

## Web Supplement to “Insight Improvisation—Integrating Mindfulness and Meditation with Drama Therapy”

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*Please note: This web supplement contains information originally included in the chapter on Insight Improvisation found in Current Approaches in Drama Therapy, Third Edition, which was omitted for a variety of reasons including length. For more information on Insight Improvisation—including a full-length book on the approach that is free to download—please visit [www.insightimprov.org](http://www.insightimprov.org).*

### Background

Where did Insight Improvisation come from?

The multidisciplinary approach began to take shape in the 1990’s as I attempted to integrate what I was learning about meditation and psychology with my background in theater and improvisation.

In my training as an actor, I had completed advanced education with Trinity Repertory Company, Shakespeare & Company, and other groups. Even so, I found myself inexorably drawn to studying with certain acting teachers— among them Jean-Claude van Itallie (1997), Scott Kelman (Heffley, 2007), and Ruth Zaporah (1995)—whose approach to theater was influenced by Tibetan and Zen Buddhism.

Meanwhile, as I adopted personal practices of meditation and moved to deepen my understanding of therapeutic approaches in a professional capacity, I gravitated toward schools of psychotherapy—including Arnold Mindell’s Process-Oriented Psychology, or Process Work (1985), and Yvonne Agazarian’s Systems-Centered Therapy (1997)—that were based in a deep sense of inner listening, body awareness, and improvisation in how they worked with individuals and groups.

The merger of these parallel threads of work came together as Insight Improvisation, and I explored ways to share the work with others.

The first Insight Improv workshops, which I taught in Cambridge, MA in 1999, were called “Freedom in Performance” and focused on the intersection of meditation and theater. Soon after, I began graduate work in drama therapy; in addition to studying psychodrama and other drama therapy approaches, as well as Buddhist psychology (Olendzki, 2010), I engaged in intensive practice in authentic movement, and conducted

experiments in solo improvisation, exploring the use of improvisation for personal growth. In 2003 I developed the psolodrama technique, which has become central to the drama therapy applications of Insight Improvisation.

### Use with Other Drama Therapy and Creative Arts Therapy Techniques

I have and continue to use a wide range of approaches from drama therapy, other creative arts therapies, and other disciplines in my practice, and find I am most effective when I can fit the technique to the client's need in the moment.

Once a client is practiced in psolodrama, the technique can be combined with other forms of drama therapy or creative arts therapy. Two examples:

- **Psychodrama into psolodrama.** The therapist begins to work on the client's presenting issue using psychodrama, directing the client in taking on a role, reversing roles, doubling, etc. At a certain point in the drama it becomes evident that the client is entering a place of the unknown—the next step is unclear—and the therapist invites him to close his eyes, follow his body, and see what happens next. The therapist says: "This is your drama. You can do whatever you like. Follow your instincts." From this point on, the client is the psoloist, and the therapist simply witnesses, usually no longer offering direction. Often this approach leads to unexpected roles and scenes, allowing the therapist to see where the client's authentic impulses lead him; the client gets to take greater ownership of his own drama, and continue his developmental process of learning to listen to and trust his own impulses.
- **Visual art into role stream/scene stream.** A client brings in a collage or some other form of visual art she has made. Client and therapist discuss the art, the therapist learning about the different emotions/characters/energies/themes it depicts. The therapist invites her to improvise, allowing the roles or themes in her art to emerge, perhaps as characters in a role stream; those characters begin to dialogue with one another in scene stream. As in the typical entryway progression, the scene stream then becomes a launching off point into psolodrama.

In neither of these examples is the client "entering empty;" neither is pure psolodrama. But the resultant improvisation has many of the same features as psolodrama: the client is on her own journey, following her own authentic impulse to discover what needs to be expressed or explored. To do so she can access the tools of psychodrama such as role reversal and the various psychodramatic roles. And by relinquishing control the therapist confers on the client a greater sense of autonomy.

Conversely, the cross-pollination between psolodrama and other techniques can go in the opposite direction; e.g., in the sharing process after psolodrama, the therapist can suggest further exploring a role, relationship, or theme that arose in their improvisation, using psychodrama.

## Informal Study: Insight Improvisation in Short-term Therapy

### *Purpose and Parameters of the Study*

The use of Insight Improv in therapy—especially over the long term—draws on disparate elements, combining aspects of talk therapy and coaching, meditation, as well as psychodrama, and potentially other types of drama therapy and creative arts therapy. In writing this chapter, I wanted to use case examples that illustrated the application of Insight Improvisation only, with minimal amounts of talk therapy or other approaches.

To do so, I created a small, informal study, inviting six new clients to try Insight Improvisation in individual sessions, from March to June, 2018. The study was limited to ten one-hour sessions per participant and followed a standard progression, introducing psychodrama, different forms of meditation, authentic movement and the other entryway practices early in the process, and teaching and practicing psolodrama in the latter five sessions.

By keeping the number of sessions low, the length of each session short, and the session plans standardized across all participants, use of Insight Improvisation techniques were maximized and supplementary approaches kept to a minimum (basically, a small amount of talk therapy during check-in and closure).

The study was framed as “coaching,” rather than psychotherapy, to clarify for participants the differences between the study and standard therapy, e.g., the set limit in number of sessions and the standardized agenda for each session. (Those who expressed interest in continuing in individual therapy following the study were invited to do so.)

Due to the constraints of the study, there were differences in how I approached the sessions compared to how I typically conduct individual therapy. Whereas sessions in the study were 60 minutes, typically in therapy I offer clients the flexibility to do longer sessions—e.g. 90 minutes—for the reasons described [earlier in the chapter]. Also, whereas I normally tailor therapy sessions significantly to fit clients’ unique needs, the study, in contrast, was “one size fits all,” with a set agenda for each session. I was very interested to see whether Insight Improv could be effective without my usual ability as a therapist to improvise and customize on the fly.

### *Study Outcomes*

One must approach the results of such a small, limited, and non-scientific study with skepticism. Many other factors, such as the influence of the client-therapist (or in this case, coachee-coach) relationship, could easily have had more impact than the

methods used. Also, as I was the only “coach” in the study, one cannot assume others would have the same results.

In the post-study questionnaire, all six participants chose “strongly agree” when asked to rate statements regarding the overall effectiveness of the Insight Improvisation approach used, the effectiveness of the psolodrama method specifically, and whether they would recommend Insight Improv to a friend or colleague. Participants wrote that Insight Improv could be effective in helping those suffering from a range of issues, including anxiety, substance abuse, trauma, ADHD, shyness, and for those who “feel stuck in their lives.” One participant, a graduate student in her mid-twenties, wrote:

*Over [these ten sessions] I have seen my personal anxiety levels drop. While I still get anxious at times, my generalized anxiety has seen a vast decrease since the start of this work. I have also gained insights into myself and have had clarity with topics that have plagued me for my entire life. While this has not been the easiest process, I deeply value the results and hope to continue on with it.*

On the constructive side, there was general agreement among participants that the sessions themselves could have been longer. One hour is brief for doing a thorough check-in, psolodrama, sharing process, and wrap-up. It would be interesting to experiment with a one hour session in which there is *no* check-in; simply psolodrama and sharing. Working this way, the verbal check-in material is instead expressed through the improvisation (as in a DvT session); the downside is that the resultant psolodrama might focus more on immediate issues rather than underlying themes and/or archetypal roles.

In summary, the study points to the possibility that Insight Improvisation could be effective in short-term treatment. Further research would be needed to confirm these preliminary results.