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Leveraging Humor as a Healthcare Survival Tool: Applied Improv as Intervention

Justin Drogos, PT, DPT

Objectives

1. Learners will be able to describe the possibilities of humor as an intervention for patients and providers in the area of pain management.

2. Learners will be able to apply improvisation principles to collaborative activities.

3. Learners will be able to incorporate principles of improv into their professional life as an educator, researcher, and/or clinician.

Improvisational Theatre

Neva Boyd



Viola Spolin



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Applied improv

Using tools, skills, and principles of improv outside of the theatrical setting

- 1990s - Education, Science, Industry
  - Active listening
  - Focus
  - Accepting the ideas of others
  - Supporting one another
- In last decade, expanding to medical populations
- Hoffman-Longtin, 2018

- Medical Improv
  - Applies techniques utilized in improv to facilitate development of characteristics in medical professionals:
    - Effective communication
    - Adaptability
    - Empathy
    - Resilience
  - Watson and Fu, 2016; 2022

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Applied Improv

Neurologic Diagnoses

- Improv classes shown to
  - ↑ ADL in Parkinson's Disease (Bega et al., 2017)
  - ↑ Mood and Sense of Belonging in Alzheimer's Disease (Dunford et al., 2017)
  - ↓ Depression in Caregivers of Persons With Dementia (PWD) (Brunet et al., 2019)
  - ↑ Mood and Engagement for PWD (Zeisel et al., 2019)
  - ↑ social participation and facial recognition in adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Mass, 2021)
- Subjectively enjoyable for participants

PLAY TIME!

"RULES" FOR IMPROV

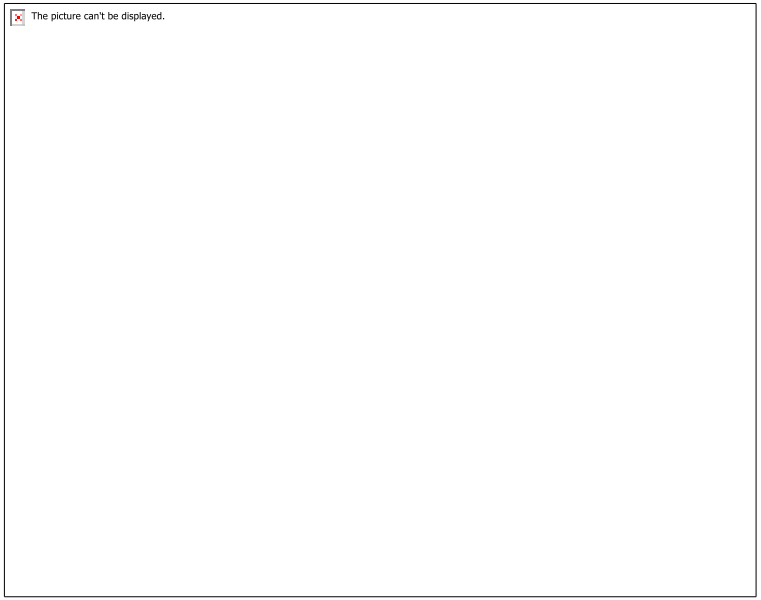
1. YES, AND (NO DENIAL)
2. BE COMFORTABLE WITH BEING **UN**COMFORTABLE
3. YOU KNOW EVERYTHING, YOU HAVE EVERYTHING
4. BE PRESENT IN THE MOMENT & FOR EACH OTHER
5. HAVE FUN!!

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YES, AND

- Silently find a partner
- Listen for Instructions

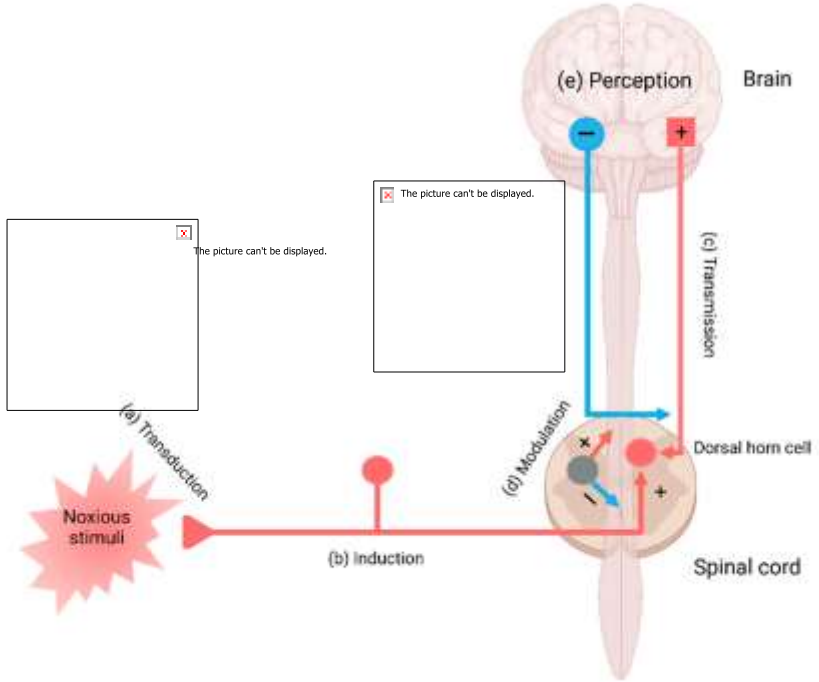
- ”Yes, and”
- “Yes, But”
- ”No”



What just happened?

Effects of Laughter on Pain

- Central and Peripheral effects
- Laughter releases endorphin and lowers anti-inflammatory response (Dunbar et al., 2012)
  - Raises pain thresholds and increases pain tolerance (Manninen et al., 2017)



Laughter and Pain: Research

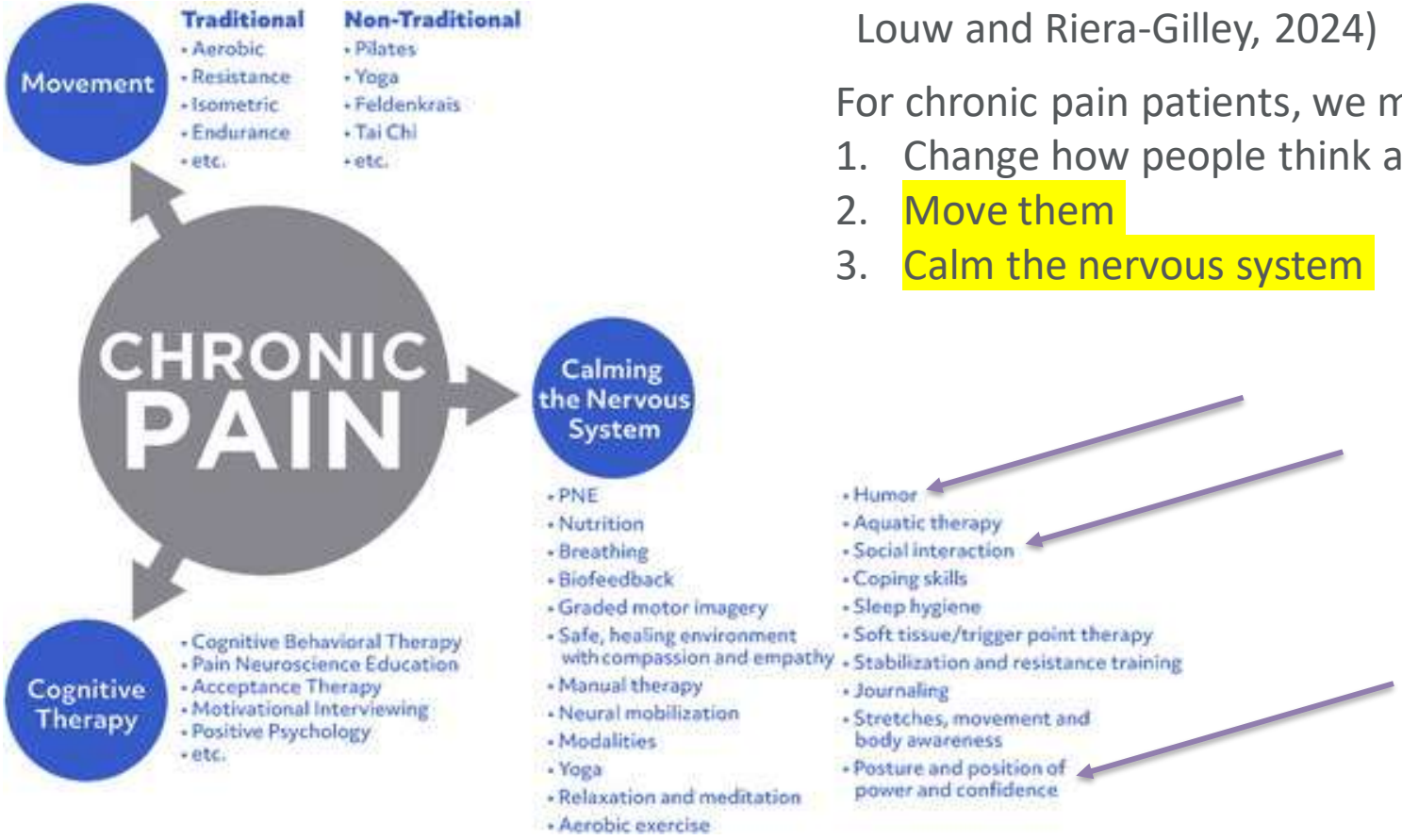
…not much in patient populations

- Laughter yoga and hemodialysis patients: ↓ pain levels and improved sleep (Ozer and Ates, 2021)
- ↑ laughter frequency: ↑positive affect and ↓ overall pain level in chronic fibromyalgia (Molchan, 2018)
- Systematic review (Uner et al., 2022) showed laughter therapy ↓ pain, depression, stress, and anxiety



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Laughter and Pain



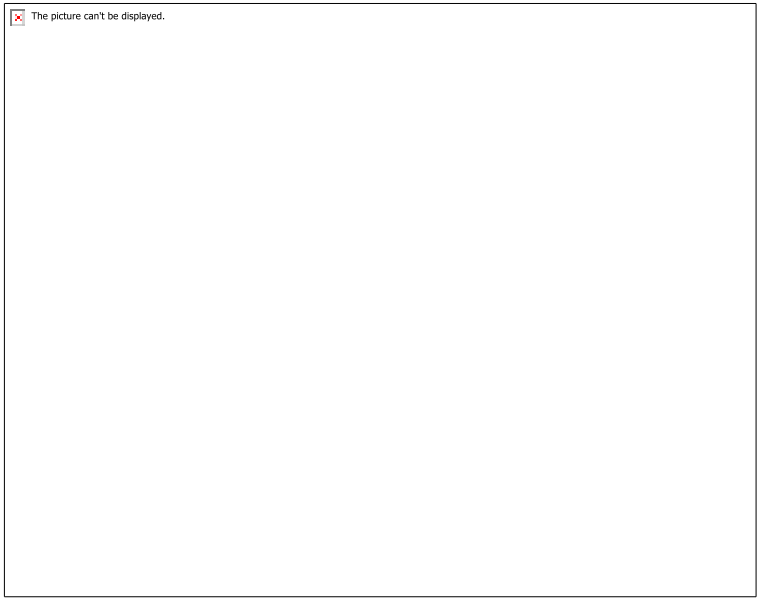
Louw and Riera-Gilley, 2024)

For chronic pain patients, we must:

1. Change how people think about pain
2. Move them
3. Calm the nervous system

PLAY TIME!
MOTION EMOTION

- Silently, get up from your table
- Start moving around the room
- Listen for Instructions



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What about you?

- Clinicians working with individuals with chronic pain often experience):
  - Frustration
  - Burnout
  - Unrealistic expectations of patients
  - Emotional burden
  - Dashing hopes
  - Symptoms for which there is no biomarker
  - Pseudoeducated patients
  - Clarke and Fitzcharles, 2025

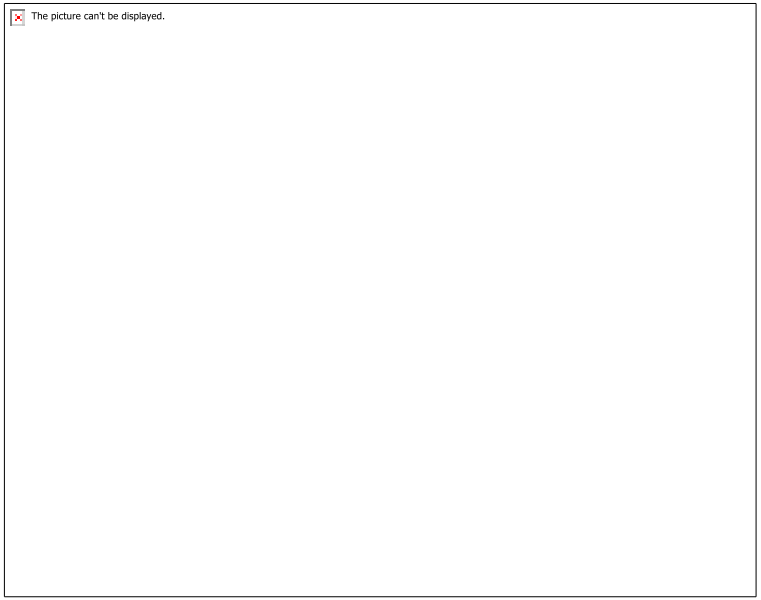
- There is evidence describing the benefits of Medical Improv within medical, nursing, dental, pharmacy and occupational therapy at improving communication, teamwork, wellness, empathy, and resiliency (Gao et al., 2019)

ONE MORE PLAY TIME!

THIS IS MY PARTNER

- Silently, turn to your partner

- Listen for Instructions



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Future Work?



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- Harness the power of laughter, movement, and community that comes from Improv
- Potential for pain patients and clinicians
- Specialized workshops at a pain clinic?
- Case Control Studies?

I want to know more!

- Sign up for an improv class!
- Medical Improv classes
  - Train the Trainer at NU
    - https://www.medicalimprov.org/find-a-class
  - Camp Yes, And at IU
    - https://yesand.indiana.edu/index.html
- Improv Encyclopedia
  - https://improvencyclopedia.org/
- Practice before your “practice”



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Questions? Thoughts?

- j-drogos@northwestern.edu

Thank You