speed bump that kind of slows them down. And how you might notice that that's happening and decide it might be time to provide some gentle nudges in steering away from humor perhaps? And kind of helping people be in touch with that darkness that you described or some of



the pain that is understandable to want to steer away from and at the same time might inhibit growth, you know?

Mallori DeSalle:

Yeah, I think that's a really important point, Sebastian, that you do use your clinical judgment to take in the whole of the client. And when you're observing that humor is the go-to for every response, that that is a moment where you dig into your empathy. So when you do see that someone is going to jokes every time that they're having an emotion, it is a great time to offer a complex reflection even that immediacy of, "And I've noticed that when we talk about your dad, that sometimes it's easier to laugh." So in that moment you can point out that humor may be a deflection versus a relief or a release.

Sebastian Kaplan:

And it's a lovely example of how in keeping with the spirit of MI and maintaining that level of partnership and compassion as another aspect of MI that there's a way to gently challenge. I wouldn't use the word confront, necessarily, because that just doesn't seem like it doesn't fit at all, right? But there are ways to bring to someone's attention, I guess, that you're noticing humor may be getting in the way while also doing in a caring, supportive, partnered type of way.

Mallori DeSalle:

It's important with, I would think, all types of helping professions that whatever you do, you do with kindness. And I've just been reading Bill Miller's Loving Kindness book and thinking about the word, agape, which is a word that just talks about love. Pure, unwavering love. And I think that if you use that acceptance with your client, even if you're saying an immediacy comment that might feel a bit intentionally leading to discord or discomfort in your relationship that it's going to be okay because you're being authentic and you're showing love. And that's important.

Glenn Hinds:

In some ways it sounds like the use of therapeutic humor is probably going to be most authentic for someone who has a relationship with humor themselves. That is humorous by their very nature, that the agape, the authentic love that arises from each of us, that when it arises in you it sometimes presents as a kindness through humor. A kindness though a light heart, a kindness though a gentle joke or a pun, but always leaning into this place where it's for the benefit of this other person for their growth. And recognizing even that awareness of an individual who's using humor as a way of protecting themselves to be gentle with your response to that. That you just invite them ... Perhaps a bit like your own story where Mat just offered you to step into a different space where humor was still available, but there was a kindness in his recognizing of the hurt and the emotions that were behind, perhaps, the presentation of your humor.

Mallori DeSalle:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). It's really true. It's really true. I was reading a little bit about ambivalence in general and how in order to really talk about both sides of the



ambivalence there has to be a safety. And that's why sometimes clients want to only talk about the sustained talk, the things that are counter reasons for changing. And the same thing can be said with if we are going to set up a safe environment where we can poke fun at the pain that you have to have a safety.

Mallori DeSalle:

Because we don't want to imply that our client created the pain or is responsible because that's another ... It's a blaming trap, it's a way to lead to discomfort or discord in the relationship. So that's the thing, like with every therapeutic skill, you have to practice it and learn it and make mistakes and therapeutic humor is no different. You will make mistakes with it. Just like with reflections, you're going to ... "Whoa, I will not reflect that next time."

Sebastian Kaplan:

Which gets to that using humor for your own ... as a coping strategy, I suppose. Whether it's a mistake you may have made clinically, or maybe getting feedback that is difficult to hear, and try to integrate that into a way that is helpful for you and your growth as a trainer, as a trainee. The humor is just helpful for us in the work that we do.

Mallori DeSalle:

Yes, actually I started evaluating ... Well, I've been evaluating my trainings for the past eight years. And I have just collected the data from the last four years and I'm trying to see how frequently humor was mentioned in what they enjoyed the most. And I'm going to do some evaluations to determine if my intentional efforts are making an impact. What I am seeing is that it's much more frequent that I'm seeing that the comments are, "You kept us engaged."

Mallori DeSalle:

And particularly with either new learners of Motivational Interviewing, or experienced clinicians, or experienced professionals that are coming in, engagement is essential. Because you're inviting them to try something or to hear something for the 18th time in their career. So I feel like if nothing else, therapeutic humor and training is helping with the engagement process so that they'll walk away and want to continue thinking about it.

Glenn Hinds:

Yeah, so they wanted to be with you at the empathy training. They are saying that, "Those last six hours were six hours that I am glad I spent, that I got something from it. That I was engaged, that I was paying attention to what was going on in the room rather than thinking about 55 other things that I could have been doing."

Mallori DeSalle:

Yes, absolutely. And as well as the laughter and humor, I also try and create a playful environment. So I think that's what we're seeing in the trends of how to teach MI is an interactivity. So my interactive options of how to learn are all these things that can be



playful. Not just laughter, but playfulness. So again, you're taking out the judgment in our brains and you're putting in that time in our lives, our childhood, when we were more likely to take risks. And so, therapeutic humor isn't always about telling jokes, it's also about just kind of letting go of judgment and playing.

Sebastian Kaplan:

It's making me think of also how you will likely tap into the idea of acceptance with your learners, for those who may prefer to be more inhibited when it comes to their participation and how their use of humor might be. And it's reminding me of how Richard Rutschman's saying ... Maybe it's not his saying, but he's a friend and colleague of ours from Chicago, who talks about challenge by choice in the experiential education world that he's so familiar with and works in. I imagine there's also an awareness you have that, "You know what? This isn't for everybody," also. How do you make room for the person who just wants to put their head down, look at your slides, and not get so touched by humor, as it were?

Mallori DeSalle:

Honestly, if you are engaging at the beginning and you say, "I invite people to participate in their own level of comfort," and I use the old improv phrase 'Yes, And' with everything. So yes, you are participating by sitting there and it's up to you whether or not you want to get up. Yes, And. And even if someone says, "I disagree with you." I go, "Yes, and that's really interesting, because ... " And so by using 'Yes, And' you can create acceptance of any level of participation.

Mallori DeSalle:

And my favorite, recently there was a gentleman ... I was doing a two day training. It was Intro to Motivational Interviewing, it was working with professionals in Indianapolis that work with homeless individuals. And so they are working really hard to get people into permanent housing. I noticed on the first day this gentleman, very large stature, you know, kind of the opposite of the way I look, and he was silent the whole day. And I thought, "Oh, I've lost him. I've totally lost him. I hope I can get him back in." And the next day I realized he had hearing aids on and he hadn't the previous day, so I thought, "Oh, he just hadn't heard anything."

Mallori DeSalle:

So, then I sort of allowed myself to laugh at that and the first activity we did, he got really involved because I did an improv activity to engage that morning. I said, "We're going to play catch." And I had an invisible ball and I said, "You get to catch and throw whatever you want. I'm going to throw a watermelon to Bob." And then that gentleman caught it and he said, "Oh, I'm throwing a demon." And he morphed into this creative character and just I didn't even expect it. And the other person was like, "Oh, okay. I'm throwing a golf ball."

Mallori DeSalle:



And I think by not calling him out, by not saying, "Well, you haven't said anything in a while," allowing him to come when he was ready, it created an environment where people felt okay about any level of participation. And I very rarely have people that don't participate and one common trend that I have is people say, "At the beginning I didn't want to do role play. The way you do role play is great and I wish we did more."

Glenn Hinds:

It's about recognizing, I suppose, as trainers that when people come to the workshop they've had years of their own educational journey, and whatever it's been like for them is coming into the room, too. Their expectations of us, not knowing who we are, is almost like a projection of all of their previous helpers, all of those previous teachers. And that the engagement process is ... As you told us the story about the guy putting his hearing aids back in, I thought, "What a lovely affirmation that he decided your class was worth listening to on the second day," because of his experience on the first.

Glenn Hinds:

But that idea of the safety that you're creating ... And I love the notion of poking fun at the pain and making the learning fun. I think for many of us as adults, that we've left what we call here the primary school, where play was getting us ready to learn, whereas what we're exploring now using play to continue to learn. And for some people that's quite a shift away from what they're used to, but again, back to your examples of who they are, and the promotion of innocence within themselves and within their experience.

Glenn Hinds:

And again, a lovely presentation of the guy who morphed into a demon thrower. And again, I just imagine how much permission that gave everybody else to be just as free to present themselves as they are. And again, that fits in with what you were describing earlier on, your willingness to be vulnerable to be authentic, that then that presented that he could be this version of who he is, too.

Mallori DeSalle:

It's really fun. I think that when you set up these conversations, you talk about you want to get curious with people and learn about it. And I try and use that same curiosity for how I can connect with them, and sometimes I tell the same stories and the same jokes. Other times, it's the presence, the responses, the acceptance of their situations and the awareness they have a lot of expertise. So I like to laugh when they come up with the humor.

Mallori DeSalle:

I tell a joke about a time when someone did the righting reflex with me. A dermatologist showed me how to put lotion on. And the next day my participant came in, and they'd been staying in a hotel, and they brought me a little sample of lotion. They said, "Mallori, do you need help with the lotion?" So it's an indication that they're listening, they're applying it, and then the next step is after it's funny, now they have to put it out in their



own context and apply it. So that's the work they get to do once they walk out of the training.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Mallori, the way you describe these anecdotes and the stories with your trainees, it is quite evident and no surprise to anyone that knows you that you must have a real gift in developing a close connection with people that you've never met before that are coming into learn some dry therapeutic model or whatever. And they come in and really are able to free themselves up and take risks, and come to really appreciate and care about you.

Mallori DeSalle:

I'm trying to avoid using my humor as a deflection tool, Seb. I almost said, "Well, you've been talking to my mother, huh?" I feel really fortunate that I have found something that I'm good at. I thought I would be a really good therapist, because that's what I grew up thinking I was going to be. And it turns out being an extrovert is not a great thing as a therapist.

Mallori DeSalle:

As a trainer, it's exceptional. So it's one of the tools I can use to my advantage. And I'm also an empath, someone who feels other people's feelings. And as a trainer that's a really important quality and I just feel grateful that I've been able to have opportunities to discover that about myself.

Glenn Hinds:

So a very significant journey that you've been on over the last period of time where you've been developing yourself as an individual, both as a practitioner, but also as a human being, and visiting aspects of yourself, and have changed your attitude or your thoughts towards them. The very thing that we understand that therapists are trying to do for other people, that you've travelled this journey. And you're now willing to share both with the practitioners, but also continue with your patients, to help them continue to explore their journey of discovery. And see what it is they can find about themselves that can help them be safe being who they are.

Mallori DeSalle:

It's so true, Glenn. It's funny, because as clinicians, early clinicians, I don't know how many people who are listening are early clinicians, I thought I needed to know everything. I was working really hard to find the answers and boy, oh boy, what a mess I must have created early in my career. Because I worked in many places with many people and now I just realize being myself with people, others actually have so much inside themselves and I've discovered that as a trainer, too. If I can be present and help evoke the strengths that are already within, then people become stronger at whatever behavior or skill or effort they're putting in. And if I can just be there to see it, acknowledge it, laugh with them when they're learning and give them laughter instead of



frustration when learning, then it becomes absolutely a different experience for both of us.

Sebastian Kaplan:

So Mallori, as someone who wears many professional hats and offers a lot to the MI world and your various roles within MINT, curious what you have either on the horizon or what's coming next for you? Or maybe something that you've already started as a professional project? Could be related to MI or not, and certainly could be related to humor or not, but what do you have coming up here in the next little while for yourself?

Mallori DeSalle:

I have been on a journey to earn a certification as a humor professional which is offered through the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor. I've now been sitting on the board of directors for that organization, so that is one way I'm giving back to therapeutic humor world and bringing it into Motivational Interviewing. And along with that I have been working on a project that combines MI with humor or laughter because I'm using the concept of affirmations and laughter. What I have found is that affirmations create much the same experience that laughter does. It helps someone feel seen and recognized and accepted. Laughter also offers that same camaraderie, and so I did some research and prepared what I call laffirmation cards.

Mallori DeSalle:

They are small cards about the size of a playing card that have words of affirmation on them. And I've been using them to encourage people to be intentional with recognizing strengths in others. I did that in Tallinn, Estonia, at the MINT forum as my experiment and I had an incredible experience seeing how people shared affirmations with one another. I gave out approximately 25 decks of cards with about 50 cards in each deck. And I saw everyone walking around with them and I thought, "What a community that is walking around and purposefully looking for strength in others, what a world we would have if that's what we did?" And I had someone give me a card, they didn't know I was the one that brought them. And they said, "I want to give you this card, here's one. I'm giving it to you." And I started crying, I thought, "You don't even know that this was my hope."

Mallori DeSalle:

And my favorite story from that ... Thank you for letting me just expand on it, is in Tallinn I was at dinner, the social event at MINT, we have a gathering during each MINT forum, and I got to sit with Bill Miller and his wife, Cathy. I said to Bill, "How are you enjoying the visit here?" And he said, "You know, it's really beautiful." He said, "Thank you for the laffirmation cards." You know, my stomach, I was like, "Oh my gosh. Bill Miller got my card." And I said, "Well, I had this hunch that it would be a beautiful experience, that people could use."

Mallori DeSalle:



And he looked at me and he said, "Mallori, always follow your hunches." And that's pretty much all I needed, because I think that the hunch that that told me was using strength as a way to help people grow is essential and I took a risk and it paid off. And so my journey now is to help people continue to look for strengths. And so I've been using the affirmation cards, the affirmation cards, in my trainings. I've been inviting people to intentionally look for strengths.

Mallori DeSalle:

And I've been hearing stories from people, from all over the world, and most recently I had a treatment organization reach out to me and they would like to use the cards as a culture of care so they can start to give them to patients to give to other patients. So that they can start looking for strengths amongst one another and I thought, "Genius, you don't need the cards to do this, people." It's a way that helps inspire, but honestly, you don't need cards to be looking for affirmations or affirmations, you just need the intention.

Glenn Hinds:

Yeah, there is so much in what you just said there, that it sounded that when Bill acknowledged to you that to follow your hunch, that someone you valued and respected encouraged you to be true to yourself, that that was very affirming in itself. But the intention that in your experiment was, "I wonder what it would be like for us to have that intention, but to do it on purpose, physically, to begin with I affirmation or affirmations cards." And it sounds like a bit ... We just had a conversation with Rory Allott.

Glenn Hinds:

Rory talked about his journey into Motivational Interviewing and talked about how mechanical it was to begin with. And that sounded very supportive for ... in my own memory of learning MI, but also to new learners. And it sounds like the cards themselves may represent that initial step of the mechanical aspect of changing the way you pay attention to that. That when you go to meet someone, you're not just interested in what harm or difficulty or challenge they're experiencing, but you're also looking for the strengths and the talents that are surrounding them as they cope with these life events and learning to notice them through them.

Glenn Hinds:

And, I suppose, just introducing to people the language to begin with, "What does an affirmation word sound like?" And practice hearing themselves saying that and eventually, "I won't need the cards because I've heard myself say it so often." And that causes a ripple, that causes a domino effect that it sounds has already started to happen for you since you produced the cards. It's now moved on another step where people are starting to come looking for you.

Mallori DeSalle:



Yes, right now I've invited several colleagues and MINTs to help me translate the cards into different languages, so that they can have that tool available to them as well in their home language, which is so exciting that someone would want to take the time to do that. And the feedback that I've also received is that is nice to have the physical reminder when some gives you a card. So they can post it as a reminder, "I am brave, or I am resilient." So that we can hear that message inside our own head, from ourselves to ourselves, over and over again, even if it started from someone on the outside.

Mallori DeSalle:

So, it lasts longer for some people because there's a physical reminder of the affirmation that was shared with them. And I know it's a bit confusing, because I call them laffirmations and I tell people the L is for laughter, it's also for light, it's also for love. So all the things a true affirmation could include.

Sebastian Kaplan:

And, as I was getting ready in my office here to have this call with you, I came across my laffirmation card. Peter Reeves, a friend of ours, gave that to me. It says, "You are caring." So it's a wonderful memory of the time in Tallinn and a reminder of you and the work you're doing, Mallori, which these cards certainly caused quite an impact for many people in this really creative way which is quite wonderful.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Well, I think we're coming to the end of our time here. And so, we just want to express real gratitude to you and appreciation to you, Mallori, for sharing with us and our listeners your thoughts, ideas, and expertise on blending humor with MI. And we really feel strongly that people are going to come away with new ideas about humor in their own lives and certainly in their own clinical and educational work.

Mallori DeSalle:

Thank you so much. It was really fun to share.

Glenn Hinds:

As we end, if a listener wants to ask you a question, how can they reach out to you and would that be okay?

Mallori DeSalle:

I would love if someone would like to continue a conversation about this. So they could reach out to me several different ways. I have a Twitter, it's @malgaldesalle, who would I be if it wasn't a silly handle, right? M-A-L-G-A-L-D-E-S-A-L-L-E, malgaldesalle. Or mdesalle@indiana.edu is my email address. And I welcome contact and I look forward to hearing from people, your impressions, your questions, and would be happy to offer resources to anyone who'd like to learn more about therapeutic humor or MI and humor.

Glenn Hinds:



Fantastic, and just to finish, Seb, if you would remind people how they can contact us on the social media platforms

Sebastian Kaplan:

Absolutely. @ChangeTalking is our Twitter handle. Facebook page is Talking To Change. Our new Instagram page is Talking To Change Podcast, and any email correspondence would be to podcast@glennhinds.com. And, of course, you can rate and review and leave feedback on Apple, and Spotify, and Stitcher, and whatever you get your podcasts.

Glenn Hinds:

Brilliant. So just to say again, thank you very much, Mallori, for your time, and your insights, and your wisdom, and we wish you all the very best and look forward to seeing you in the very near future. And Seb, just to say it again, thank you to you and speak to you soon.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Sounds wonderful, Glenn. Happy New Year to you both.

Mallori DeSalle:

Bye-bye.

