

No kidding: Theater improv makes you happier, creative, tolerant of uncertainty

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Can theater improvisation actually make adults feel better and more creative? "Yes, and ..."

A new study by researchers at the University of Michigan and Stony Brook University found that 20 minutes of improv experience causes people to feel comfortable and more tolerant of uncertainty.

"Individuals also reported a happier mood compared to a [control group](#), who didn't get the same satisfaction when performing scripted tasks," said study co-author Colleen Seifert, U-M professor of psychology.

What makes improv popular is not knowing what will happen next during a collaborative performance as opposed to scripted theater. The most widely cited principle of this training is "Yes, and ..." This technique requires improvisers to accept the information their partner offers (the "yes") and adds more content.

Seifert and colleagues Peter Felsman, the study's lead author and a postdoctoral associate at Stony Brook, and Sanuri Gunawardena of U-M

completed two experiments to determine if an improvisational theater experience could boost one's well-being and creativity—measured as divergent thinking with multiple solutions to a problem.

In one experiment, [improvisation](#) activity was compared to a control with social interactions where people picked a friend to talk about, a movie to discuss and physical actions to demonstrate. The improv group improved more in divergent thinking, but both groups increased in feeling good and comfort with uncertainty.

A second experiment involved scripted social tasks for the control group, and only improvisation tasks allowed participants to create their interactions. In this experiment, only the improv group experienced increased [positive emotions](#) and comfort with uncertainty.

The study highlights three key features of improvisation as an intervention: it engages creativity and idea discovery by working with others, improves mood and increases comfort with uncertain (unscripted) social interactions.

"Improvisation is shown in these experiments to produce benefits beyond every day, routine social interactions," Seifert said.

Overall, improv enhances [psychological health](#) without the negative stigmas and difficulties in access surrounding other therapeutic interventions, researchers said.

The study appears in *Thinking Skills and Creativity*.

More information: Peter Felsman et al. Improv experience promotes divergent thinking, uncertainty tolerance, and affective well-being, *Thinking Skills and Creativity* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.tsc.2020.100632](#)

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