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Improv exercises promote uncertainty tolerance and improve creativity outcomes

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Abstract

Improviseational theater is defined broadly as a theatrical setting in which, process and product co-occur (Sowden, Clements, Redlich, & Lewis, 2015). Therefore, practicing improviseational theater involves embracing uncertainty (Napier, 2004). In this context, individuals may learn to tolerate uncertainty with greater comfort, a common treatment outcome across many psychological disorders (e.g. Boswell et al., 2013). The current study employs a lab-based paradigm linking brief improviseational theater experience to increased divergent thinking outcomes (Lewis & Lovatt, 2013). We set out to replicate and extend this finding by including an explicit measure of uncertainty tolerance. Across two studies, our results show increased uncertainty tolerance for people who improvised, significantly more than people who participated in a social interaction control with limited uncertainty. Additionally, the improvising condition predicted relative improvement on a subset of divergent thinking measures, offering partial support for the Lewis and Lovatt (2013) finding that improviseational theater exercises can improve creativity.