

Improvisational Theater Session Objectives and Goals

Learning Objectives:

At the end of this session, students will be able to:

1. Describe and demonstrate various nonverbal improvisational theater techniques that convey kindness, compassion, and their opposites through tone and posture
2. Describe and demonstrate various verbal strategies that convey kindness and compassion in response to unexpected or uncomfortable clinical situations.
3. Demonstrate how they can “enact” (take on) the perspective of another in a role-play scenario.
4. Describe and demonstrate skills of close listening and careful attention to what is happening in a given clinical situation.
5. Apply skills of improvising kindness and compassion in unexpected and uncomfortable clinical situations.

Session Goals:

The purpose of this session is to implement an improvisational theater experience for medical students in order to improve kindness, empathy and creative problem-solving in addressing surprising, unexpected, and distressing aspects of patient encounters. In difficult clinical encounters, students want to demonstrate kindness and caring, but often feel they lack the skills to do so, and revert to formulaic verbal and nonverbal behaviors, even when these are not appropriate to the situation at hand (1). Some have argued that the “art of medicine” is best understood as a performing art that relies on knowledge of characters, nonverbal and verbal language, and dramatic action (2, 3). Stage actors must learn to tailor vocalization, posture, as well as verbal and nonverbal expressions to rapidly evolving situations (4). Drawing on performative studies, theater has been used to teach verbal communication strategies, clinical empathy and perspective taking, listening for subtext, acknowledging patient’s feelings and other affective learning, as well as skills of physical expressiveness, body language, vocal presence, eye contact, and body positioning to medical students (4-7). Other scholars have noted that the use of interactive theater allows learners to explore alternative modes of interacting while challenging them to respond creatively to unfamiliar and uncomfortable situations, ideas, and perspectives (8). The ability to think “as if” one is the Other lies at the heart of theatrical performance and leads to generating ideas, solving problems, and creating new interactive possibilities (3). Of great importance in clinical situations, training in improvisational theater emphasizes *listening*, as opposed to talking, and *awareness* of what’s happening rather than *judgment* of what’s happening (9).

References

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