

*IMPROVISATIONAL THEATER GAMES FOR PERSONS WITH PARKINSON’S DISEASE AND CARE PARTNERS*

*By Margot Escott, LCSW*

Improvisational Theatre Games for people with Parkinson’s Disease and their care partners is not just fun but therapeutic. I have been teaching Improv for people with Parkinson’s and Care Partners for three years.

Parkinson’s Disease (PD) is a movement disorder that affects up to 1 million people in the US and doctors diagnose 60,000 new cases each year. Improvisational Theater Games, based on the work of Viola Spolin, are being used clinically all over the world. Improv classes are being offered for stress management, Autism, dementia, Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s and other neuromuscular diseases.

With Parkinson’s disease there is accompanying problems with facial rigidity (or masking), gait impairment characterized by a stuttering gait as well as anxiety and depression. Some of the Improvisational exercises we use are directly related to these issues.

We do an exercise called “Show, don’t tell, your feelings” where students have to use facial muscles to portray a feeling. This exercise is important as students can recognize the need to use their muscles to indicate their emotions.

Parkinson’s Disease can be isolating not only for the individual with PD, but the family as well. In these eight -week classes, participant’s work with partners and in small groups to play a variety of improv exercises each week, while learning about improvisational theatre principles. In these lively classes participants get a chance to express themselves non-verbally through movement and music activities. To aid in cognition and memory skills, improvisational games present fun challenges to solve.

There is growing research on the therapeutic benefits of Improvisational Theatre Games for people with PD. The neurology Department of Northwestern University has partnered with Second City since 2015 researching the benefits of teaching improv to people with PD and their caregivers\_. Their research showed that improvisational theatre games helps to cultivate focus, improve communication, and promote well- being.

Our groups have 8-10 participants. We begin by explaining Acceptance and “Yes, and…. “ We also focus on the concept that there are no mistakes, only gifts. Acceptance is an important concept as people with PD have difficulty accepting their disease. The idea that they don’t have to like it but rather accept the realty can be a way to help with the denial that often accompanies this disorder. This holds true for the care partners as they too are often in denial. Allowing time for games, no one is pressured to speak quickly and others don’t try to “interpret” is also important especially for care partners as they become used to “doing” everything for their partner and often end up controlling and, in some cases, demeaning their partner.

I use a brief mindfulness exercise in all classes as it gives them time to slow down and calm their thoughts.

Some of the games I use that are very effective and easy to learn are:

Everybody Go Pass the Sound – in this game people say their name, a word that describes them and a gesture. For example, a student says, “Craig, coffee” while he mimes drinking a cup of coffee. This is a fun way to get to know the names of other group members. It can be done standing or sitting. It also helps with cognitive functioning, memory and focus.

In this session we will learn other games, like Mirror and Zip, Zap, Zop that are effective with this population.

Even if folks are confined to wheelchairs we can make accommodations. I’ve seen wonderful improvements in many of my students and am honored to work with these brilliant, genius improvisers.

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