



Improv Wisdom to Enhance Caregiving

*by Kathy Laenhue, M.A.
Wiser Now, Inc.
www.wisernow.com and
www.wisernowalz.com*



Using Improv Wisdom to Enhance Caregiving

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Introduction



I frequently find that the best ideas come from unexpected sources. The book *Improv Wisdom* by Patricia Ryan Madson is filled with advice that has broad applications for caregivers, although we are clearly not her intended audience. Many of us became intrigued by improvisational (improv) theatre while watching the television show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* a few years back. But the show was a mixed blessing, according to Ms. Madson, because it implied that improvisation was all about comedy. In reality, it can be any art form (dance, painting, drama) and anything we do. We all improvise dinner, words of solace and parenting/caregiving. We make up our lives as we go along. As Shirley MacLaine has said, *I think of life as a wonderful play that I've written for myself, and so my purpose is to have the utmost fun playing my part.*

The following adaptation of some of the principles of improvisational theatre which Ms. Madson described in *Improv Wisdom* first appeared in my newsletter, *Wiser now Alzheimer's Disease Caregiver Tips* in January 2009. Ms. Madson, now an emeritus faculty member, joined the Stanford University drama department in 1977 and founded the Stanford Improvisors in 1991. She and her husband, Ronald Madson, also direct the California Center for Constructive Living. (<http://www.constructiveliving.com/>).

*You can discover more about a person in an hour of play
than in a year of conversation.*

~ Plato

Limiting the rules

Although I love the concepts expressed in Ms. Madson's book, she spreads her insights over 13 maxims, and that is too much for any caregiver to absorb in one sitting. Therefore, I have adapted her material into six principles:

1. Say "Yes and . . ."
2. Be yourself
3. Start anywhere
4. Pay attention
5. Wake up to the gifts
6. Enjoy the journey



Yes and . . .

The first and perhaps most important maxim is to say, “Yes, and . . .” We all put up our defenses when someone says, “Yes, but . . .” When a person says instead, “Yes, and . . .” we pay attention, because that person is obviously bright – after all she agrees with us!

“Yes, and . . .” really combines two rules into one. “Yes” leads into a new world of possibilities; it’s an act of courage, optimism and hope. When you say yes, you abstain from blocking, which is a way of trying to control a situation instead of accepting it. We are blocking when we change the subject, fail to listen to what is really being said or ignore the situation – as well, of course, when we actually say no. Practice affirmative phrases:

- *You bet!*
- *I’m with you.*
- *Good idea!*
- *You’re right.*

Then look for ways to put a positive spin on your reality.

Saying, “Yes and . . .” is how the action moves forward in improv. Agreement is just the beginning. If an improv scene begins with my partner saying to me, “You have a duck on your head,” and I respond with just “Yes,” it’s almost like saying, “No, I don’t,” because I have given my partner nothing else to work with. If I say, “Yes, and I think she’s about to lay an egg. Quick, give me your purse,” my partner has a clue about what to do next.

In caregiving, particularly when someone has Alzheimer’s disease, saying “Yes, and . . .” means that we are willing to join that person’s reality. If the person wants to talk about his mother who died a half century ago, but whom he thinks is still living, we look for ways to draw out positive reminiscences about his mother.

If the person’s communication abilities are vastly diminished, we can say yes to the tone of voice or body language: *It sounds like you had a good time*, or *That seems to have been upsetting*. If we simply want to encourage the person’s attempts at communication, we can be neutral: *How interesting!*

“Yes, and . . .” can also work in situations when what we mean is “Yes, but . . .” For example, if someone says, *I’m leaving!* you can respond with *Yes, and let’s get your coat so you won’t be chilled*. That is usually a more effective response than *No, it’s much too cold outside*, or even, *Yes, but you will need a jacket*, because we all stop listening after the “but.” When you show your agreement, the person is much more likely to be willing to slow down long enough to find warm clothes, which will either make going outside a reasonable thing to do, or if he needs to be further distracted, buys time for doing it. For example, you could also say, *Yes, and when you come back, I bet you’d like a cup of hot cocoa – or would you like some now?*

“Yes, and . . .” is the first step in finding flexibility as a caregiver, and that’s absolutely key to success.



Be yourself

Again, there are two parts to this maxim. We often think of improvisational theater as highly innovative, but in reality, the performers work better when they are given ordinary situations that at most are simply an odd mix, like a fireman at a birthday party. Ms. Madson notes that when audience members are asked to give suggestions to an improv group, they frequently call out something highly unusual that is its own joke, like a fried mermaid. The audience member may be given kudos by his friends for his “clever” idea, but there isn’t anywhere to go with it. Improv actors work best when they are allowed to let scenes unfold as ideas come to them. It’s good advice for caregivers, too.

You are the only you there is, so bring your natural self to life and to your caregiving role. The best ideas are usually not extraordinary, “far-out” or even exceptionally creative; they are simply what works for you.

Ms. Madson describes an improvisational exercise in which a group of 25 people are asked to open an imaginary present and savor what’s inside. When they discuss afterwards what they imagined, invariably they give 25 different answers. Have you ever come up with what seemed to you a perfectly obvious solution to a problem that baffled others? (Parents and teachers do this all the time!) Your viewpoint is already original, so take Ms. Madson’s advice: “Trust your imagination. There is always something in the box.”



But remember that improvisers work together. You don’t have to do it all. Do what you do best and seek help from others. Many people are simply waiting to be asked to use *their* best skills.

The second part of being yourself is recognizing your imperfections. Perfection is rarely called for in life. A lick and a promise is all that many tasks need. Giving it all you’ve got is frequently a waste of energy – and under-appreciated. Close enough is good enough.

But that said, we will, of course make mistakes. Mistakes, however, are often simply unplanned results. It is said that Thomas Edison made 2000 attempts to invent the light bulb, but he never thought of the unsuccessful attempts as failures; rather they were part of the process of learning. Ms. Madson suggests that we “jump into the world of oops” and see what we can make of our bloopers.



She tells of an improv moment when in a sketch called “Battle of the Nuns,” the vicar comes knocking at the door. He says, “I’ve come to see Sister Agnes.” The woman answering the door, forgetting that that’s her character’s name, says, “I’ll go and get her.” As she starts to walk away, she realizes her mistake, and says, “Oh, right, Sister Agnes, that’s me. I guess all of us nuns look alike.”

Not all of us can turn situations gone bad into laugh lines, but we *can* look for unseen opportunities in disasters. We can learn resilience and perseverance. If you have caused harm, absolutely apologize. Ms. Madson notes that “improvisation is always an act of responsibility;” it’s not about throwing out common sense.

But it *is* about taking ourselves lightly. Have you ever tripped, started to fall and recovered yourself, then looked around to see who might have seen you? Looking at bystanders, have you ever said, “I *meant* to do that”? Ms. Madson says those moments call for a circus bow – you know the kind: You spread your arms over your head and say, “ta- DAH!” Then bow to the left and right.



All of us have personal limits and limited resources, but these can be assets that bring out our creativity – what the French call “bricolage” which essentially means making the best possible dish out of the ingredients at hand. Trust yourself enough to be yourself.

Start anywhere

As caregivers, (heck, as human beings,) we are frequently overwhelmed by all that needs to be done. For everything we check off on a To Do list, two more things get added. I have a 4-year old granddaughter whose quickly shifting attention can create a tsunami of toy debris in her wake, and although I am trying to teach her to clean-up using the principle of “start anywhere,” it’s not one I have mastered myself. Nevertheless, this is one of the simplest rules.

When you have 15 things to do and don’t know where to begin, start with whatever is most obvious. Ms. Madson says, “Your first thought is a reasonable starting place . . . Don’t hesitate.” Second-guessing yourself slows the action. Once a task is underway, it always becomes more manageable. You have already taken the most important step by showing up. Now begin.

Pay Attention



Someone once suggested that people with advanced Alzheimer’s disease are the perfect Zen Buddhists because they have mastered the art of living in the moment. Their present reality is all that concerns them. It is one of their greatest gifts to us as their caregivers – teaching us to slow down and attend to the present. Ms. Madson spent a lot of time in Japan, and in *Improv Wisdom* describes the Japanese tea ceremony, which has rigid rituals all aimed at that goal. They have a saying “Ichi go, ichi ei,” which means “One time, one meeting.” This particular moment will never happen again, so savor it.

As caregivers, paying attention means learning to see the moment through the eyes of the person with dementia. Observe what is happening around you at this moment in time.
How

is the person with dementia reacting? What do we know of his past that influences this moment for him? Perhaps he has always loved classical music and is enjoying the Beethoven symphony that is playing in the background, or conversely, perhaps he is upset by the heavy metal music blaring. Perhaps he is enjoying watching the children play nearby, or perhaps he is upset with their hyperactivity and screeching voices. Perhaps he is restless and needs a walk outdoors, or perhaps he would be most calmed if you sat in silence with him, just holding hands. When we know the individuals in our care, we can adapt their environment and our actions to their comfort.

Wake up to the gifts

I have long talked about what I call “barbed wire gifts,” i.e., gifts that we hesitate to open because they are wrapped in barbed wire. Alzheimer’s disease is the barbed wire, but when you look inside the package, there is still joy and beauty there, both in the people with dementia and the people sharing the care.

I have spent many years as a caregiver for numerous relatives, and I definitely made plenty of mistakes that could *not* be covered up with a ta-DAH! At times my stress suppressed my immune system and my sanity was hanging by a thread. Nevertheless, I met the most amazing people and experienced some of the most tender moments possible in the human experience. If I have ever doubted that people – in spite of all their flaws – are innately good, my faith was restored by the people who entered my life during those years. There are many people who are underpaid for back-breaking, heart-wrenching work, and people who are not paid at all who are present for us at our darkest moments.

Ms. Madson asks us to be mindful of all those who have supported us in the past and are supporting us in the present. She even suggests that you think about the chair that is probably supporting you as you read this, providing silent comfort to your body. Pay attention to those who too often go unthanked and thank them. “Never let an hour go by without giving credit to someone.” Everyone and everything is interdependent. Someone wise once said, “We are not here to see through one another, but to see one another through.” It’s the essence of what improv players and caregivers do.

Enjoy the journey

The last principle, “Enjoy the journey,” is as important as the first. We often can’t control what life hands us, but we can control how we react to it. Ms. Madson says that wishing things were different is a waste of time and energy. Work with what you have been given. Practice what the Japanese call “arugamama” – the virtue of abiding with things as they are.

We talk about finding balance, but the reality is that life is a constant act of *balancing* – an active verb – as if we lived on a surfboard or a bicycle. Ms. Madson advises us to “Embrace the wobble.” Insecurity is normal.



Once you've accepted the wobble, funny stuff happens. Ms. Madson says, "Play is essential to growth." Two of my mantras in my brain aerobics course are "Relaxed learners learn more," and "Fun fuels the brain." When you approach an activity intending to enjoy it – no matter how unpleasant the task at hand may be – you change the experience. "Joy seems not so much dependent on the conditions of our external reality as it is on our way of looking at life," according to Ms. Madson. Thich Nhat Hahn said it in a slightly different way: "Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy."

Improv wisdom is about taking what life has given us and delighting in it by connecting with the people who share our space on earth. So go ahead, improvise.

Kathy Laurenhue is CEO (Chief Enthusiasm Officer) of Wiser Now, Inc., (www.WiserNow.com) a multi-media training company/publisher. She is the creator of **Brain Aerobics Weekly** and a frequent presenter on positive aging topics. You can reach her at Kathy@wisernow.com or 800-999-0795, 9 – 5 ET.

Wiser Now Products

Kathy Laurenhue is the author of two books on Alzheimer's disease:

- **Alzheimer's Basic Caregiving – an ABC Guide and**
- **Activities of Daily Living – an ADL Guide for Alzheimer's Care**

Each provides essential, highly practical information for any family or professional caregiver of people with dementia in a warm and reader-friendly voice. The books are available for just \$7.95 each or \$15/set through the website www.WiserNowAlz.com. As ebooks they are \$7.95 each. Request information on quantity or custom-cover orders by sending an email to Kathy@wisernow.com or calling 800-999-0795 (9-5 Eastern time).

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Kathy Laurenhue is also the author of the blogs www.MindMusings.com and www.CaregiverCheer.com which offer both insights and additional resources.

She also has books and CDs available through Health Professions Press. See <http://www.healthpropress.com/store/activity.htm>.