

USING IMPROV
EXERCISES TO TEACH
COMMUNICATION IN
MEDICAL
PROFESSIONS

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DISCLOSURES

- Dr. Mitchell holds equity in See Yourself Health Inc. -- a digital health startup company.
- There are no conflicts of interest or financial disclosures related to this educational program.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Use improv theater exercises to explore empathy.
2. Use improv theater exercises to explore agreement and cooperation.
3. Use improv theater exercises to explore quick thinking scenarios.
4. Use improv to explore power relationships.



PATIENTS / CAREGIVERS AS COLLABORATORS - TEAMWORK AND INTERPROFESSIONALISM

- “Good Patient and Difficult Patients”, Louise Aronson MD. NEJM 2013
- *“I didn’t want to be the sort of family member medical teams complain about.”*
- *“Too often....good means you agree with me and you don’t bother me and you let me be in charge of what happens and when. Such a definition runs counter to what we know about truly good care as a collaborative process.”*



CHALLENGES WITH PATIENT-CENTERED COMMUNICATION

Table 1 – Representative standardized patient comments following simulated antenatal counseling sessions with neonatology fellows.

Encounter 1:

"I didn't feel that I got empathy throughout. She did use a warm tone of voice, but I felt overwhelmed with constant eye contact and no break in the conversation for me to absorb information."

"I felt a little bullied and although (she) had a warm tone of voice and was looking right at me, she was not on my side. I felt distrustful that she may do something without my consent. I felt powerless."

Encounter 2:

"I felt challenged and looked down on by the fellow. I felt ignored, as I had expressed my opinion several times and felt disregarded. I felt uncomfortable when the student used lots of medical jargon."

Encounter 3:

"The fellow expressed empathy by saying I did nothing to cause this in a supportive tone, but nothing like 'I'm sorry this is happening to you'."

"I felt overwhelmed after all that information. I felt unsure of what was really important and what 'may' happen. Everything seemed to have the same level of importance. Perhaps if the fellow modified her tone I might have felt less unsure?"

"I felt lost in the jargon."

WHAT IS MEDICAL IMPROV?

- Medical Improv is the adaptation of improv theatre training methods to the context of medicine,
- Goal: To build confidence in communication in medical settings and promote positive interpersonal interactions through better *cognition, wellbeing, and collaboration*. Not comedy; it's about collaboration.
- *Med Improv Exercises* are dynamic, interactive, and 100% participatory. They break down the complex art of communication into basic building blocks.

Source: Watson, Katie. "Perspective: Serious Play: Teaching Medical Skills With Improvisational Theater Techniques." *Academic Medicine*. 2011 October; 86(10): 1260-5.



WHY IMPROV?

- Future clinicians will practice medicine in a more complex environment than ever, where skills of interpersonal communication, collaboration and adaptability to change are critical.
- Improv-based exercises represent an **experiential learning** modality that is underutilized in communication skills training.



IMPROV FOR PERSON-CENTERED CARE



Empathy and Difficult Conversations

- New diagnosis
- Goals of care
- Counseling
- Shared decision making

Communication Skills

- Emotional intelligence
- Listening and mirroring emotion

IMPROV FOR CLINICIAN WELLNESS

Clinician Wellness

- Burnout prevention
- Enhance psychological safety at work
- Reduce perfectionism, shame, bullying behaviors
- Mindfulness & Forgiveness
- Recognition and validate team contributions
- Support others' efforts

Wellness



IMPROV FOR INTERPROFESSIONALISM

Interprofessional Communication Skills

- Listening & Supporting
- Leading & Following
- Resolve conflict
- Build comraderie



IMPROV PRINCIPLES

- Yes, And
- Support each other
- There's no mistakes, only gifts & opportunities
- Embrace uncertainty
- You have everything you need



IMPROV SKILLS

- Empathy – Deep listening and mirroring emotion
- Cognition – attention, focus, memory, reflection
- Careful observation and perception of cues
- Flexibility and spontaneity
- Rapid response in high stakes situations
- Coping with ambiguity and stress
- Collaboration and teamwork – support others and surrender ego for group success
- Curiosity, creativity and discovery minded



IMPROV
EXERCISES



EMPATHY, UNCERTAINTY, COLLABORATION

'Yes, and' Circle



Instructions – Participants stand in a circle. One person starts by saying "Let's have a party!" to the person standing next to her. That person responds by making a statement that adds a new element to the event, beginning with the phrase "Yes, and" (eg. "Yes! And we'll have a piñata!") Each subsequent person in the circle follows suit with another "Yes, and" statement that adds to the event.

Debrief – Participants identify their individual and collective behavioral tendencies toward agreement or disagreement, careful listening, ability to connect ideas in a logical manner, hesitation, support or judgment of others' ideas, and spontaneity. Participants consider the impact of such behaviors on teamwork and patient counseling.

Skills – Listening, validation, support, spontaneity, connection, narrative.

Source: Koppett, K. (2013) *Training to Imagine*. Sterling VA, Stylus Publishing

PATIENT-CENTERED COMMUNICATION

Time Traveler (aka 'Rip van Winkle')



Instructions – Participants work in pairs; one partner is designated the role of a “time traveler” from a few hundred years ago who has suddenly arrived in the present time. The other partner must help the time traveler by explaining current technology (eg jet planes, microwaves, CT scan) in terms that the time traveler can understand.

Debrief – Participants discuss the ability to reframe concepts in creative and effective ways, developing a broader range of expressive strategies such as the use of plain language, analogy, and metaphor. Participants also reflect upon their ability to assess other people’s comprehension. Participants discuss the relevance of these skills in situations such as explaining treatments and tests to patients without the use of jargon.

Skills – Reading cues of comprehension; speaking with clarity, use of analogy, ability to simplify, synthesize, and summarize.

EXPLORING POWER RELATIONSHIPS

Status Cards



Instructions – Participants are given a random playing card; the number on the card indicates their social status. The participants hold their card against their forehead, facing outward such that everyone can see everyone else's card, but not their own. Everyone then mingles as though they are at a social event. At the end of a few minutes, participants must arrange themselves in order of their self-perceived status, based on the way

Debrief – Participants discuss cues and clues that led them to interpret their status, their reactions to the behaviors they experienced, and the relevance of such behaviors to interactions in their own lives, including interactions with patients and colleagues.

Skills – Perception & expression of cues (verbal and non-verbal), awareness of power dynamics

S U M M A R Y

- High quality patient-centered care and team wellbeing depend on effective communication.
- The practice of medicine requires improvisation skills – spontaneity, support of others, cognition, emotional intelligence.
- Engaging learners in experiential exercises enhances skills and desire to use them.
- Practice leading improv exercises before using them with students.
- Be prepared for debriefing after the exercise.
- Beware of students' tendencies toward perfection and ease them into the improv experience. Remind them – *the goal is not comedy*.
- Support psychological safety of participants when using improv training exercises.
- Have fun!

THANK YOU!

