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What Actors Can Teach Us: Think on Your Feet & Gain Confidence With Improvisation

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In many ways, improvisation feels like playing in a safe space—but don't let the fun fool you. These heightened versions of reality can spark meaningful discoveries.

My own experience with improvisation comes from directing short plays and films in Manhattan. In rehearsals, I'd frequently ask actors to set their scripts aside and interact as their characters with specific objectives. No longer restricted to the page, they would loosen up and listen more intently. Even the goofiest moments usually brought important surprises that I used later on.

In an improvisation class—which is different from the performance improv I was doing—the process involves exercises and scenes. It may be taught in groups, solo, in person or virtually. Class scenarios are structured with the “five Ws” (who, what, where, when and why) and a specific objective, according to professional actor and acting instructor Elizabeth D’Onofrio (<https://elizabethdonofrio.com/>).

The benefits of improvisation are so vast that classes are now taught everywhere, from corporate environments to schools. Along with strengthening personal relationships and conflict resolution (<https://www.success.com/11-strategies-for-handling-conflict/>), you can use improvisation to strengthen any career where you interact with others.

The history of improv

Many of improv’s principles are rooted in the groundbreaking work of Viola Spolin, who is known as the mother of improvisational theater. Spolin was an American actor, teacher and social worker, the creator of theater games, and the author of the revolutionary book *Improvisation for the Theater*.

Since Spolin’s book was published in 1963, a growing body of research has discovered the positive impact of improvisation on nonperformers. A sample of these benefits includes reduced social anxiety (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S019745562200106X>), increased creativity and brain connectivity (<https://www.neuroregulation.org/article/view/21231>), and boosted confidence.



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Manhattan-based improv teacher Carl Kissin (<https://carlkissin.com/main/>), founder of Kissin Improv and former mainstage cast member of the Chicago City Limits improv troupe, says that improv can help tune you into several things. For example, are you going after what you want as passionately as a character in an improv scene would? And knowing that there will be obstacles, how can you be creative about overcoming them?

Yes, and...

Like a magic trick with just two words, “yes” establishes a connection, while “and” allows that connection to blossom in boundless ways through free association. For instance, your partner might say, “We’re lost in these scary woods.” You might respond, “Yes, and if we listen for animal sounds, they’ll lead us to safety.” Then your partner might say something like, “Yes, good idea. Let’s listen. Did you hear that? There’s a fox in the distance.”

In real life, people often go into interactions feeling the need to dominate, says Mike O’Keeffe (<https://www.instagram.com/okeeffeimprov/?hl=en>), a New Jersey-based improv teacher. He calls this “an unfortunate slash-and-burn strategy.” Instead, trying “yes, and” puts you in a place of active listening that naturally helps you gain trust. It also promotes understanding and empathy that allows the speaker to feel validated. He believes that the exercise “can be the antidote to home, work and relationship negativity” and can “improve all communication by reducing barriers and increasing acceptance” as a result.

Make your partner look good

During an exercise or scene, a support system is in motion.

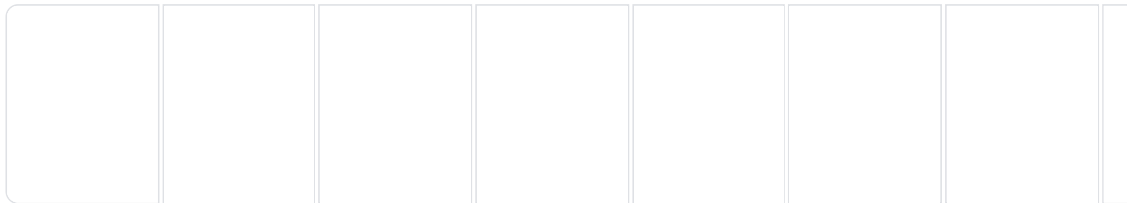
Improv is not about shining a light on you—it's about helping the person you're with. Because of this, you should ask yourself things like “What does my partner need?” and “How can I help them get where they're going so they can reach their goal?”

“In improvisation, we believe that everyone looks good—if I'm trying to make you look good and you're trying to make me look good—as opposed to... ‘I don't care,’” explains Kissin, who says he's embraced this philosophy in all areas of his life.

Take a lesson from improv: When talking to another person, listen with your full attention and delve deeper into the heart of what's being said. Then you can determine how you can empower and uplift the person you're with.

Mistakes are opportunities

Like it sounds, this concept turns a misstep into an excuse for spontaneity. If, during a scene, one person trips or drops something, everyone leans into the flub. The mistake then takes on a life of its own, according to Kissin.



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He adds that improv has the ability to cut some of the shackles people put on themselves. For instance, imagine if you didn't fear doing or saying the wrong thing. What choices might you make?

Kissin gives the example of heading home and getting off at the wrong subway stop or taking a wrong turn on your way to someone's house. “You're now a tourist having a great experience. You're walking down a block you weren't meant to walk down,” he says. Discover it, enjoy it and rejoice in the randomness of a mistake.

Exercises to improve your improv skills

To become a better improviser, try these two exercises:

1. Practice a scenario

A written or imagined scenario can help you merge the benefits of improv with everyday life, according to D'Onofrio, who says that doing so helps you mentally prepare for an experience, relieve anxiety (<https://www.success.com/5-simple-habits-to-manage-your-anxiety/>), and glean unexpected insights.

Begin with the five Ws: Who are you talking to? What are you doing? Where are you? When is the scene taking place? And why are you there? Once you're clear on the specifics, "enter your setup and begin your improvisation," she says, either as a visualization or written scene.

Possible examples from D'Onofrio include "asking for a raise, running a meeting [or] presenting information for an idea you recommend." When you create improvisations based on a specific situation and play both sides, you'll be able to grasp both perspectives of a conversation or conflict, which she says "can release the fear by knowing the different ways the situation can pan out," she says.

2. Spark connections

You can also generate new ideas through the power of connection.

Try making a regular practice of free association. Begin by focusing on an ordinary object and see what connections you can make through your senses. Resist the urge to second-guess or edit yourself and let the ideas flow. Then write those ideas down, speak them aloud while seated or mentally notice them as you walk.

Kissin uses the example of a traffic light in the street. "How far can you go before you run out of free association? [It] should be never. But just play with it," he says.

When you look at the light, you might ask yourself something like, "What does its shape, color, sound or texture bring to mind?" For instance, if it's red, the shade might remind you of a childhood sweater or toy you once had, and you can continue free-associating from there.

Improvising through life

Kissin compares improvisation classes to “lifting weights or doing yoga or doing an exercise. One session may not change your life, but as these things become a part of your life, I believe they will.”

Improv isn't about impressing anyone with how clever you are. The emphasis is on supporting one another, making connections and listening. Some of the best improvisers are shy or introverted and naturally excel at these skills, Kissin adds.

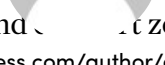
No matter you  or career, improv has the potential to widen both your imagination and  zone, all while serving as a playful reminder that life can be an ongoing adventure. [\(https://www.success.com/author/danielle-winston/\)](https://www.success.com/author/danielle-winston/)

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