

A novel approach to enhanced communication confidence: Utilizing improv as skill development



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BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS

Communication is vitally important to the doctor-patient relationship and delivering effective, patient-centered care. Physicians often overestimate their ability to connect with patients; most patient complaints are related to the doctor-patient relationship rather than medical competence.¹ Further, the proliferation of telemedicine adds another layer of complexity to successful doctor-patient communication, as empathy and quality communication skills are often lacking in telehealth visits.² Our study investigated whether improvisation workshops enhance communication skills and confidence. We believe these workshops can then be used to aid physicians in their medical practice and build more trusting, connected, and equitable doctor-patient relationships. This study implemented a unique design to further assess the association between improv training and the ability to build strong, trusting relationships with patients both in-person and on a telehealth visit.

METHODS

A cohort of 58 Master of Science in Biomedical Science students at Rocky Vista University-Colorado participated in this study. The 90-minute improv workshop was conducted by Brian Schwartz, PhD, a faculty member with improv training experience. The session included a series of communication-based improv activities, focusing on skills of active observation, attention, teamwork, creativity, acceptance, quick-thinking, and active listening, as detailed in Table 1. We used a survey to assess the effects of the workshop on students' confidence levels regarding their verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Survey questions were synthesized from seven validated communication instruments, indicated in Table 2. Chosen questions consisted of five major themes: adopting a logical approach, building rapport, active listening using nonverbal and verbal skills, acknowledging another's viewpoint, and adapting to one's level of understanding. Students were asked to complete a pre-survey and a post-survey which consisted of identical questionnaires, immediately before and after the workshop, respectively.

Table 1. Exercises Employed by the Improv Workshop. The activities students engaged in during the workshop are shown, along with the skills each is meant to improve on.

| Exercise | Description | Skills |
|-----------------|--|---|
| Same Circle | Students are divided into groups and stand together in a circle. Taking turns, each group member makes a gesture and all other members of the group must imitate them. | Active observation, paying attention |
| Group Photo | In small groups, students are given a scenario and, without talking, must arrange themselves into what a group photo would look like (e.g. a rock band, waiting in line for a popular movie). | Teamwork, creativity |
| Three Stories | Students are paired up and given a story prompt starting with an incomplete sentence. One student must finish the sentence and expand upon the story. Their partner responds with a sentence that begins with "No, but". The pair continue to respond to each other with sentences beginning with "No, but". The activity is then repeated with a new story prompt, but instead of "No, but", the students' responses to each other must begin with "Yes, but". This is repeated one more time with a third phrase "Yes, and". | Acceptance and building on each other's ideas |
| "Yes, let's" | All students continuously walk around the room. At a random time, the instructor announces "Let's all go to the _____", and all students must respond "Yes, let's!" and mime an action that would fit an activity at that location (e.g. "Let's all go to the gym", a student responds with "Yes, let's!" and pretends to lift a heavy weight). | Quick thinking, creativity |
| Dr. Know It All | In groups, students are instructed to answer a verbal question together; however, each member can only provide one word at a time. No other talking within the groups is allowed while constructing the sentence. | Teamwork, active listening |

Table 2. Survey Questions Synthesized from Validated Communication Instruments.

| Validated Instrument | Survey Questions |
|--|---|
| Kalamazoo Essentials Elements Communication Checklist ³ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrating attentive listening and interest (Q4) Using non-verbal communication techniques to demonstrate concern (Q5) Encouraging a patient to share their understanding of a problem (Q18) |
| Master Interview Rating Scale ⁴ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing support in response to someone's emotions (Q1) Encouraging someone to share their story (Q16) |
| Calgary-Cambridge Referenced Observation Guides ⁵ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using empathy to communicate appreciation of someone's feelings (Q2) Accepting legitimacy of others' views and feelings without being judgmental (Q3) Responding to someone's verbal cues (Q8) Dealing sensitively with uncomfortable topics (Q10) Using empathy to communicate appreciation of someone's beliefs (Q12) Responding to someone's nonverbal cues (Q15) Using empathy to communicate appreciation of someone's experiences (Q17) |
| Patient-Centered Communication Tools ⁶ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keeping the conversation with a patient "on-track" (Q13) |
| Mindful Attention Awareness Scale ⁷ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussing a patient's feelings (Q11) |
| Four Habits Model ⁸ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allowing time without talking for a patient to absorb new information (Q6) Providing the opportunity for a patient to talk without interrupting (Q7) Adapting to give a clear explanation (Q9) |
| SEGUE Framework ⁹ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adapting to someone's level of understanding (Q9) Making a personal connection during a visit (Q14) |

RESULTS

Survey responses were reported on a 4-point Likert scale (not at all confident; somewhat confident; confident; extremely confident) and were converted to numerical values (1-4, respectively) for statistical analysis. Paired t-tests were used to assess statistical significance between pre- and post-survey responses. The analysis showed statistically significant improvement ($p < 0.05$) in confidence levels post-improv workshop on each of the 18 survey questions (Figure 1). Additionally, a statistically significant increase ($p < 0.05$) in confidence was noted when comparing the averages of all pre- to post-survey responses (Figure 2).

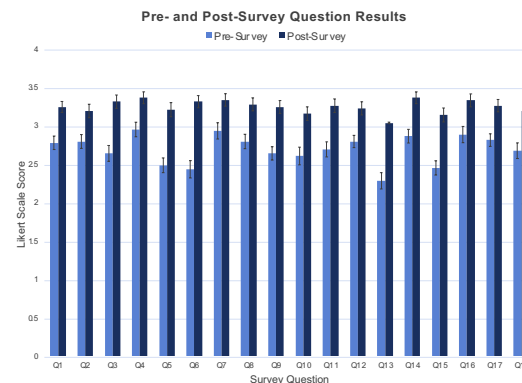


Figure 1. Pre- and Post-Survey Question Results. Paired t-test analysis showed statistically significant improvement in self-reported confidence levels in all 18 survey questions ($p < 0.05$). The x-axis lists survey question numbers corresponding to Table 2.

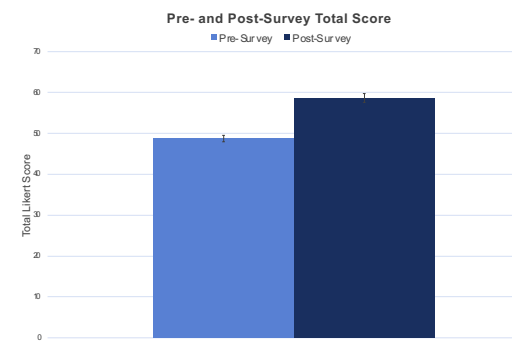


Figure 2. Pre- and Post-Survey Total Score. Paired t-test analysis showed statistically significant improvement in self-reported confidence levels when comparing average of the total pre- and post-survey responses ($p < 0.05$).

CONCLUSION

Improvisational techniques and exercises are effective in the enhancement of communication confidence and skills. This is a fact gleaned from the literature on the topic and was also shown to be present in this study. The improv exercises undertaken with the participants created an environment in which the importance of agreement and lack of denial, as well as encouragement, active listening, and creating a partnership for effective communication were instilled in the students. They were given instructions for the improv exercises, and were able, with guidance and repetition, to foster an atmosphere of listening and active participation. This atmosphere was hypothesized by the investigators to be conducive to increased confidence in communication. The statistical analyses and anecdotal observations of the investigative team supported that hypothesis, further encouraging the efforts to utilize improvisation in training to strengthen communication skills. We believe strong communication deepens the doctor-patient relationship and amplifies an osteopathic physician's ability to treat patients holistically—mind, body, and spirit. We propose utilizing improvisation workshops as a potential solution to combat the decline in provider communication. Ultimately, improv sessions focused on communication skills will benefit future medical professionals to provide more personalized interactions with their patients during both in-person and telemedicine visits.

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