

Laughing Through The Tears

In these unprecedented days of stress and anxiety, here's an unlikely outlet. Improv. No, really! Here's why it works.

by MELISSA GREER

WHEN CAMERON ALGIE'S THERAPIST SUGGESTED HE TRY IMPROV, HE hated the idea. "I thought, 'Wow, you really don't get anxiety. I can't do anything, let alone do something so scary.'"

Social anxiety is one of the most common anxiety disorders and affects up to 13 percent of Canadians. In severe cases, people with social anxiety might avoid all social situations, even dropping out of school or quitting their jobs.

Improv sounds like the last thing someone with social anxiety would want to do. But growing research suggests that improv could actually be a beneficial form of therapy for those who suffer from anxiety. In a way, improv functions like exposure therapy, where participants confront their fears head-on. But there's more to it than that. Experts believe that, similar to a therapist's office, improv offers a safe space without judgment or fear of failure.

In fact, psychology professor Gordon Bermant outlined similarities between the two in a paper published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*. "Both improv and applied psychology practices aim to increase personal awareness, interpersonal attentiveness and trust," writes Bermant.

Comedy – and, more specifically, laughter – provides an incredible physical release, says Journey Gunderson, executive director at the National Comedy Center in Jamestown, New York. "Jokes and sketches are a buildup of tension followed by the punchline, which is a release of that tension," she says. "In many ways, there is no better remedy for high stress and anxiety than laughter and that release of tension."

Despite his initial reluctance, Algie ended up going to an improv class at The Second City in Toronto and, to his surprise, enjoyed it. But it wasn't easy getting there.



"I arrived emotionally and physically drained from the idea of even getting there," he says. "It was like climbing the Everest of anxiety for me, but I thought, 'If I can make it to improv, I can do anything.'"

Algie stuck with it and saw noticeable changes in himself. "I started going easier on myself," he says. "I was very mean to myself in my head, and that softened through improv. Judging myself less was life-changing."

Letting go of judgment – both of oneself and others – is an essential element of improv, says Kevin Frank, artistic director at the Second City. It's part of the principle behind the skit of "Yes, and..." where each improv actor must agree to accept wherever their ensemble members take them. "Participants learn to support one another's ideas without judgment, explore and take risks and embrace failure as a lesson or opportunity when they improvise in front of an audience," says Frank.

"Isn't that a great way to go about communication and relationships with others?" says Gunderson of the "Yes, and..." principle. She says many of the skills learned in improv are also valuable life skills, whether they're used in your professional or personal life. "Improv helps us think on our feet, work well with others, build trust between ourselves and others, think creatively and open our minds," says Gunderson, explaining that improv classes are also popular among people who want to be more successful in business.

While Algie signed up for improv as a way to help deal with his social anxiety, it also had benefits for him in his job as an advertising copywriter. "Improv changed how I presented," he says. "Rather than sit there with a paper that was shaking in my hands, I started to stand up to present and then I became aware of moving my body. Eventually, I started to almost perform the scripts."

Everyday social interactions also became easier for Algie. "I got better at small talk," he says. "Conversation felt easier."

Practising simple types of social interaction in a judgment-free space is certainly beneficial for anyone with social anxiety, but these are also skills that everyone might want to brush up on. According to Frank, society's increased use of technology has led to a lack of face-to-face interaction, especially among younger generations. "There's a lot of online interaction and social media, so those fundamental communication skills aren't as well practised," he says. "Eye con-

tact, body language, the use of your words and the space between them – those are things we teach improvisers."

Ironically, he said that Second City has moved all of their classes online during the pandemic. "We are now seeing first-hand the necessity to develop effective collaborative communication skills in order to maintain business and personal communities."

Since Algie took his first improv class more than 10 years ago, the Second City has expanded its offerings to include a class specifically geared to people with anxiety called Improv for Anxiety. The class is very similar to regular improv, but the addition of the word "anxiety" in the course title makes coming to class a little less intimidating, says Frank. "For some, they would never take that first step in coming to class," he says. "We decided to modify the curriculum to be more inclusive."

As for Algie, the experience was so transformative that he has made it his life's work, leaving behind his career in advertising to focus on helping others overcome fear through improv. He was a founding instructor of Improv for Anxiety at the Second City in Toronto and launched his own improv company called Play with Fire Improv. "Improv changed my life. It can change yours, too." *BT*



Why not give it a try?

There are a few similar programs across the country. Here are a few suggestions to get you started.

Vancouver TheatreSports, Vancouver
vtsl.com

Montreal Improv, Montreal
montrealimprov.com/classes.html

Neptune Theatre, Halifax
neptunetheatre.com