*The following is an excerpt from the book:*

# Insight Improvisation

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

by Joel Gluck, MEd, RDT

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

## Working with Individuals

> *Our mind becomes more spacious, more open, and happier as we move past our avoidance and denial to see what is true.*
>
> *— Joseph Goldstein (1993, p. 12)*

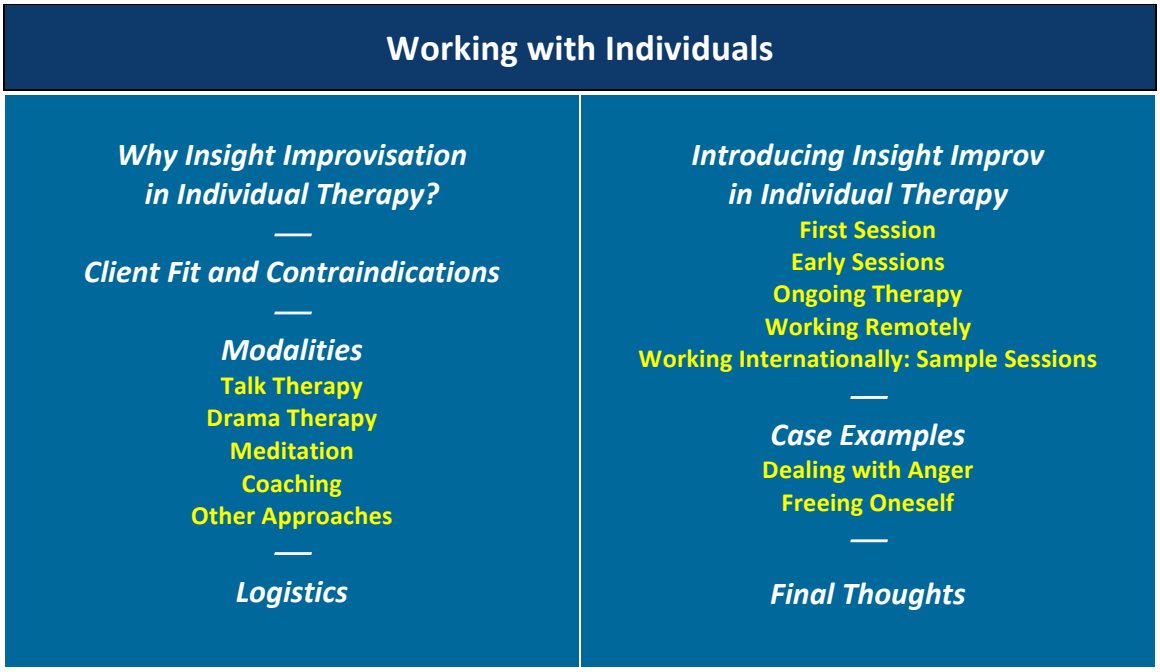
This chapter is for therapists—talk therapists, creative arts therapists, drama therapists, psychodramatists, and others—who have explored earlier parts of this book and wondered: "How do I actually apply this in my therapy practice?"

I have been using Insight Improvisation as a therapist and coach for more than 15 years. In that time, I have perceived an increasing desire and openness among clients for alternative ways of working that go beyond talk therapy, that offer creative approaches to their issues. And I have had many conversations with fellow clinicians about their desire to try new techniques, to break free of habit, and to keep their practice fresh.

Insight Improvisation has several qualities that can complement an existing therapy practice. It is physical, creative, improvisational, and fun. At the same time, it draws upon meditation and deep listening to the body and emotions, and thus creates a

beautiful container for mindful exploration. Insight Improv—and psolodrama in particular—is designed to empower the client to make his own discoveries and allows the clinician to serve as witness and guide.

The purpose of this chapter is to help you as a clinician incorporate Insight Improvisation into the work that you do.




## Why Insight Improvisation in Individual Therapy?

As has been described elsewhere (e.g., van der Kolk as cited in Hudgins, 2000, p. 230), experiential approaches are often most effective in therapy. They can bypass the rationalizing, intellectualizing, defended mind and make a direct connection to the client's subconscious, memories, emotions, habits, secrets, deeper motivations, hopes and

dreams, traumas, unexamined beliefs. Some of the most powerful experiential techniques connect directly with the body, through movement or touch. Getting beneath the words—or putting aside words entirely—can help us find the truth.

Insight Improvisation shares these strengths with several other forms of drama therapy and creative arts therapy. Clients enjoy practicing Insight Improvisation, and often cite it as one of the most powerful parts of a therapy session. It allows them to break out of their habitual thinking-mind, get into the body, relax, and be present to different channels of information—senses, emotions, inner imagery and roles.

But what's unique about Insight Improv?

**Appealing to a range of personal styles/preferences.** The combination of mindfulness/meditation with drama therapy provides two complementary forms of treatment that together are effective for a range of issues; mindfulness appealing to the inner/introverted/contemplative side of the client, and drama therapy unleashing their expressive, playful, creative side.

**Oriented toward self-discovery and ownership.** Once the client understands how to practice the form (psolodrama, preceded by the entryway practices—authentic movement through scene stream), the therapist's role is primarily as a witness in Insight Improvisation. Clients generally take greater ownership of answers they find themselves, and Insight Improv is designed to create the conditions for those insights to emerge organically, from the client's own improvisations. Insight Improv helps clients tap into their own inner wisdom, imagination, and creativity.

**Helpful for times when the therapist is at a loss.** Psolodrama (and the entryway progression) can be taught to a client and then be applied at any time in the course of

therapy. It is particularly useful for those times when there isn't a specific issue the client wishes to focus on or for when it is unclear how to work on a given issue: rather than leave the session feeling it was not as powerful as usual, the client will often end such a session having made a meaningful connection to their body, feelings, and authentic impulses. Having gone on a memorable journey in their psolodrama, they may also leave feeling more self-expressed, open, creative—and possibly, through the sharing dialogue with the therapist—having gained a valuable new insight.

**Practicing and instilling new "Being Mind" habits.** My drama therapy colleague and friend Dan Wiener recently wrote to me:

> *Cultivating "Being Mind" is quite a struggle for most of us, since the world is pulling/training us to live predominantly in "Performance Mind." This leads me to the questions, "How successful are you in getting psychotherapy clients to enter Being Mind?" and "What time and effort is typically required to attain that state, even temporarily?"*

I agree that personally making the shift from Performance Mind to Being Mind, as well as helping others do the same, can be challenging: modern life seems bent on conditioning us to *not* be present. Insight Improvisation techniques—from meditation and authentic movement to psolodrama, and just about every exercise in this book—are designed to help the client (and ourselves) strengthen the ability to return to the present moment, and let go a little bit of the grip of "performance mind" (the neurotic cycling of self-judgment and/or worry, combined with a need for others' approval). Insight Improv practices help cultivate a greater sense of equanimity, awareness, the joy of being in the moment, relating to the world in a way that feels more grounded and centered, yet with a more open heart. Using these techniques, I find that clients can enter states of Being

Mind quite readily, even in a second or third therapy session, without a great deal of effort or preparation. And with practice—such as a personal practice of meditation or psolodrama—clients are able to cultivate the ability to return to Being Mind more readily in their everyday lives.

**Easy to incorporate.** Insight Improv is easy to use and combine with standard talk therapy and creative arts therapy, as will be described in this chapter. It is simple to adapt and mold to fit the moment—for example, a psychodrama can easily transition into a psolodrama with very little additional prompting. And most structures in Insight Improv, including psolodrama, are designed for two roles—psoloist and witness—roles naturally suited to client and therapist.

## Client Fit and Contraindications

What kinds of clients benefit most from Insight Improv, and particularly psolodrama?

In my own practice I tend to work most with "normal neurotics"—individuals who are functional, sometimes quite successful, but have issues they would like to address: life issues, emotional issues, relationship issues, work-related issues, habits of mind and/or body, etc. I find that adults fitting this description tend to get the most out of Insight Improvisation and psolodrama.

Those in the above group who may *especially* benefit from trying Insight Improv include meditators, performers (actors, dancers, those interested in improvisation), those who have experienced drama therapy or psychodrama and are seeking a deeper personal exploration, and those interested in body-oriented (somatic) approaches.

Certain clients would *not* benefit as much and might actually be harmed with the careless application of these approaches. As described in Part III of this book, there are some who may find certain Insight Improv techniques, especially psolodrama, too unstructured, confusing, or even triggering or retraumatizing. I would include in this group children (and adults) who are not developmentally ready for this type of work, those who have a mental illness (e.g. schizophrenia or similar illnesses) or personality disorder, or those with a history of addiction or severe trauma. A general rule of thumb is that anyone taught psolodrama should have the ability to hold and support their own emotional process; if the therapist has doubts but wishes to proceed, he is advised to use caution, go slowly, and provide lots of structure and coaching throughout.

## Modalities

In my private therapy practice, I use Insight Improv to foster growth and change in my clients by combining four different modalities: talk, drama therapy (including Insight Improvisation), meditation, and coaching.

My practice is eclectic. I fit what I do to the needs of whomever I'm with, meaning there are also a few things I do that do not fit neatly into those four buckets. So I've added a fifth category, below, under the heading of "additional approaches".

### Talk therapy

Early in the therapy process, talk is the initial form of intake, for learning about a client's past, family of origin, relationships, career, etc., as well as their goals for therapy.

I use talk therapy in subsequent client sessions to check-in, learn about a client's needs—their presenting problems—and explore issues more deeply through inquiry and dialogue. I will often ask a client for their "headlines," the top items they would like to cover in the session, which could include latest news, issues they are facing, or requests to work on a particular challenge using experiential approaches such as drama therapy.

When using talk therapy my intention is to be a fully present, empathic, and supportive listener. I also draw from a broader toolkit of talk therapy approaches, including cognitive-behavioral concepts and exercises.

### Drama therapy

I use two main forms of drama therapy in my practice: psychodrama and Insight Improvisation/psolodrama—the latter including the entryway practices of authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream. In addition, over the years, I have on occasion used other kinds of drama therapy with clients, including ritual theater, self-revelatory performance, the Embodied Psyche Technique, and Developmental Transformations (Johnson & Emunah, 2009).

I use drama therapy for many reasons.

Drama therapy helps the therapist perform a more thorough intake. The depth of information shared from even a simple psychodrama—e.g., the client talking to his father—is almost always greater than what is shared through talk alone.

Drama therapy breaks free of one of the limitations of talk therapy, which is that for some issues, talking can lead to a client retreading the same ground, because they are simply sharing the thinking about the issue they have already done, and smart clients usually have thought about all of the expected angles on their problem. Drama therapy

accesses the body and the imagination, and can offer up unexpectedly powerful insights as well as emotional connections that thinking and talking cannot. For this reason, drama therapy is my main tool for helping break a client out of her habitual approach to an issue.

Although it can be a little scary to try something new—introducing drama therapy can elicit resistance in some clients—drama therapy is an experiential approach that lifts the act of therapy from something mundane to something exciting, dynamic, special, even sacred. Clients spend their lives talking—often talking with others about their issues. Having a different approach, an entirely different channel to enter and work with issues, helps differentiate the therapy experience.

### Meditation

Over the years, I have taught many therapy clients (as well as life coaching and executive coaching clients) meditation, for a variety of reasons. Some clients are experiencing stress and need some form of relaxation to restore calm and balance in their lives. Other clients are noticing that their behavior is reactive, and need training that can help them maintain equanimity, and build the capacity for nonreactivity, in the face of challenging circumstances, anger, fear, etc. Others turn to meditation to learn to be more present, in the face of external distractions or chaos, or internal distractions such as a scattered mind. Others seek a deeper journey in their life, one in which they can explore who they are with a different kind of awareness—to know themselves more fully, so that they can better understand life, death, and their relationships with others.

Because my own meditation background is mainly in the Theravada Buddhist approach—I have been a daily practitioner since 1997—I tend to teach the three kinds of

awareness (as well as the three corresponding meditation practices), described in Part I of this book: mindfulness/*samadhi* (meditation on the breath—*anapanasati*—being a typical example); choicelessness/*vipassana;* and lovingkindness/*metta* practice.

For clients who find sitting meditation too challenging, or who need another approach, I also recommend walking meditation, sometimes the slow method of walking often used in Theravada practice, sometimes a more natural walking pace accompanied by gathas as suggested by Thich Nhat Hanh (from the Vietnamese Zen tradition).

I freely borrow from other traditions in the work I do with clients, and have been inspired by Tibetan teachers such as Sogyal Rimpoche (*The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*—especially his teaching on "good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end," 1993)—and the Dalai Lama.

Meditation tends to show up a few different ways in my practice. First, for a client who is new to meditation, for whom I think it would be helpful, and who is open to trying it, I will introduce the idea, and lead them in a very short meditation, usually focused on breathing. If the interest and need are there, over time I might introduce and do short versions of other types of meditation, such as *vipassana* and *metta.*

For the same client I will often assign meditation as homework (more about homework, below, in the section on coaching). This will usually consist of a short daily practice of meditation, e.g., waking up in the morning, rolling up one's bed pillow, sitting on it, and doing (initially) 5 minutes of meditation on the breath. Over time this can grow into a more substantial practice; eventually the client may do 20-45 minutes of meditation daily, including *samadhi, vipassana*, and *metta*.

I also occasionally use meditation to help a client upset by strong emotions. Once a client who was normally fairly even-keeled arrived in our session speaking a great deal and at high speed about the tremendous anxieties she was facing in her life. After she'd shared for a while—we had been walking outside together (more on this below)—I suggested we sit in meditation together. As we sat in silence on a bench, with eyes closed, she began to cry and release the pent up feelings that she'd been trying to hold back. After the meditation, our conversation changed, and she was able to engage in a more productive dialogue about what could help her return to equanimity in her life and to address the various factors that were causing her anxiety.

For clients more experienced in meditation, there are occasions where we do a longer meditation together during our session. In one recent session a client wanted to explore a certain pattern of thinking, an inner phenomenon he had been struggling with. He and I meditated together for nearly an hour (as part of a two-hour session), checking in periodically about what he was noticing.

*(See "Meditation," the first chapter of this book, for more information and detailed meditation instructions.)*

### Coaching

Although coaching and talk therapy overlap—many talk therapists also coach their clients, and many coaches spend some part of their client sessions doing what appears to be talk therapy—I like to think of coaching as distinct from talk therapy.

One way to distinguish the two—this is a gross generality and not always true—is that therapy tends to be oriented toward the past, aimed at discovering the roots of an issue (e.g. in childhood) as a way to work on it, whereas coaching tends to be more

future-oriented, helping a client establish a vision and clear goals and working toward achieving those goals. One could also say that a therapist tends to work with those who are dysfunctional in some way, to help them become more functional, whereas a coach tends to work with those who function well, to help them achieve extraordinary performance.

Coaching appears in several forms in my therapy practice. One way is that I often assign homework to clients, providing practical ways for them to work toward their goals in between sessions. The homework is something we develop mutually—in fact, if I sense the need for homework I will usually ask the client what homework she would assign to herself. We both write the homework down, and I will usually bring it up near the beginning of the subsequent session, to see how she did. Homework can help address a wide range of needs and take many different forms. A few examples: starting (or reviving) a regular practice of meditation; writing a letter (and, usually, not sending it) to an estranged love one, one's boss, etc.; creating a list (e.g., "what I want in a partner"); taking practical steps in a job search such as creating a resume and contacting potential employers; having an important conversation with a significant other; having fun—e.g. going dancing, doing something outdoors; having sex in a new way with one's partner (e.g., letting go of the goal of orgasm and treating sex as a meditation or improvisation); beginning or reviving a regular exercise routine.

Often just having a third party, the coach, be aware of one's goals and homework can help the client stick to those goals and follow through. One example, from the case of my client Jake (see below), was how he began to meditate regularly at home and in his truck, as a way to counteract his habit of having angry tantrums. What began as a simple

homework assignment took root as a new behavior and habit, and made a profound difference in Jake's life.

Coaching appears in other ways in the therapy process. Early in the process I ask for the client's goals for the work, their desired outcomes—and often check back with these to see if we are on track and really progressing toward those goals. And I frequently use coaching approaches such as endorsing, challenging, and messaging to inspire clients or help them see something in a new way.

### Other Approaches

What has helped me the most as a therapist, both to serve my clients' needs as well as to keep my own practice of therapy fresh and alive, is to stay flexible and to listen for clients' authentic impulses. Years ago, a client asked if we could take a walk together as part of our session. It worked so well that I now often walk with clients, through local parks or around a nearby pond. Walking side-by-side while talking, for some clients, feels more natural and easy than sitting face-to-face, and the element of exercise and changing scenery adds beneficial stimulation that keeps both client and therapist fully engaged. Being side-by-side rather than facing one another, we feel a bit more like a team or like friends, "just chatting"—taking some of the feeling of pressure or intensity out of the therapy process. Because I typically walk outdoors with clients in the warmer months, when the need or desire to do some drama therapy or meditation strikes, we do it outdoors. I have sat in meditation with clients on benches, large rocks, and by bodies of water; we have also practiced psychodrama and psolodrama next to baseball fields, on grassy hillsides, and under large trees (taking care to choose locations out of earshot of others).

As a creative arts therapist—specializing in drama therapy—I remain open to all uses of the arts in therapy. For clients who love visual arts, I encourage them to make and bring in their pieces. One client who loved collage would often show me her work. We would discuss her latest collages and frequently do drama therapy about a particular piece. She would improvise and bring to life the various elements of the collage—e.g., a photo of a woman, a stick figure of a child, a painting of a doorway, and the relationship among the three. By playing the roles appearing in the collage, my client would more deeply understand and explore what she'd created in the collage and its meaning, and she used the improvisation as a springboard to exploring larger life themes she was facing. Other clients have shared with me poems and songs they have written, and we have worked with those through drama therapy as well.

## Logistics

Although Insight Improv can be used in a brief session—including the kind of 45-60 minute sample session described further below (see the section "Working Internationally: Standalone Sample Sessions")—I encourage clients to reserve 90 minutes for a typical therapy session. This allows a more thorough check-in and airing of issues before proceeding into drama therapy work, and generous time at the end to reflect on the drama therapy and to discuss next steps or homework. For clinicians who are restricted to 50-60 minutes per session, it is still possible to use psolodrama; one just needs to be more disciplined about limiting the initial check-in time. Here is sample timing for a short session and a longer session:

**Typical Timing for a Therapy Session Incorporating Psolodrama**

50-minute session

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Check-in/ Headlines/Talk Therapy 15 min | Authentic Movement 3 min | Shared Vipassana 2 min | Role Stream 2 min | Scene Stream 2 min | Psolodrama 11 min | Sharing 10 min | Final Thoughts/ Next Steps 5 min |

90-minute session

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Check-in/ Headlines 10 min | Talk Therapy/Session Planning 20 min | *Authentic Movement 3 min | Shared Vipassana 3 min | Role Stream 3 min | Scene Stream 3 min | Psolodrama 16 min | Sharing 20 min | Final Thoughts/ Next Steps 12 min |

**It is possible to add 5-10 minutes of sitting meditation before authentic movement, by shortening other parts of the session.*

Space is important for drama therapy: the client needs an unobstructed clean floor or carpet to move on; 2m x 3m (6 square meters) is a reasonable minimum, larger is better. It is helpful to have cushions available to sit on for meditation, or as props in psychodrama. (Psolodrama, with its roots in authentic movement, tends not to use props—it is entirely a product of the imagination and the psoloist's body in the space.)

Sound proofing and/or use of white noise outside the space is also important, as psolodrama and other exercises invite and encourage full vocal projection. It is equally the case that even small sounds from outside the space can disrupt a quiet meditation or a client's silent authentic movement. Phones should be silenced.

## Introducing Insight Improvisation in Individual Therapy

### First session

At the beginning of the therapy process, the client is sometimes just trying to make up his mind whether to work with the therapist. So in addition to asking a variety of intake questions, I also try to do some introductory form of drama therapy, usually a brief psychodrama, during the very first session in order to give the client an idea of how we might work together.

Sometimes this might come directly out of something the client has shared. For example, if the client is talking about his fraught relationship with his mother, I might say: "Let's try something. Here are two chairs. Let's say you are sitting in one and your mother is in the other. What would you like to say to her? What would you say if you could be completely honest?" From this beginning, I would direct a small psychodrama in which the client plays all the roles: himself, his mother, the doubles of each of them, and any other characters who may appear.

Another similar exercise I often do in a first session or early in the therapy process is something I call **couples therapy** or **family therapy**. After talking for a while, I might ask the client if she would like to try an experiential exercise, to get a better sense of how we might work together. If she says yes, I would say: "I want you to imagine that you could bring someone into our therapy session, anyone you like. We could think of this as couples therapy or as family therapy. You will play both yourself and the other person. I will play the therapist. If you could bring anyone into our session, who would it

be?" We then set up two chairs for the "clients," and I both direct the action and play myself as the therapist.

Both of the above approaches are very simple to set up and enter into for the client, but can lead to powerful psychodramatic scenes. For a client new to drama therapy, they will often leave the session inspired by how quickly they could go into deep material, and interested to keep working in this way.

Following the initial session, I usually schedule a two-hour intake session with the client, just to listen to them and understand their background and issues in greater depth.

## Early sessions

### Introducing Meditation

Parallel to introducing drama therapy, for those clients who need it, I will introduce the idea of meditation early in the therapy process.

Over the course of a few sessions, I teach the client *samadhi*, *vipassana*, and sometimes *metta* practice (as described above, and in greater depth in the chapter on meditation in Part I). We do short meditations in the session, and I assign homework to instill a regular practice.

I have a short written handout on meditation that I share with clients (Gluck, 2015—see "References," below, for a link to this freely available PDF). On rare occasions a client has asked me to record a guided meditation so they can play it back while they meditate.

## Introducing Psolodrama

For a client who is ready—who has become or is already experienced with drama therapy and meditation—a next step is to teach them psolodrama.

I typically do this by introducing the entryway process over a series of sessions: authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream. Because each of these practices is a therapeutic methodology in itself, I use each as the central activity of the session, teaching the client how to do it, and then engaging in a sharing process afterward, linking the client's discoveries during the practice to our therapeutic goals.

Once the client has become proficient in the full progression though scene stream, I will often show them a written "Psolodrama in Brief" handout (Gluck, 2011—freely available online; see References below), and discuss the remaining ingredients of psolodrama, including the intention of psolodrama and other guidelines, as well as the five psychodramatic roles.

Typically I will coach the client in their initial psolodramas until they are feeling ready to do it on their own. *(See the chapter "Coaching Psolodrama" for more on the techniques involved.)*

## Ongoing therapy

Depending on the client, ongoing therapy can look different and present unique challenges. In the therapist role I find myself balancing several needs: to continue working toward the client's goals; to create a steady, comfortable, safe space for the client to return to, to express themselves fully, and to continue their journey; while also keeping the process fresh and gently stretching/challenging the client.

With the majority of my clients, sessions tend to follow this progression:

1. **Check-in/Headlines.** Can include an EQ check-in (how the client is feeling today), clearing (saying whatever they need to say to be fully present), and headlines (top items they would like to share, discuss, and potentially work on in the session).
2. **Talk therapy/Session Planning.** The client shares the story behind each headline, and we discuss. My focus is mainly to listen, understand, and empathize, now and then asking questions or reflecting back what I am hearing. Once the client feels they have shared sufficiently, we usually make a plan for the rest of the session, often a choice between doing a psychodrama on a particular issue, or seeing what arises in a psolodrama. Sometimes the client requests something different, e.g. to talk further about a particular issue, to use other coaching or therapy techniques, to go deeper into meditation, etc.
3. **Psolodrama, psychodrama, or other active experiential work.** This may springboard directly off of something the client says or a moment of emotion arising in his conversation. Or it may be a distinct part of the session: the client, having shared enough verbally, may say "now what?" or specifically request drama therapy. This part of the session could also include meditation or other experiential activities from drama or creative arts therapy. If what the client is doing or saying does not suggest a particular approach I will often ask them to choose between psolodrama and psychodrama: "Is there a particular issue you would like to work on,

with me guiding you [psychodrama], or would you like to begin with authentic movement and see what arises [psolodrama]?"

4. **Sharing.** We discuss the experiential work. I will often ask: "Would you like to speak first or shall I?" and let the client choose. When it is my turn to speak, I draw from the three types of reflection described in the chapter *"Witnessing Psolodrama"* in Part III: authentic movement reflection, psychodramatic sharing, and interpretation.
5. **Final Thoughts/ Next Steps.** As our ending time is approaching, we will usually discuss whether it makes sense to set any homework for our next session, action steps the client would like to take out in the world, based on what we'd worked on in the session. I also ask the client if he has any final thoughts or questions, or any feedback for me on how the session went. Before the client leaves, we schedule our next session and handle payment.

### Working Remotely

I have several clients in other states in the US, as well as in other countries, who regularly work with me remotely, usually via Skype. I have found that psolodrama lends itself well to working this way: I can be a bit more of a witness, intervening/coaching less than I would in a psychodrama, allowing the client to follow their own process.

It helps to have first met and worked together in person, to establish a strong bond of trust, as well as to teach the entryway practices and psolodrama itself. And initially working remotely I may need to offer more coaching and support: at the beginning it can

feel strange for a client to be somewhere in his own home, talking to a face on a screen, and then closing his eyes and beginning to move authentically while knowing the therapist is watching via the computer's camera. But once the client becomes used to it, the technology melts away, and we are simply psoloist and witness engaged in the process together within the strong container of mindfulness we are both creating. I have seen many times that remote work can be as powerful as an in-person session.

### Working Internationally: Standalone Sample Sessions

When teaching Insight Improvisation workshops, especially overseas, I like to offer individual Insight Improvisation therapy sessions during off hours, so that interested workshop participants can experience this type of one-to-one therapy firsthand, as well as better understand how Insight Improv can be incorporated into an existing therapy practice. In some countries and cultures, the use of psychotherapy is stigmatized; sample sessions offer a way to demystify and normalize therapy.

Despite being short (45-60 minutes) and standalone—or possibly because of it—these sessions are often quite effective; clients in sample sessions are capable of going deep in very little time. There may be other reasons for this. These clients are also workshop participants and have built a degree of trust with me by being my student. Also, as a foreigner, I may be seen as someone they can safely open up to without repercussions or feeling judged.

These standalone sample sessions have three parts: intake, active work, and wrap-up.

**Intake.** I usually begin by inviting the client to do a little check-in and clearing and to state what they would like to work on. This alone may provide enough information for us to proceed into active work, or it may be necessary for me to ask questions and dig a little deeper in order to understand how the client has tried to approach the problem or issue before.

**Active work** may begin as psychodrama, spring-boarding directly off something the client has said. I may suggest she speak directly *to* the person she has been talking about and then reverse roles and play that person. More elaborate psychodramas are also possible. If there is a third party present, such as a translator, I may sometimes ask that person to play an auxiliary ego role.

If the client has learned some Insight Improvisation, or has expressed a desire to try it, I can guide them through the entryway process (authentic movement through scene stream) and into psolodrama and provide space for them to improvise between instructions. Now and then I may offer coaching, such as when an opportunity to dialogue with or embody an auxiliary role may be missed. Although I tend to think of psolodrama as a fairly advanced technique, requiring some prior training or experience, I have seen in sample sessions clients entirely new to psolodrama use it to explore their presenting problem or to reveal and express a deeper set of truths.

A third possibility is to begin with psychodrama but seamlessly transition into psolodrama—see the second case example, below, for an illustration of this approach.

**Wrap up** in a sample session provides a brief opportunity for the client to share their experience, for the therapist to reflect on the work, and for the client to ask any final questions he has. I make sure to ask the client for his feedback on the session and how

they are feeling about it, not only for my own learning but also to make sure the client is leaving feeling calm and grounded rather than stirred up and vulnerable. Questions like: "Is there anything else that you need before we end our session?" can also be helpful.

## Case Examples

### Dealing with Anger—Use of Meditation and Drama Therapy

Jake, an airport truck driver in his mid-20's, originally came to me complaining of uncontrolled anger, sudden bursts of rage, and physical tantrums in which he was damaging physical property (including his truck) and threatening other people. Jake came across as a "tough-guy," working class, but there was also something boyish and a little mischievous about him.

In our very first session together we did a little drama therapy. By using the "couples/family therapy" technique described above, I invited Jake to pick someone he would like to bring in to therapy, and he picked his sister. Playing both roles, he had a moving conversation with her about feeling alienated from her, and their differing takes on their relationship with their father, who had been physically and verbally abusive and violent when they were younger. Jake cried a bit as he connected with his estranged sister. Afterward, we discussed meditation, in which Jake expressed an interest.

Over the course of the next three or four sessions, I introduced two kinds of techniques to Jake.

First, I taught him a few types of meditation—*samadhi, vipassana, and metta*—both practicing in our session and giving him written instructions (and later, a guided audio recording) to help him meditate at home. Jake began to practice meditation daily.

Second, I taught Jake the entryway practices to psolodrama, including authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream. Jake took to these well, as they appealed to his creative, artistic side. (Jake shared that he was a singer/songwriter on the side, and also had an interest in acting.) Through using these techniques, scenes began to emerge: Jake on the beach as a teenager, sitting with a girl he really liked; Jake as a boy, having a tense car ride with his father. There were other roles as well that emerged through the role stream, including a snake hunting in the grass, and a tough boxer who was aggressive and intimidating.

Through a combination of talk and psolodrama in our sessions, Jake's story began to come out: as a boy, he had been physically abused by his father, whose typical greeting was to enter the house, pick Jake up, and throw him against a wall. Jake's father began to appear more in his psolodramas. In these improvisations, Jake's first impulse was to make peace with him. But then he would turn on his father and yell and curse at him, threatening his life.

A few months into our work together, Jake reported progress: he had begun using meditation outside of his morning sitting practice at home. When he noticed the urge for a tantrum, he would stop his truck, go in the back, and meditate.

Over time, Jake's psolodramas changed as well. He was able to play the role of his father, seeking forgiveness for what he'd done. Jake was able to cry as he reconciled

with his father. And in real life, Jake reported that he met with his father and was able to talk with him honestly in a way he hadn't before.

Within six months of working together, Jake reported real change. Instead of three uncontrolled tantrums per day, he reported going for an entire month with only one incident of anger, which he was more able to control.

Post-therapy, I spoke with Jake roughly two years later, and the changes had stuck. He had consistent control of his anger, and was still meditating regularly.

**Comment.** Can Jake's change be attributed solely to the use of Insight Improvisation—meditation, drama therapy, and psolodrama? It is a truism that the quality of the clinician-client relationship has the most impact in therapy, more than any particular therapeutic technique or approach. Jake and I had a great relationship, a strong client-therapist bond. But I would contend that our bond would not have been as strong—and Jake's interest in therapy might not have been maintained—had it not been for the dramatic techniques we used in-session and the meditation practices we gave him to use in his daily life. Psolodrama helped Jake make new personal discoveries regarding the bottled-up truths about his family, while meditation helped engrain in him new habits of peace and non-reactivity.

*(I have previously written in greater detail about working with Jake; see "Mindfulness and Drama Therapy," 2013.)*

### Freeing Oneself—Use of Psolodrama in a Single Session

*The purpose of this case example is to give a more detailed illustration of a single Insight Improvisation therapy session, including how a typical psolodrama works in such*

*a session. For this reason, the content of the session, and particularly the drama therapy portion, has been only minimally edited, to preserve the subtleties of the client's process.*

Julie is a visual artist in her late thirties. She has a younger sister who is mentally ill—depressed, suicidal, and prone to periodic rage and acting out—and Julie suffers from a great deal of guilt, a constant feeling she is not doing enough. She also feels responsible to her parents, who are all but estranged from her sister; Julie has been the conduit of communication, which is wearying and depressing to her. She feels stuck in a family pattern she cannot get out of. Julie is also in a constant struggle to find sufficient paying work that feels meaningful to her.

Julie and I have worked together for several years, and she is experienced with meditation, improvisation, and the use of psychodrama and psolodrama in our sessions.

On this particular day she arrives in our session and says:

> *I'm doing fine, but I have news. I haven't been able to contact my sister. A few days ago she wrote to my parents. The email said "these are the ways I'm going to kill myself." She also wrote "I'd like to meet you, Dad, but I don't want to meet you, Mom."*
>
> *I wonder if there's no end to this. I don't feel terrified or too emotionally involved. But my parents are freaking out.*

Julie says she would like to use this session to investigate stressors in her life, which fall into three themes:

First, the lingering problems with her sister and her parents: how her parents keep changing their mind repeatedly about how to deal with her sister, their constant requests that Julie call her sister, and the fact that her sister doesn't pick up when she calls,

causing Julie to become angry. Julie says: “I have a repeating pattern of being a good daughter. I cannot get angry at my parents.” But she is extremely irritated with them.

Second, Julie speaks about her work:

> *There’s battle between me wanting to free myself and fly versus staying and committing to the work. I have to keep putting in effort. I have to keep creating something, keep thinking, making new art, getting it seen, getting money. I keep running, but it never stops. But I’m creating it myself. It’s a psychological thing. No boss—I’m the boss, employee, everything. It is SO tiring! Just telling you about it I feel tired. I can never stop.*

And third, Julie has a feeling that in general she is losing her spark. She says:

> *I’m getting ugggghhh [makes a dead face]. Something is making me move very little. Why do I have a feeling like: “what does it really matter if I die now or later?” Where is passion or love or romance—the flame? I get this feeling of it really doesn’t matter when I die .... I don’t have any kids, if I die now, or if I die later. I don’t feel like “oh, I should not die” or “I should live”—I’m just losing my passion. I’m just thinking about death a little bit.*

Summarizing, Julie says:

> *I am frustrated with myself. I think that I’m so trivial and small when not really communicating everything when I talk to people. I communicate more with you than with others. So much irritation around me. Many times I would like to scream.*

I ask her whom she’d like to scream at.

“I’d scream at my parents,” she says.

“Both parents?” I ask.

She says, “I’d start with my mom.”

Julie begins a psychodramatic dialogue with her mother. This is a structure we have used many times before, so she jumps right in:

**Julie (p1):** (yelling at Mom) WHY DO YOU ALWAYS ASK ME TO CALL HER?!? Many days ago you said “Don’t do it!” Then after a few days, you called me to ask me to call her. This is nonsense, just going back and forth! Just take action. You spend all your time, all day, thinking about what to do...blah blah blah!! She’s not contacting us because you’re not contacting her, you sit and complain, and ask me to call her. Why are you not making the call yourself?!?

I suggest that Julie stand behind her chair and play the double, “What are the inner thoughts and feelings you are *not* saying to your mother?”

**Double:** I think you and my sister are the same. You’re blaming each other. YOU are making yourself a hell, turning this situation into hell. When I see that you guys are the same, there’s nothing I can do to help. I have to get away from the black hole...

Julie’s tone has changed and her eyes are watering. I can tell she is touching a deeper emotion. I suggest she close her eyes and be present to the feeling. After a long pause, I invite her to follow her body, to trust where her instincts take her. Julie begins to transition into psolodrama, a form she is very familiar with. I cease outside guidance and create space for her to improvise and explore.

**Julie (p1):** Wide field...white clouds...blue sky...I feel like I can breathe deeper...(she does)....Want to breathe more...more breath in my

chest...I want to fly...(she begins to flap her arms slowly)…my shoulders are aching...feeling heavy...but I want to fly...my wings are kind of tight, heavy, but I want to hold them up...stretch...arrrrhhh....oohhhhhh....I haven't flown for a long time, my wings are so heavy....I don't know if I can fly...(breathing a lot)....oh, oh....I can't fly, my wings are too heavy...I'm just looking at the sky...It feels like the sky is just there, if I want I can fly, am I feeling heavy, or afraid? Just kind of there, watching.

As Julie continues, she clarifies the role she is in:

**Peasant (p3):** Ucchhh. It's too sunny, too much sunlight. I'm a peasant, too much work to do. Didn't even start and I have so much pain in my whole body. Look at this field—too much sun out there...when will it rain? Wish I could fly like that. Well I must work...Carry some water. Work work work. (Chopping) Must keep going...I don't know why. There's going to be no end. Haven't had a harvest for a long time—just kind of barren for a long time—what am I doing? Hasn't rained...must keep pouring water. Things are drying out. I guess this is the way it goes. I wanna sit. (Sits) Tiring. Uh! Sun is too strong! No drop of water. Somebody is walking over here...Hey, what are you doing over there?

Julie steps to one side, turns her body, bends over a little, and speaks in a different voice, becoming an old woman. (Throughout the remainder of the psolodrama she physically shifts between the roles of old woman and peasant.)

**Old Woman (aux):** What are you doing over *there*, sitting down there, are you tired?

**Peasant:** See there is a whole field out there. I haven't been harvesting for a long time. It's really tiring, so irritating. I don't know why I have to keep doing this.

**Old woman:** (laughing) Just like me when I was young...what I did...praying there would be rain, and that it would be great...that day never came...and I'm just old...don't have much to live for now.

**Peasant:** So what are you saying to me? That this is not worth it?

**Old Woman:** Ha ha ha! Now you just can't see anything else but that. You only look at the field, sun, no rain, digging dirt and carrying water—over and over. Turn your eyes around and see everything more wide.

**Peasant:** Ohhhh. Well...I don't know what else I can see...field here...sun....what else can I see? Is there more than this?

**Old Woman:** Well yes....there's more...but unfortunately I cannot tell you what it is...you have to find it out. Just don't regret your life until you become my age, and then look forward to death. You're still young, you can still look around...who knows, there's more magical things around.

**Peasant:** Well, you've done this before... so I can trust you I guess. I'll try.

Julie pauses, opens her eyes, and says "That's it." She adds:

*I can breathe better than before. I can feel the pattern I'm making. It's two sides of me: one side keeps going, another older and wise is*

*telling me to look around. I'm kind of happy with that. Actually, I'd like to continue.*

She closes her eyes and continues her psolodrama.

**Peasant:** So you're saying there is more to this life? There's a tree there, a bird, the field, the sun—see? There's nothing more.

**Old Woman:** Ha ha ha! Well, that's the riddle of this life—I was fascinated and perplexed about this riddle. It makes no sense. What can you find more of, in this life? Sky, field, tree, bird, people, road. So what more is there? Well it took me a long time to really find out. I can't tell exactly what this life is all about, but the riddle is fascinating. Magical and wonderful about life: you can create what you want. If you set up to be a peasant—so boring. But life is how you make it. You don't have to be a peasant.

**Peasant:** What?! Are you out of your mind? If I don't do this work, I'll just be a beggar. This is the only thing I can do—all my life, years and years. Something I have to do every day. Can't really go play.

**Old Woman:** Well, I want to crack your head. If you don't crack your head yourself, and get stuck there, you will so regret it at the end of your life. I can be what I choose, that's the magic of life. Not the answer someone gives you, it's the answer *you* find. Be adventurous. That's what you find: there's more to this.

**Peasant:** Wow, really amazing—I feel more convinced now. If I can just be… more than what I am now. So did you find the answer? What did you do? What are you doing now?

**Old Woman:** Well, I am more myself. I am just feeling more, looking forward to day-to-day life. Just feeling more alive. When I look at things around me—sunset, sunlight, ocean, nature—or people—kids—I just feel more life to it. Things are more shining, alive in front of me, really amazing feeling.

**Peasant:** Maybe not something to do with my work…maybe something else. I want to be like you—more alive—it sounds wonderful. How can I be like you—alive? I feel dead now.

**Old Woman:** Ha ha ha! Well....I think you should play more. And look around more. Just don't do your peasant work, even for one day. Enjoy and play.

**Peasant:** You're telling me, just don't think of my work for one day? That I should—ok—that sounds a little bit scary. Not scary, but I haven't done it before. Maybe with you I can do it. Can I hang out with you? Can you take me…wherever?

**Old Woman:** OK! Sounds good! I'll take you around.

**Julie:** (referring to the two characters) So we go together... (she laughs)

Immediately after her psolodrama, Julie says:

*I feel much better. I am both the old grandma and the peasant. My heart is getting warmer. I can feel the spirit of the grandma—wisdom. I feel more elated, more alive. Just realizing: this is a state of mind.*

*This was really wonderful. I was a little bit shy. I felt I don't have the answer. When you encouraged me to follow instinct and trust it, it opened up something—I started being myself. I really felt alive. Things are*

*kind of more beautiful to me, the fields, becoming more alive. I could see the stars—the sunset—nature was so beautiful. So I could translate that to the peasant—exactly like me—who can only see one thing. So funny! It's a state of mind.*

At the end of our session, Julie sets some homework for herself:

*I'd like to commit to doing things differently.*

*I want to remind myself that I am capable of feeling what I want to feel. I want to say to myself, when I wake up in the morning, be more attentive, feel more—bring more imagination, more creativity, in relation to my work. To not think my work is a boring thing I have to drag people to—but seeing it in the light of enjoying the dance. Dance is good. I need to dance into my work.*

*I tend to only do that when I'm feeling good. But when I'm bored, or have an "oh, work" attitude, or have a stomach ache, I forget my inner joy. So I can learn to dance with the problems that arise. And learn to dance with my work!*

**Comment.** This example demonstrates how psolodrama can be used spontaneously in an individual session, once the client is familiar with the form. Julie's psolodrama is very simple, a single dialogue between a protagonist and an auxiliary ego role—no director, double, or audience roles appear. Also, in this case, there was no entryway progression, no authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, etc. That progression is very helpful when first teaching a client psolodrama, and is an excellent warm-up when doing psolodrama by itself. But once a client gets the idea, and the experience of psolodrama is in their bones—the ability to let go and follow the body,

inner imagery, and the roles that emerge—then psolodrama can easily springboard off of more traditional psychodrama, as in this case.

If, instead of transitioning into psolodrama, I continued leading Julie through a psychodrama, she may have been able to further express her anger toward her mother (something we had worked on in previous sessions through psychodrama and other means), and could have also reversed roles, allowing her to become her mother and empathize with her mother's struggles.

Why, then, make the transition to psolodrama early in the psychodramatic scene? By doing so I am inviting Julie to listen more deeply to herself, to her feelings and instincts, in a way that she cannot completely do if I am directing her in a psychodrama. Because psolodrama taps into the raw creativity of the client, it can become deeply satisfying to her in a very individual, unique way—not only is the client working on her own issues, she is also creating something, a play is emerging before her own eyes, and mine. Furthermore, because she made it herself, rather than be directed by me, there is a sense of ownership of the outcome and insights that feels noticeably different from psychodrama.

Finally, by allowing Julie to follow her own instincts, the results are unexpected, surprising, not what I would have chosen or expected, and ultimately exactly what she needed to free herself. It was fascinating to notice how, although we started the psychodrama with anger toward her mother (and both parents) regarding how they were handling the situation with her sister, what emerged in the psolodrama were deeper themes of burnout, dissatisfaction with Julie's work and life—existential issues of what it means to be fulfilled and how to live happily every day. My sense is that Julie was more

than a little burnt out dealing with her sister and parents, and the psolodrama helped her discover own truth: that she needs to focus on herself and her own happiness, and not give away her life to her parents' and sister's repeated crises.

## Final Thoughts

There is still much to explore about the use of Insight Improvisation in individual therapy. Two brief examples:

**Assessment.** The solo nature of psolodrama and the entryway practices may make them particularly apt for assessing personality styles (or disorders). Psolodrama is a bit like an embodied Rorschach test; the therapist, as silent witness, exerts little conscious influence over the client's improvisation—what influence they have is largely a matter of projection on the client's part. The defenses that arise are mainly the result of the client confronting the structure of the exercise and his own habits and patterns as he moves, speaks, and improvises. The "Psolodrama Traps and Habits" table (in the chapter "Troubleshooting Psolodrama" in Part III) offers a breakdown of some of the typical defenses that arise. It is up to the clinician to interpret their implications beyond the psolodrama itself.

**Developmental arc.** The development of the client-therapist relationship in Insight Improvisation—a process that typically progresses from psychodrama to monodrama to coached psolodrama to psolodrama—parallels the stages of healthy child development in relation to its parent. This client-therapist process models and possibly helps repair a process that may have been missing or disrupted in the patient's childhood. A securely attached child is able to explore the world, knowing she has a loving parent

and a secure home to return to whenever needed. In Insight Improv, having the therapist as witness (and when needed, as coach) provides that secure home to return to; at the end of the psolodrama—after journeying into the unknown—the client returns, sits down, and reconnects with the therapist. And there is a further progression: in at least one instance in my own therapy practice, a client who became skilled in psolodrama in therapy went on to establish a new peer relationship in which she continued to practice psolodrama following termination of therapy—paralleling how securely attached children are perhaps better able to later form stable, intimate relationships with others.

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