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11-21-2018

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STARS Citation

Poissant, David, "Yes, and:' Overcoming Anxiety with Improv" (2018). *UCF Forum*. 330.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum/330>

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'Yes, and:.' Overcoming Anxiety with Improv

By David James Poissant
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, November 21, 2018



David James Poissant (third from right) at his improvisational comedy course at the SAK Comedy Lab in Orlando.

The first time I stood on a stage, I threw up. I was 7 years old, and, 10 seconds into an acting class, fear sent my stomach somersaulting. Years later, I tried a high school acting course. My first scene involved a stage kiss. This sent me into paroxysms of unease that resulted in what I can only imagine was the world's hardest kiss to watch. By college, I'd given up the acting bug, though I longed to perform for people.

I am a writer, and writing leads to book tours. These readings satiated my desire to move an audience to laughter or tears. But readings are safe. The author stands behind a podium, anchored to a book.

I wanted more. Which is how I found myself enrolled this year in an improvisational comedy course at the SAK Comedy Lab in Orlando.

Most cities have a comedy scene, but Orlando's is no joke, and neither is SAK, the site where *Whose Line is it Anyway?* star Wayne Brady got his start.

Improv, for the uninitiated, is the art of building a scene or song, usually comedic, around an audience-suggested subject. Unlike standup comedy, the material is made up on the spot. Sometimes, the results are spectacular. Sometimes they're failures. Both are fun to watch. Even if you've never seen improv, chances are your entertainment has been steered by it for decades. From *Saturday Night Live* to *The Office* to *The Daily Show*, most casts and writers' rooms are staffed with people who got their start in improv.

Improv is the best cure I've found for anxiety.

So, why improv? Why would I, a stage fright-prone, spotlight-phobic, generally anxious person subject himself to the torture of standing onstage before strangers without the safety net of memorized lines or written material? Because, counterintuitive as it sounds, outside of therapy, improv is the best cure I've found for anxiety.

There are few rules to improv, but here they are: Don't think. Listen. Say yes to everything. And, give yourself permission to make mistakes, because you are not alone.

That's it. I mean, there are hundreds of tips and tricks, but all of them fall under the umbrella of those general guidelines, and it's those guidelines that spit in the face of anxiety. Because, what is anxiety? Anxiety is a fear of the future. General or specific, anxiety is the voice that tells you to worry over what happens next. As a friend once told me, you don't have to worry about whether you will die. You will. Make peace with that, and figure out how to live. Simple, but not easy.

So, how does improv training combat anxiety?

First, anxiety is often the result of spending too much time in your head. In an improv, there's no time to think. And here's the beautiful part: You don't have to think, because there's no wrong answer. The only wrong answer is *no*. Recently, I saw an improv show in which a woman was dancing. Her scene partner interpreted the dance as wing flaps. He thought she was a chicken. But, the scene had already established her as a woman. So, for the preservation of both truths, she became a woman who laid eggs. This happy accident led to material that was 10 times funnier than anything they'd been doing.

All of which is to say, second, that improv is a safe place to make mistakes. In good improv, everything's incorporated, even the errors. This takes practice, sure, but it can be done. And, even when it's done poorly, improv audiences are remarkably forgiving. Unlike other comedic forms, improv is rarely performed in clubs. The culture of improv is closer to theater than stand-up. I've never, for example, seen improvisers heckled.

Third, improv combats anxiety because it comes with teammates built in. You're never alone. If your anxiety takes over, your scene partners will rescue you. Say you freeze onstage, they'll even use you to guide the scene. ("Let's get this ice sculpture inside before it melts!")

But, the most anxiety-obliterating aspect of improv is that your answer to almost every suggestion is already written for you. The answer is "*Yes, and.*" (Player 1: "I heard you

turned your backyard into your very own Jurassic Park.” Player 2: “Yes, and the velociraptors are loose again.”)

You don't have time to question your partner's motivations. You don't have the luxury of overanalyzing the offer or weighing your options. You have no time to wonder whether your response could be rephrased for maximum impact, or whether it's potentially problematic, or whether it's funnier to one political party or the other, or whether it's going to get you in trouble at work, or whether your children are watching, or whether your parents would approve, or whether your answer will showcase your smartest, best, most photogenic self. You don't have time. You freeze, you're an ice sculpture. You flee, you let your scene partners down. So, you fight. You perform. You say “*Yes, and,*” and you say whatever pops into your head, no matter how silly or strange.

How fulfilling, then, to have an outlet like improv, a place to be anyone you want for at least a few hours a week.

And there's something freeing about that onstage, if not necessarily in life. Life isn't the ideal place for such behavior. How fulfilling, then, to have an outlet like improv, a place to be anyone you want for at least a few hours a week.

Please don't misunderstand. Improv is *not* a get-out-of-jail-free card to be offensive. Improv is at its best when it's tolerant and accepting of all, when every offer comes from a place of love and celebration, and when the fun we poke is mostly at ourselves. But, if you're someone who agonizes over every Tweet and Facebook post, or how each word will land on others' ears, you might, like me, embrace a culture where it's okay to mess up, a place where you're given the benefit of the doubt, because it's assumed you want to honor others and make them laugh.

In a world where we tend to think the worst of others until we're proven wrong, it's a pleasure to find a place like SAK where it's safe to take risks and play, no anxiety required.

David James Poissant

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