
What is Medical Improv and How Can it Help Us in Healthcare?



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Medical Improv is an exciting teaching tool that can be used to promote emotional intelligence, communication, teamwork, and leadership skills in healthcare professionals. It is different from improv comedy because the focus is on learning instead of performing. In this emerging field, practitioners adapt experiential activities from the world of improvisational theatre to build skills and impact key outcomes such as; patient safety, patient experience, workforce health, and cost-effectiveness.

There are eight core principles of Medical Improv and hundreds of activities that can be adapted. Once participants learn the principles, workshops can be customised to target individual and organisational goals. Because individual and organisational behaviours are underlying causes of medical errors, poor patient experience, occupational injuries, and wasted resources, the impact that Medical Improv can have is extremely promising.

While the activities are generally simple, the learning is often profound. Medical Improv sessions present fundamental human development opportunities as participants learn:

- What it is like to feel heard and validated.
- About hesitation that hinders assertiveness and how to overcome it.
- About impulses that cause one to interrupt or talk over another and how to slow down and listen.
- How to increase comfort with leading and/or following.
- What it feels like to support and be supported by others in teams.
- How to use status behaviours to improve therapeutic and inter-professional relationships.
- How to improve other 'soft' skills associated with communication & collaboration.

For instance, one activity called "Same-time-story" involves one person telling a story while her partner tries to tell it at the same time. The person telling the story must go slow enough to allow her partner to speak the same words at the same time and her partner must be very attentive to facial expressions and sounds. As people get the hang of it, they become very engaged and focused. It is a very powerful way to teach the underlying skills of respectful listening such as, empathy, suspending judgment, and curiosity.

Another activity called, "Physical Phone" can be used to make important points about how complicated communication can be and why we have patient safety issues associated with "handoffs". It is described in my article: [A Medical Improv Activity: Breaking Tension & Improving Communication](#) which can be found online at: [nurse.org/articles/medical-improv-activity-improving-communication](#). You don't need experience to teach it or try it out!

Zoom-On Beth Boynton

What is your top management tip?

If you want to build assertiveness in staff, ask them what they need to accomplish a goal or contribute to an organisational initiative. Then listen and validate!

What would you single out as a career highlight?

My 3rd book, "Medical Improv: A New Way to Improve Communication (with 15 activities you can teach STAT!)" will be released in the Winter of 2017. It is a train-the-trainer resource that I hope will help healthcare professionals and organisations provide safer, more compassionate care.

If you had not chosen this career path you would have become a...?

Some sort of fitness instructor.

What are your personal interests outside of work?

I love to take Improv classes, walk, Zumba, swim and spend time with kindred spirits.

Your favourite quote?

"There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about."--Margaret J. Wheatley.

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