

# Improv for Focus and Attention

playing in the moment

Improv games selected to exercise the skills  
we ADDers need to succeed



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## ADHD and Improv: *isn't Impulsivity our problem???*

When you think about ADHD and improv, a paradox immediately comes to mind: isn't Improv all about being unfiltered, uncensored, and impulsive? And aren't those exactly the things I'm trying to learn to manage?

Well, yes and no.

In Improv, you find yourself taking on different characters and being in different situations all the time. You have to shoot from the hip, responding quickly to whatever offer was made by your partner, with no real guarantee where the scene is going to go next. You don't always have time to think: is this the right thing to say here? Is this the best answer? Will I regret this later?

Kind of like real life.

The benefit of doing Improv is that it's a safe setting where you can be yourself, knowing that these encounters are temporary and disposable. Nothing we say to each other is to be taken personally, it's characters talking to characters. We can experiment with relationships in a way we can't in our day to day lives.

As I see it, the main job of the person running the Improv (coach, leader, facilitator, teacher, whatever) is to create a safe environment, grounded in uncritical acceptance and positive reinforcement (see Bermant's paper in the REFERENCES section). You should feel the freedom to be yourself and create things on-the-fly that don't ever have to come to fruition. They don't

have to be anything more than what they are. They exist in the moment and they can be jettisoned as soon as we're done with them. So, you can experiment with no fear.

What is required, though, is that you try to be 100% present to the people around you, to work as a team, and to be authentic. *Don't go for the laugh.*

This is an important point, so I'll repeat it: don't go for the laugh.

The roots of Improv are not in comedy, they are in social work and theatre. This is explored more in then expanded version of this booklet, but for now, I'll just say a few words about what Viola Spolin was after when she created the theatre games that are the basis of Improv. She wanted to get us to a point where we would act directly from our intuition, a point beyond linear, structured thinking. Again, this might sound counterintuitive to how our ADHD brains are wired, but in reality, it's an excellent way to learn to harness this power, not let it run rampant.

We all know (now!) that ADHD is not a *lack* of attention. The problem is our inability to consistently *direct* that attention. And that's exactly what Improv calls for.

That's how the paradox is resolved: in the actual DOING.

## The Basics: What do I NEED to Know?

Improv has evolved differently in different parts of the country, but here are some of the basics everyone should know:

- "Yes, and..." - THE basic rule of Improv.

"Yes" means that whatever someone says in a scene is now true. It's how you create the world, the characters, and the theme of a scene.

"And" means that you want to elaborate on what's been said. It's how we add detail and complexity to the scenes.

- There are no mistakes, only gifts.

This is variously credited to Tina Fey, Bob Ross, and others. Personally, I heard it was Miles Davis. Whoever said it, it's important to "get" that you cannot really make a mistake in Improv. You can make stronger or weaker choices and you can throw your scene partners a curveball, but that's another bullet point...

- Improv is a team sport.

You always want to make your partner look good. Give them good suggestions, support their choices by expanding on them. You'll quickly find that it's easier trying to make your partner look good than trying to make yourself look good. It creates good will, and the audience feels the connection. And in larger scenes, isn't it nice knowing you have 5 people trying to make you look good, not just yourself?

- You can stop a scene or step out for any reason at any time.

In order to make this a completely safe space, every player has the absolute right to discontinue a scene for any reason, no questions asked.

Some other good things to know:

- Do not deny - don't say "no"

The quickest way to stop a scene is this: "so how are the kids?" "I don't have any kids."

- Don't ask questions.

The quickest way to stop a scene is this: "so how are the kids?" "I don't have any kids."

# Some Nuts and Bolts

## Who Starts the Scene?

New players often ask "OK, who goes first?" "Who goes first" is typically up to the players. There is a big advantage to going first - you have a lot of say in what's going on, who your characters are, where you are, and what the problem is. Consider everything that's established in this opening line:

"Steve! I can't believe you scored tickets to Comic-Con! And dressed as the Hulk! You've lost a lot of weight since we took those skydiving lessons."

## Who Ends the Scene?

This is a little trickier. With more established players, and especially in Long Form, a scene ends when another one starts. For our use, the coach typically ends the scene by ringing a bell or some other sign.

This makes it incumbent on the coach to watch for logical breakpoints - a callback line, a non sequitor, or just recognizing that the scene doesn't have anywhere to go.

## Who's the Star?

Improv is a team sport, so there usually isn't a "star", but often the power dynamic between the characters is unequal, skewing toward one or the other. In larger scenes, one person might *evolve* into the focal point, but that's usually unplanned and organic.

## Do I Have to create a different character for each scene?

Yes, you should. It's a great opportunity to try out other parts of your personality. If you're naturally loud, be withdrawn and tentative. If you're naturally goofy, be a little more serious. Play with it!

## Do my characters have to have accents and body language?

No, but again, it can be fun.

Let go of feeling obligated to create accents and characters and do what you feel. You are in a safe, grown-up playground where you can get as dramatic, goofy, absent-minded, self-absorbed, etc. as you want!

## Do We Want/Need Side Coaching?

Side-coaching is when the coach gives suggestions during scenes. There are pros and cons and the subject should be agreed on before the session starts. Part of it has to do with the goals of the session and the nature of the players. For our purposes, I try to keep coaching *during* scenes to a minimum, but find it very valuable to talk about the scenes once they've finished. Since we are trying to exercise certain skills in this context, it can be very helpful to talk about scenes after they end.

The main thing to remember is that side-coaching is intended to help the group grow in the agreed-on areas, not to mold it to the coach's preferences.

## The Rest of These Pages

The rest of these pages are games and exercises and scenes you can play when you're hosting an Improv. There are a lot of games in the Improv universe, but I've selected some of the ones I think are most aligned with our ADHD brains.

Each page will have the following:

- The name of the Game
- Skills Involved

These are the ADHD traits these Improv were chosen to help improve. Not all games are good for all of these, so I've indicated on the individual games.

- maintaining focus
  - short term memory
  - flexibility / giving up control
  - non-verbal communication
  - reading social cues
  - identification/empathy (putting yourself in the other persons shoes)
  - emotional recognition / regulation
- Players - how many people are typically involved
  - Description - how to play the game
  - Suggestions / Prompts - helpful places to start
  - Example - for some of the less familiar games
  - Notes - some other things I thought you might like to know about the game

## WARM-UP GAMES: YES, AND...

| SKILLS INVOLVED   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● maintaining focus</li><li>● short term memory</li><li>● flexibility / giving up control</li><li>● identification/empathy</li></ul>  |
| PLAYERS   |
| ALL   |
| DESCRIPTION   |
| <p>The first person in the circle begins by making a statement, establishing some aspect of a scene. Each player adds to the statement by saying "Yes, and" and then adding more detail.</p> <p>Sometimes, the narrative is from a single character's point of view, but speaking through all the different players, sometimes each player is their own character. Neither is wrong. Let it evolve.</p> |
| SUGGESTIONS / PROMPTS   |
| "I see you rode your bicycle here today."<br>"What a great weekend. I binge watched all the Star Wars movies."  |
| EXAMPLE   |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1: last night was the coldest night we've had on this trip.</li><li>2: yes, and the forecast says tonight is going to be even colder.</li><li>3: yes, and we thought Aruba was warm all year round.</li><li>4: yes, and I am never letting Dave plan our vacation again.</li></ol> etc.   |
| NOTES   |
|   |

## WARM-UP GAMES: TRIFECTA

|   |
|---|
| SKILLS INVOLVED   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● maintaining focus</li><li>● short term memory</li><li>● flexibility / giving up control</li><li>● non-verbal communication</li></ul>  |
| PLAYERS   |
| ALL   |
| DESCRIPTION   |
| <p>This is a 3 step word-association game. I often watch for associations that can become scene prompts later.</p> <p>Step 1: Players form a single line. A random player steps forward several feet, turns to the group, says "I am a (for example) tree", and physically represents a tree. Any of the remaining players then becomes something "tree" makes them think of. Player Two steps forward and says "I am a leaf" and represents that. Player Three makes a complimentary association such as "I am a squirrel".</p> <p>Step 2: Player One then chooses between "leaf" and "squirrel" and takes one offstage: "I'll take the squirrel." They go back to the line.</p> <p>Step 3: The remaining player repeats their offer: "I am a leaf". Two more players make their associations (maybe "table" and "tablecloth") and the game continues.</p> |
| SUGGESTIONS / PROMPTS   |
|   |
| EXAMPLE   |
| NOTES   |

## GAME: REMEMBER THAT VACATION...

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|--|
| SKILLS INVOLVED  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● maintaining focus</li><li>● short term memory</li><li>● flexibility / giving up control</li><li>● non-verbal communication</li><li>● reading social cues</li><li>● identification/empathy</li><li>● emotional recognition / regulation</li></ul> |
| PLAYERS  |
| 2  |
| DESCRIPTION  |
| Two players are reminiscing about an imaginary vacation that they took together.<br>The game begins with the first player saying "remember that vacation to ...?"  |
| SUGGESTIONS / PROMPTS  |
| What went right / wrong about the vacation ?<br>Would they do it again ?<br>How long ago did it happen ? (e.g., were they children? was it last summer?)<br>Who else was with them ?<br>What did they forget to bring ?<br>What were their souvenirs ?                                   |
| EXAMPLE  |
| 1: Remember that vacation to Miami?<br>2: It was awful! The first time it snowed in 76 years!<br>1: Well I had a great time. Where else can you get a suntan and make a snowman at the same time?  |

## GAME: SIMPLE SCENES

| SKILLS INVOLVED  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● maintaining focus</li><li>● short term memory</li><li>● flexibility / giving up control</li><li>● non-verbal communication</li><li>● reading social cues</li><li>● identification/empathy</li><li>● emotional recognition / regulation</li></ul>   |
| PLAYERS  |
| 2  |
| DESCRIPTION  |
| <p>Especially with newer players, it can be good to do short, simple scenes. Two players are given a location, a relationship, and a problem they are facing. Give them a lot of room to explore.</p> <p>Keep these fairly short, but watch for the level of engagement. If they are exploring real aspects of the problem, or each other, let the scene go a little longer.</p> |
| SUGGESTIONS / PROMPTS  |
| <p>Teachers at a class reunion who were completely wrong about which student would take what job.</p> <p>Siblings at Disneyland, one wants to stay, one is ready to go home.</p> <p>Co-workers who are applying for the same promotion.</p> <p>Business partners who are facing bankruptcy.</p> <p>The band is breaking up.</p>  |
| EXAMPLE  |
| NOTES  |
| Remind players to keep it simple and real. What would these conversations actually sound like?   |

## GAME: TYPEWRITER

|   |
|---|
| SKILLS INVOLVED   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● maintaining focus</li><li>● short term memory</li><li>● flexibility / giving up control</li><li>● non-verbal communication</li><li>● reading social cues</li></ul>  |
| PLAYERS   |
| 3 (can be modified for more)  |
| DESCRIPTION   |
| One player is the writer creating the story based on a prompt. The writer narrates the story out loud. The other players (typically a single pair) act out the story. At times, the writer will stop and let the characters move the story forward on their own.  |
| SUGGESTIONS / PROMPTS   |
| EXAMPLE   |
| NOTES   |
| <p>This game can sound confusing or intimidating, but once you start, it usually works well. Here are some helpful notes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1 - let the players try acting out the scene WHILE the writer is speaking. This often helps "launch" them into the sections they will do on their own.</li><li>2 - don't let the writer's or the players' sections be too short or too long. Find a happy medium</li><li>3 - make sure the players take part in moving the narrative along, not just continuing what the writer created. If they want, they can change direction completely, which causes the writer to give up their original idea.</li></ol> <p>Encourage use of body language to convey emotion, expectation, etc.</p> |

## GAME: MIKE'S MODIFIED LARONDE

| SKILLS INVOLVED   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● maintaining focus</li><li>● short term memory</li><li>● reading social cues</li><li>● identification/empathy</li><li>● emotional recognition / regulation</li></ul>   |
| PLAYERS   |
| ALL, in pairs   |
| DESCRIPTION   |
| <p>One player directs the others through a modified "La Ronde" long-form game. Choose a general theme ("relationships", " vacation", "work "). Choose a Director.</p> <p>Two players begin a scene that relates to the theme. They are free to choose location, relationship, etc. Make sure characters and relationship are clear. As the scene develops, the Director is watching for an opportunity to start a related scene. Director stops the scene and has one Player leave and one stay. Director chooses a new player, assigns them a character, and has them enter the scene. A new scene is played, keeping in mind everything that has gone before. It can be a new location, some time may have elapsed, etc. The only things that remain the same are the overall theme and the reality of the character who remained onstage.</p> <p>This rotation continues until everyone has been onstage twice. Director closes the loop by bringing up the first player who was taken offstage.</p> |
| SUGGESTIONS / PROMPTS   |
| EXAMPLE   |
| <p>Theme: "art"</p> <p>The first 2 players are Artist and Model. They talk about how nobody appreciates sculpture anymore. The Artist leaves, the Model is joined onstage by the Landlord. The Artist owes 3 months rent, the Model makes excuses, pleads for time. Model leaves and the Landlord is joined onstage by his Wife. She accuses him of not being hard enough on his tenants, etc.</p>  |

## NOTES

In a more traditional game, players would create their own characters and bring themselves on and off stage. That requires a team that has worked together for a while, so this version gives that duty to a Director. Director could stop a scene and ask "does anyone have a character they want to bring onstage?" as a way of helping players develop this skill.

## GAME: NEW CHOICE

| SKILLS INVOLVED   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● maintaining focus</li><li>● short term memory</li><li>● flexibility / giving up control</li><li>● identification/empathy</li><li>● emotional recognition / regulation</li></ul>                       |
| PLAYERS   |
| 2   |
| DESCRIPTION   |
| Two players are engaged in a scene.<br>At any point, the director can interrupt. Whoever is currently speaking must go back and start their line again, going in a completely different direction.  |
| SUGGESTIONS / PROMPTS   |
| EXAMPLE   |
| 1: The sunset is beautiful tonight. I love the way the colors reflect off the water.<br>2: It makes me think of that time we were in Hawaii...<br>DING!<br>2: Is that a whale out there?<br>DING!<br>2: So the bad news is I burned dinner... |
| NOTES   |
| New players often make minor changes like: "I like the red car" DING "I like the green car" DING! "I like the blue car". Encourage them to make more significant choices.   |

## GAME: EMOTIONAL ZONES (modified for online)

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|---|
| SKILLS INVOLVED   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● maintaining focus</li><li>● short term memory</li><li>● identification/empathy</li><li>● emotional recognition / regulation</li></ul>   |
| PLAYERS   |
| 3   |
| DESCRIPTION   |
| <p>Characters are assigned a sequence 1,2,3.<br/>Three emotions are chosen, such as "happy", "hungry", "anxious".<br/>Each player is assigned an emotion.<br/>A scene prompt is chosen and the scene begins, with each player demonstrating their emotion in their character.<br/>Coach will interrupt the scene and players change their emotional state. For example, Happy becomes Hungry, Hungry becomes Anxious, Anxious becomes Happy.<br/>They remain the same characters in the same story, but their emotion changes.<br/>Coach can interrupt the scene several times.</p> |
| SUGGESTIONS / PROMPTS   |
| EXAMPLE   |
| NOTES   |
| <p>This is a more sophisticated game in that we want the players to really explore how those emotions are played out in different people in different situations.</p>   |

## GAME: TIME TRAVEL

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|--|
| SKILLS INVOLVED  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● maintaining focus</li><li>● short term memory</li><li>● flexibility / giving up control</li><li>● identification/empathy</li><li>● emotional recognition / regulation</li></ul>  |
| PLAYERS  |
| 6 or more in pairs   |
| DESCRIPTION  |
| Two players do a simple scene, establishing that they are somewhere mid-life. Coach will then assign the other groups to play scenes that happened before or after the scene.  |
| SUGGESTIONS / PROMPTS  |
| Business partners.<br>Married couple.  |
| EXAMPLE  |
| NOTES  |
| Once the first scene is established, the characters remain the same, but pairs can be moved around in time. For example, the original mid-life pair might show us the same characters in a scene in their 90s.<br>Call out any inconsistencies you hear, it will prevent more confusion down the line. |

## GAME: FOUR SQUARE (MIKE'S SIMPLIFIED VERSION)

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|---|
| SKILLS INVOLVED   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● maintaining focus</li><li>● short term memory</li><li>● flexibility / giving up control</li><li>● non-verbal communication</li><li>● identification/empathy</li><li>● emotional recognition / regulation</li></ul>  |
| PLAYERS   |
| 4   |
| DESCRIPTION   |
| <p>For the online version, the four characters are paired A-B, B-C, C-D, D-A. Each pair of players is assigned either a Relationship, a Location, or a Situation. The game begins with A-B starting their scene. At some point, they are stopped and B-C begin their scene, using their prompt. Character B is NOT the same person in both scenes, meaning that each person (A,B,C,D) is creating 2 characters. This continues with C-D, D-A, etc. until each pair has come up once. At that point, A-B continues with their scene, either immediately where they left off, or some time later (minutes, weeks, years). In my version, each pair performs 3 times, giving them a chance for beginning, middle, and end. In the regular version, rotation can be swapped (A-B, B-C, C-D, B-C, C-D, etc) and the game can go on as long as the coach chooses.</p> |
| SUGGESTIONS / PROMPTS   |
| EXAMPLE   |
| A-B are parent child; B-C are mechanics. C can only use hand gestures ; C-D are a hairbrush and a mirror, both on a table; D-A are a Gladiator and a pilot  |
| NOTES   |
| A lot of questions can come up when setting up and executing this game. Remember it's Improv. Make up the answers. It's YOUR game!  |

## **REFERENCES (a VERY partial list)**

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Second City, Chicago

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