

Improving Life through Improvisational Comedy

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I've been a huge fan of improvisational comedy for as long as I can remember. In fact, I come from a long genetic line of "improv" artists. Accordingly, I've earned titles like "class clown" repeatedly over the years. Since I am also a believer in the importance of authenticity, or more simply, being yourself across life roles, you can imagine my excitement when I first stumbled across the concept of improvisational comedy as a form of therapy.

In a coincidental sort of way, the idea was given to me right when I needed it most. A friend lent me her copy of Emily Oldak's Activity Book entitled, "Comedy for real life: A guide to helping kids survive in an imperfect world", as I was attempting to conduct some semblance of "group therapy" with a particularly challenging group of teenagers. These youth were dealing with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), combined with a variety of other serious issues.

Needless to say, I took to the concept like a duck to water, and so did the group. Through the use of improvisational comedy, we were improving their social skills, communication techniques, problem-solving abilities and self-confidence although it only felt like "goofing around" to them. Many young people in this first group were able to excel at "improv" techniques using the very skills that had gotten them into trouble over the years. (For example, impulsivity can be channeled into creative spontaneity).

Since my initial breakthrough experience with improvisational therapy, I've used the method with a diverse array of groups: kids, adults, employees from many different lines of work, boards of directors, and others who work in various helping professions. Just like the first time I used it, "improv" therapy has helped me get through many impasses in groups with those whom I work.

Despite its name, Improvisation is structured by four underlying skills. As Katie Goodman, author of the book entitled "Improvisation for the spirit," puts it, anyone can "Live a more creative, spontaneous, and courageous life using the tools of Improv Comedy." I agree wholeheartedly. "Improv" has certainly helped me professionally and personally. I've seen it work with people from all sorts of backgrounds. And so, in the spirit of building creativity in our community, I am sharing four skills with you in hopes that you will also find them helpful:

- 1. Listen with your full attention.** In this world of overstimulation, true listening is becoming a dying art. Even those of us who listen as a profession are becoming more and more distracted. So listen to those around you. Shut off your mind when it starts drifting to other distractions, or to what you should say next. Be present, aware, in the moment, and “all ears.” Trust me, honing this skill alone, like learning to speak another language, will make you a rare commodity personally and professionally.
- 2. Accept the ideas of others unconditionally.** A huge no-no of improv comedy involves negating another actor’s ideas. Many “improv” actors refer to this as the “pink elephant rule,” referring to a scenario in which one actor says there is a pink elephant in the room, and the other replies that he can’t see an elephant at all. In life, as in “improv”, we can benefit from a wide variety of creative ideas. But, we can’t obtain the benefit if certain ideas are knocked off the proverbial conference table before they’ve even been fully laid out. Some of the most ingenious results have sprouted from what were first considered off-the-wall concepts (the light bulb, for example). To remind myself of this one on a daily basis, I have a sign in my office that reads, “Trust your crazy ideas.” I would add that we need to trust the “crazy ideas” of others – co-workers, family members, friends and neighbors – if we are to benefit from the creativity that is all around us, much of which is untapped.
- 3. Get in the habit of saying, “Yes, and…”** If I could impulsively take two words out of our vocabulary, they would be “can’t” and “but.” These words, along with a few others, shut down creativity and potential in individuals and groups. What if we accepted whatever other people had to offer and met them wherever they were coming from? I’m thinking everyone would feel more included and valued. It’s simple. All it takes is replying with “yes, and…” In this manner, we accept the ideas of others and add our own. Is there any better collaboration? The response doesn’t have to communicate complete agreement with the presented idea, it simply accepts that ALL opinions are valid, that maybe we’re all “right.” (In other words, someone doesn’t have to be “wrong” in a discussion to make me “right”).
- 4. Be flexible.** Most of us have heard the popular quote, “Life is what happens when you’re making other plans.” How true. And, as much as many of us would like to deny it, we have little to no control over the unforeseen aspects of life. In truth, we often have very little control over the *foreseen* parts of life! Given this, flexibility is one of the most valuable resiliency skills we can develop. Practice letting go of your attachments to ideas and preconceived notions. Your ideas are important. Make sure you contribute, but also be open to other’s ideas and “go with the flow.” There is definitely a time to “stick to your guns” about things, but the typical day-to-day collaborations in which we all get involved don’t need to become life-or-death power struggles. We all have more productive ways to use our energy.

By the way, if you’ve enjoyed this article, many local theaters offer improv comedy lessons. They’re fun, enlightening, and just might improve your life!

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mental health issues in general, please call Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network at 303 730 8858 or visit admhn.org

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