

The following is an excerpt from the book:

Insight Improvisation

Melding Meditation, Theater, and Therapy for Self-Exploration, Healing, and Empowerment

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To learn more, please visit <http://www.insightimprov.org>.

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The Three States

Two men move together in the space. There is stillness, silence, a sense of mutual caring. They move extremely close to one another, barely touching. Then one holds the other for what feels like a long time. The group, witnessing, does not make a sound. There is a poignancy in the dance, a feeling of loss or grieving. Some in the group are moved to tears—afterward they share how rare it is to see such intimate connection between men.

Next, two women enter the space. Suddenly, a different quality: wild play. Ponies gallop over open prairie. Freedom. Breath. Air. Wind. The group's eyes are wide.

The final pair, a man and a woman, enter the space. It's a barroom brawl waged by two Neanderthals. Grunts, groans, curses in gibberish. A primitive, gut-wrenching battle of the sexes. Belly-laughs from the group.

The Three States is a simple and deep practice of moving in relationship with another. Part dyadic improvisation, and part authentic movement, the exercise provides a liberating context to explore moving in contact and apart from one's partner—all while maintaining mindful awareness. It can be playful as well as moving, and can evoke a wide range of feelings, states, and mutual experiences.

The exercise was inspired by the work of Carol Fox Prescott and Jean-Claude van Itallie, and developed by yoga and improvisation teacher Billie Jo Joy and myself. This chapter describes the basic version of The Three States, as well as variations incorporating sound and words. The exercise is enjoyable to watch as well, so we'll also discuss its use in a workshop or performance context before an audience.

The Three States		
Basics	Use in a Workshop	Variations
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Basics

Starting Out

The Three States begins with two partners entering the space, closing their eyes and beginning to practice authentic movement. No external witness is required for this exercise—both partners are in a sense moving *and* witnessing.

As the two move, they are already experiencing one of the three states: moving while **apart**, but with an awareness of the other. They may open or close their eyes at any time during the exercise.

At some point, one or both partners, following their authentic impulse, makes either **physical contact** or **eye contact** with the other.

The state of **physical contact** begins when one person touches the other, making physical contact in some way. The two continue moving in physical connection, without breaking it, for as long as they like. They are still in a sense each practicing authentic movement, following their own impulses—they just happen to be in physical contact. If one person breaks the physical contact, or makes eye contact, they have entered a different state.

Note that while in physical contact, the partners can move and change the way they are connected. For example, if my first impulse brought my fingertips into contact with my partner's back, I may follow that movement by rolling the back of my hand and then my arm against his back, until I end up back-to-back with him. We may then slowly squat until we're sitting back-to-back on the floor together. There is no plan; we are simply following our own authentic impulses while remaining open to what we're perceiving from the other.

The state of **eye contact** begins when both partners have their eyes open, they see one another's eyes, and they maintain the eye connection as they continue to move but without physical contact. It is not necessary to stare: it's OK to blink, or briefly look away—the instruction is to continuously return to making *relaxed* eye contact with the other, while following one's own authentic movement impulses.

As the exercise proceeds, either partner can initiate a change to a new state: moving in **eye contact**, moving in **physical contact**, or moving **apart**. However, you

must keep in mind a basic rule of The Three States: **You cannot be in physical contact and eye contact at the same time—if you initiate one you must break the other.**

Before you begin, it can be helpful to set a timer—perhaps try 10 minutes if this is your first time (as you gain experience, you may experiment with 20 minutes or longer). When the timer sounds, take a minute to transition back into the first state—moving apart—and then gradually come to stillness, with eyes closed. Each person should take a few moments with eyes closed to notice their body, their breath, and how they feel.

Afterwards, set aside a good amount of time to share what the experience was like for each of you. A thorough sharing process can take as long as the movement itself, and is an important part of the exercise. *(You can follow some of the suggestions for sharing which appear in the “Authentic Movement” chapter in Part I.)*

Exploring

The Three States is rich terrain for exploration and exercising both self-awareness and awareness of the other. Once you’ve tried the exercise a few times, the following questions can be used both as “lenses” to look through during the exercise, as well as useful areas for exploration in the sharing process:

The Other/Myself. How does the quality of my awareness of the other—and of myself—change when moving apart, in physical contact, or in eye contact? What happens to my awareness when moving with eyes open versus eyes closed? What affect is my partner having on my own movement, emotions, state of mind? How am I affected by their facial expression, their body language, the way they make eye contact and/or physical contact?

Physical Contact. What do I notice as I make physical contact? Can I take in bare sensation: touch, pressure, texture, weight, temperature, friction? If I slow down and take in the contact, what am I sensing when touching my partner: clothing, hair, skin, fat, muscle, bone? What happens when moving in contact with eyes open versus with eyes closed? What feelings arise for me while in physical contact? Is it pleasant, unpleasant, neutral? What is getting communicated in each moment of touch: connection, affection, distance, support, conflict, desire?

Eye Contact. What is the impact of making prolonged eye contact? Can I relax in the eye contact, let go, return to an awareness of myself and my own body? Or is the eye contact so powerful that I feel pulled by it, or lost in it? Am I still breathing while in eye contact? (Breathing is recommended...!) How does it make me feel: Vulnerable? Shy? Aggressive? Attracted? Fearful? Seen? What role do I feel I am playing as I make eye contact? Can I notice subtleties: the color and shape of their eyes, how much they are blinking/looking away, what emotion/feeling is getting expressed through their eyes?

Impulse. Where does impulse come from? How do I “decide” when to initiate physical contact, or eye contact, or move apart? Is my impulse authentic? Is it driven by desire, aversion, or something else? Can I slow down and notice impulse, but not react instantly?

Relationship. Am I open to being in relationship with this other person? What are my tendencies or habits in relationship? E.g., do I tend to hide, or to be assertive? Am I able to stay in touch with myself and my own authentic impulses while being in relationship? Or do I tend to “care-take” the other?

How does the quality of the relationship change when in the three different states? For example, when moving apart, I may still sense the other, feel their energy—as one can sometimes feel the “chi,” or energy field, when two hands are rubbed together and then held facing one another and slowly brought together. Can I be open to being affected by the other, while not being attached to them?

Status. In each moment, do I notice feeling superior, inferior, or equal to my partner? Have they cast me in a certain status role—e.g. by lowering their body in relation to mine—or am I the one changing things in order to balance or unbalance the status? What uses of gesture, posture, or stance affect our relative status? How about eye contact?

Sensuality, Sexuality, Attraction. Any exercise involving touch or prolonged eye contact can evoke feelings of connection, attraction, or desire—or, conversely, distance, dislike, or aversion. Can I be aware when these feelings arise in this exercise, and open to them, rather than push them away? How are they affecting my ability to remain present and centered? How am I changing my movement or use of physical and/or eye contact in response to these feelings? Can I appreciate the feelings, but not act on them?

For couples whose relationship has fallen into dysfunctional patterns, such as an avoidance or diminishment of physical intimacy, the Three States can be a useful exercise, particularly when facilitated by a trained clinician as part of a therapeutic process. The exercise allows one to experience one’s partner in a new way physically, in a context distinct from sex or affection (and the habits built up around each), and removed from the pressures, constraints, and judgments of daily life. (*More on applications of Insight Improv with couples appears in Part IV of this book.*)

Imagery and Role. What inner images am I experiencing during the exercise— e.g. am I imagining a “scene” happening in a specific place, or that we are playing certain roles in our relationship with one another?

Returning to One’s Own Center

There is a tendency when moving with a partner to focus on—and worry about—the other person and what they are thinking, rather than being grounded in one’s own experience: “Is she OK with the way I’m touching her?”; “I wonder if it’s been too long since I’ve made eye contact with him?”; “Is she avoiding me?”; “Is this too much?”; etc.

Van Itallie refers to this as “**giving away one’s center.**” As actors—or speakers—we sometimes do this when standing before an audience, wondering what the audience is thinking about us, rather than focusing on our intention, or on simply being in the moment. In *The Three States*, it is easy to give away one’s center to the other person.

To return to your center, one of the best ways is to return to bodily awareness. The body is a gateway leading back to the present moment.

If I simply take a breath—feeling that breath in my center, in my belly (also known as the *hara* or lower *dantian* in Eastern traditions)—I am brought back to myself, to the present moment, to a sense of authentic impulse: “gut feeling.”

But any sense door can lead me back to the here and now. Feeling the back of my hand against the cool floor, opening to my sense of smell or taste, taking in my partner’s eyes and noticing their color and shape, closing my eyes and simply listening to the subtle sounds of our movement; all are ways to get out of my head and return to my own center.

When I am connected to myself, my movement is truly authentic. I am no longer *reacting* to what my partner is doing—the reflex to mirror, or please, or protect, or avoid the other. Instead I am able to respond, taking in their movement, feeling the contact (or lack of contact) and its effect on me, but also noticing my own impulse and following it mindfully, intentionally.

The Three States provides a safe container in which to practice having an authentic response to another, a response grounded in one's own center. This is useful practice for real-life relationships, where we often are prone to giving away our center. The next time I have a conflict with my partner, for example, can I stay grounded in present-moment awareness, noticing how I feel, while listening and remaining open to the other's point of view?

Use in a Workshop

The Three States can be taught in a workshop setting, even as an introductory exercise. Because it involves improvisational movement *and* physical contact, ask participants to remove eye glasses, jewelry, watches—anything breakable, sharp, or dangling—beforehand.

Begin with the whole group doing simultaneous authentic movement, with the facilitator as witness. Then, instruct participants to open their eyes slightly while continuing to move, and slowly allow their movement to take them into contact with a partner. Once they have all found partners, say: “Continue following your authentic movement impulses, but do it while maintaining physical contact with your partner—do not break the physical contact as you move.”

After a minute or two, offer some coaching: “As you move in physical contact with your partner, you may find yourself worrying about what your partner is thinking or feeling. ‘Is this touch OK for them? What do *they* need right now?’ Those are completely natural thoughts. However, for this exercise, try to return to your own center, your own authentic impulse. What does your body want to do right now, in this moment? Listen to your body and follow it. If you’re unsure, just be still, relax, and breathe, until an authentic impulse arises. Treat this exercise as a meditation in which the goal is to continually return to your own center. Continue to move in physical contact with your partner for a few more minutes.”

Allow them to try this for a little longer, and then say “In a moment we are going to make a transition: slowly, in your own time, I’d like you to shift to moving in eye contact with your partner, no longer in physical contact. Continue following your body and what it wants to do. Slowly allow your eyes to open and make relaxed eye contact with your partner. You are no longer touching your partner. It’s OK to blink or look away briefly whenever you need to, but see if you can return to making relaxed eye contact with them, as you continue your movement.” In a minute or two, add: “As you move in eye contact with your partner, can you stay connected to your own center, your own authentic impulse? Don’t forget to breathe! Really relax and let go as you move in eye contact with them.”

After a few minutes, introduce a third stage: “In a moment we’re going to make another transition. Slowly, in your own time, I’d like you to break the eye contact with your partner, and move apart from them, no longer in physical or eye contact. Maintain an awareness of your partner as you move apart. What are you noticing coming in

through your sense doors? How is this different from moving in physical or eye contact with them? Follow what your body wants to do...

And then a final stage: "In a moment I'm going to invite you to continue your movement as an improvisation with your partner, exploring these three states: moving in physical contact, moving in eye contact, and moving apart. Feel free to initiate a change anytime. However, note that you can only be in one state at a time: if one partner makes eye contact, both of you must break the physical contact, and vice versa. As you improvise, stay connected to your own center and what your body wants to do."

Let the pairs improvise for several minutes, and then talk them through a gradual ending, e.g. "In your own time, begin to find an ending with your partner." And then: "Slowly make the transition to moving apart now, no longer in physical or eye contact with your partner. Allow your eyes to close. Begin to come to stillness. Take a moment in stillness and silence to relax, breathe, and notice how you feel right now. Let everything go. Take a deep breath and let the body fully relax. When you are ready, you can go meet your partner. Take a few minutes to discuss the exercise: what was it like for you? How was moving with a partner in these three states different from doing authentic movement alone?" Etc.

Variations

Sound and Words

As with authentic movement, the partners in The Three States can agree beforehand on the use of sound and/or words. Note that this is an advanced stage of the

practice, as words and sounding can really pull us off our center. There is a great deal to gain from the nonverbal and silent form of this practice, including a deeper understanding of body language in each of the three states. Once you're comfortable with The Three States as a silent exercise, try allowing the use of sounds. Only experiment with words when you feel ready.

A few ground rules help when adding language in The Three States: speak only about what's happening right now, either directly or through metaphor (e.g. don't deliver a monologue about what you had for breakfast this morning); keep the language spare and essential; avoid unnecessary repetition; have plenty of pauses and silences (i.e., avoid a stream-of-consciousness non-stop delivery). The idea is to be mindful, and notice the effect even a little language has on the interaction, rather than to get lost in a lengthy monologue. Notice how role/story can emerge from the interaction and use of language, and be open to what emerges. But also be open to changing roles/stories as the physical interaction changes. Singing is OK (*see the subsequent chapter, "Singing"*), but again only if it's about what's happening right now.

Here are a couple of interesting variations that can help control the amount of speaking and prevent simultaneous speech:

Assign one person to be the dedicated speaker; the other person must be silent throughout the exercise. Then switch roles. One variation on this variation is to switch roles whenever the pair move apart.

Assign one person the ability to make sound or speak words only when in physical contact; the other can make sound/speak words only when in eye contact. Both must be silent when the pair is apart. This also makes for a very fun

performance score when doing The Three States in front of a group/audience. If three are moving (see below), each can be allowed to speak during one of the Three States. The downside of assigning roles is that it can put the movers into their heads a little bit, as each must remember when they are allowed to speak.

More than Two

It is possible to do The Three States with more than two people.

When doing it with three or four (or more) at one time, add the instruction that it's OK to be in eye contact with one person while in physical contact with another.

As the size of the group increases, the exercise may begin to look like a big "Contact Improvisation Jam." There are some important differences, however:

Participants in The Three States are, within the structure of the exercise, doing authentic movement, in the sense that they are following their body's authentic impulses—rather than thinking and moving intentionally as in Contact Improvisation to find ways of sharing weight, balancing with a partner, etc. If these things happen organically in The Three States, that's fine, but they are side-effects or happy accidents rather than the goal.

Participants in The Three States are conscious of what state they are in: moving in eye contact, in physical contact, or apart. They may be in eye contact with Person A and in physical contact with Person B, but they cannot do both with the same person at the same time. This is also in contrast to Contact Improvisation, where there are no such rules about eye contact and physical contact.

Performing The Three States

The basic version of The Three States, as well as any of the variations mentioned above, can be used as performance structures in a workshop or experimental theater context. The examples at the beginning of this chapter come from one such workshop session.

It is important to remind the movers beforehand about the distinction between Performance Mind and Being Mind: “Break out of your habit to perform or entertain us—instead, stay with yourself and follow your inner impulses, what your body wants to do. Trust that the audience will get what they get.” (*For more on Performance Mind versus Being Mind, see the first chapter of Part II, “Naked Improvisation.”*)

Final Thoughts

Like all Insight Improv exercises, The Three States is a part of mindfulness training, an extension of meditation. It is an opportunity to meditate on relating to others, to open one’s senses and experience the power of sight when in eye contact, the power of touch when in physical contact, and the power of all the senses when moving apart.

The Three States is a practice of being true to the moment while respecting the other. Can I fully take in the other—the subtle expression on their face, the weight of their body leaning against mine, their scent, the sound of their breath—when doing The Three States? Can I really let someone else in, open up to them, with mindfulness?

When doing The Three States, I am *in* a relationship. At the same time, the exercise is a metaphor for relationship. It can echo all the qualities of actual human relationships: intimacy, competition, camaraderie, shyness, domination, seduction,

support, empathy, inhibition, exploration... It may be a misnomer to call the exercise The Three States—it would be more accurate to call it The Infinite States, as there are infinite possibilities that arise when working with a partner in a mindful and open way.

We can extend this idea to all of the exercises in Part II of this book—all explore the mindful relationship to something or somebody. We began with Naked Improvisation, working in relationship to oneself, the space, and the audience; then with Amplification, working in relationship to one's own body and voice; and now The Three States, working in relationship with a partner. We'll see in the upcoming chapters, on Working with Text and Storytelling, how the text or our story can be an inspirational partner as well.

Ultimately, any object of our meditation provides infinite inspiration. When practicing with mindfulness and choicelessness—staying focused while remaining open—the actor, performer, or artist is never at a loss for something to spark their creativity and self-expression. Inspiration emerges from this very moment, with no stress, no pushing. Each moment of awareness presents its own gift to us, if we can remain open to it.