

MANAGE STRESS WITH THESE



6 IMPROV PRINCIPLES

Stress is a part of our everyday lives – it can come from so many sources, some are the result of the daily frustrations of life including our jobs, others from unexpected challenges such as major health issues.

The thing is, stress isn't always bad – it can motivate us into action. And even in those situations that might initially seem like the negative kind of stress, you have the power to turn it into something positive. With this perspective, stress can have value in your life if you deal with it in the right way.

I have found that the following six principles of improvisation can help you take on the stress that comes with your job, family, and just the day-to-day responsibilities of life:

COMMUNICATION – Some of the greatest slap-stick comedies revolve around communication – or the lack thereof. With classics like, *Bringing up Baby* and *What's Up Doc?* to *Airplane*, these movies are full of comedic sequences based on confusion. This confusion turns into frustration that the characters feel and express – causing us, as an audience, to laugh. Why? Because we know better and it's funny when you're not the one experiencing it! The problem is, confusion and lack of communication exists in our lives in and out of the workplace every day. And, when we're the ones experiencing it, it's not that funny.

Paying attention to improving our communication skills can go far in reducing our stress and the stress of others. When

people feel disrespected or discounted, stress intensifies. When they feel unheard, they shut down, or they respond with cynicism, distrust, or anger—and the situation becomes exponentially worse. Effective communication however, can validate and motivate.

AWARENESS – Being aware of your environment can help you take control of your involvement in whatever situation you are in. When you assess your surroundings – those around you, the actual location, yourself, etc. – that awareness will help you develop confidence and overcome the stress. In relation to this list, awareness is the bridge between communication and adaptability. Awareness goes hand in hand with being a better listener and communicator which results in being able to adapt to situations quicker and more effectively.

You know what else can really help you be more aware and stress-free? Being prepared. Well, being as prepared as you can be in any given situation. The more you understand the environment and variables in that environment you may be going into, or are frequently in, the more comfortable you'll be focusing on what is happening in the moment. Without preparation you're more concerned about your anxieties –

including not being prepared! You can't foresee the unexpected, but you can be ready for it with preparation and the confidence it brings – allowing you to be more aware of changing dynamics.

ADAPTABILITY – Adaptability is a HUGE part of improv – it IS improv. A lot of things in life can be stressful, but we have the ability to “go with the flow.” Adapting is simply the ability to readjust as you experience things – whether that be readjust your sales pitch, or the time in the morning you give a presentation or having to select a different menu item when your first choice is sold out. No matter the situation, it takes flexibility and confidence to address change head-on – and let's face it, things are always changing, things rarely go as planned.

There's a game I give audiences in my seminars to exercise adaptability. I begin by asking three volunteers to sit up front and face the audience. “Together, these people are Mr. Know-It-All,” I'll say, “and can answer any question—but just one word at time.” To demonstrate, I'll ask something like: “Why is the sky blue?” I'll turn to the first person, then the next, and the next – each providing a word as they attempt to construct a sentence to answer the question. Inevitably, each volunteer has formed some kind of plan - or agenda - in their mind for how they want to answer. However, when the player before them doesn't say something that fits their agenda they get flustered and have to scramble for a response.

That's what happens in life – we come up with scripts or ideas before the person in front of you has even finished, or started. Why? We don't want to look dumb. And yet we don't respond appropriately with our scripted responses, because we're not really paying attention to the person in front of us and therefore unable to really adapt based on what was said. When you start to really focus you can adapt and reduce your stress at the same time.

ATTITUDE – There is a huge difference between “I will do the best I can” and “This is going to fail.” If you adopt a better attitude, one that doesn't broadcast defeat, you might actually find that you are doing pretty well – this is the same with doing improv. No matter the source of your stress, your success to overcome depends on your ability to perceive things positively. You either can see your situation as a challenge and make the most of it, or you can succumb to it and let the stress win.

One of the greatest ways to achieve the kind of attitude that will yield success is learning to shift your perspective from “yes, but...” to “yes, and...”. Let me explain. “But” is a conjunction used to introduce something contrasting with what has already been mentioned. “And” is a conjunction used to connect words of the same part of speech, clauses, or sentences that are to be taken jointly. One stops a thought in its tracks and introduces something else. The other connects an additional idea to be considered jointly. It's eye-opening to think about how often we use the phrase “Yes, but...” and the dramatic effect that happens when you replace “but” for “and.” “And” continues the conversation, gives hope and room for new perspectives.

Even if you don't ultimately agree on what's being said or proposed, you're at least allowing for the possibility of something and thereby showing respect and support for your associate. It works when talking to your inner critic as well! Doing this small, yet significant shift in language promotes positive attitudes from all and encourages an atmosphere of acceptance and possibilities, not one of rejection and defeat. As a result, the workplace culture thrives.

CALM IN CHAOS – “Don't panic.” If you ever hear someone say that, it's almost a trigger to go ahead and start panicking. You don't have to though – it certainly won't help you. When you're staring chaos in the face, you must refuse to tell yourself that you can't do it/overcome it/face it. The fact is, you can – and awareness, adaptability, communication, all the improvisational techniques, help you operate clearly without panicking. You'll always know you can figure a way out.

A big part of staying calm in chaotic moments is learning to manage your inner critic. We're all familiar with it, the voice that tells you you're not good enough, not smart enough, that you shouldn't be here. What can you do? You have to change the lines and start programming your brain to use “yes, and...” instead of “yes, but...”. When you do, you develop confidence. You tell yourself, “I can do this,” and the more times you repeat it, the more you will believe it. Here are a few examples of how to incorporate this line of thinking: “Yes, I know I will make mistakes, and they will not hamper me. Yes, I will not be perfect, and that means I can only get better.”

HUMOR – So many workplaces seem devoid of humor. I often ask my audiences, “When was the last time your coworkers burst out into laughter and it wasn't at your expense?” The answer definitely depends on your culture and your colleagues. A regular dose of laughter, however, reduces stress, and it's desirable. In fact, a Forbes article written by Jacquelyn Smith cited a few statistics that validate the importance of humor, “A Robert Half International survey, for instance, found that 91% of executives believe a sense of humor is important for career advancement; while 84% feel that people with a good sense of humor do a better job. Another study by Bell Leadership Institute found that the two most desirable traits in leaders were a strong work ethic and a good sense of humor.”

A regular dose of laughter reduces stress – it really is the best medicine. It loosens us up and bolsters the immune system. Stress, on the other hand, can get us sick causing productivity to plummet. So, start laughing and get your coworkers to chuckle as well.

Whether your stress in life results from a physical condition, a family member or your workplace demands, so much of your success in overcoming these challenges depends on your ability to perceive things positively. Either you win, or you let the stress win. Choose to beat it with improvisation.