

The Comedy School Wellbeing Project

Learning Report 2016-17

Forward

In 2016-17, The Comedy School began The Comedy School Wellbeing Project in partnership with South London and Maudsley (SLaM) Recovery College and Social Inclusion, Hope and Recovery Project (SHARP). The aim of the project is to improve people's mental health and wellbeing using comedy as an educational tool making the learning process not only effective, but fun as well.

This year marked the first of a two-year *Test and Learn* period for The Comedy School Wellbeing Project where we are delivering comedy courses to in the mental health sector for the first time and robustly evaluating both the process and the outcome of the project. Drawing on learning from our successful projects in the criminal justice system and with young people, and literature on how comedy is used in mental health interventions abroad, we are excited to bring comedy into mental health services in London and to explore the impact of our work in this arena.

This report summarises the delivery of the first year of The Comedy School Wellbeing Project and discusses key learning from its evaluation. Lessons learnt were both in relation to delivery of the project as well as the impact on participants. This report also outlines our plans for moving forward and how the second year will be evaluated to deepen our understanding of the project's impact.

While the results from this year's evaluation are promising, we still have more to learn about the impact of the project on participants' mental health and that learning can only come from continuing to develop and rigorously evaluate the project.

The 2016-17 year focussed on improvisational comedy, delivering taster sessions, 7-week Introduction to Improvisation courses and organising group outings to watch live comedy. We are happy to have secured funding from Comic Relief to continue the project for the 2017-18 year. In 2017-18, we will continue delivering Introduction to Improvisation and introduce three 7-week Stand Up Comedy courses to the project.

A 3-minute video accompanies this report, which includes feedback from participants, facilitators and delivery partners. This video can be found on the [SLaM Recovery College Website](#).

The Comedy School Wellbeing Project

The Comedy School, SLaM and SHARP

Founded in 1998 by Director Keith Palmer, The Comedy School aims to raise the profile of the many uses of comedy, from stimulating personal creativity to encouraging social skills and improving literacy. We achieve this through our innovative workshops and performance and arts projects for those who wish to be comedians, work in the arts and/or improve their communication skills and confidence. Using comedy as the educational tool makes learning interactive and fun and thus more effective. Our unique way of working has enabled The Comedy School to take arts practitioners to many different environments including schools, prisons, traveller sites and excluded communities across the UK.

The Comedy School Wellbeing Project is delivered in partnership with South London and Maudsley (SLaM) Recovery College and Social Inclusion Hope and Recovery Project (SHARP). SLaM and SHARP provide a range of effective, time-limited, evidence-based therapeutic interventions, aimed at developing coping skills, resilience and confidence among people with mental health problems, and to help these people 'get on with their lives'. Their services are developed and delivered in close collaboration with their service users. As stated on The SLaM Recovery College website, "*co-production is at the heart of everything we do. Every course and workshop we offer is co-designed and co-run by trainers with lived experience working alongside trainers from the mental health professions.*"

(<http://www.slamrecoverycollege.co.uk/>)

The Comedy School Wellbeing Project was born when SHARP team member Sarah Josefsberg met Keith Palmer on a comedy course and saw the potential benefit that comedy could bring to their service users.

Improvisational Comedy and Mental Health

Improvisational comedy (improv) is a comedic performance with little or no predetermined elements. Performers act spontaneously often around suggestions from the audience. While improv is rooted in a lack of planning, there are techniques which can be learnt and practised over time. "It is the form, not content, that is rehearsed" (Bermant, 2013).

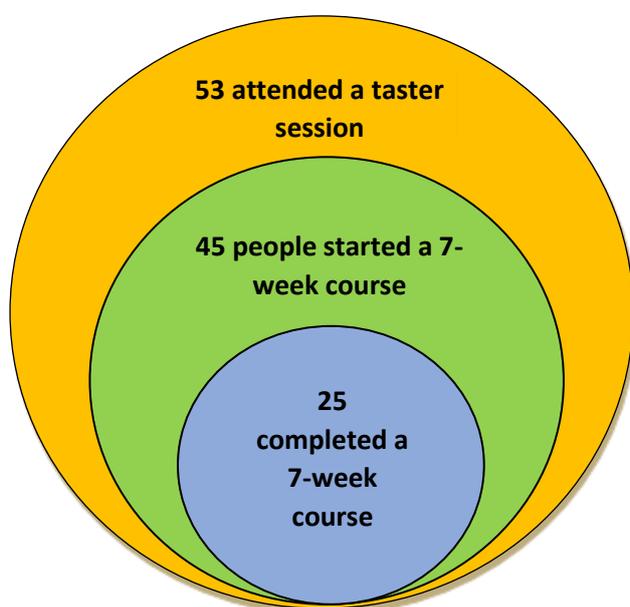
The core tenet of improv is "unconditional positive regard" (Bermant, 2013) for your performance partner. This combined with the known benefits of social laughter make the link between improvisational comedy and improved mental health clear to see. While the theory behind such interventions is strong and anecdotal evidence suggests that it is effective, there is little empirical research on the effectiveness of improv comedy as an intervention for mental health. We are excited to contribute to this growing area of research.

In their article *Comedic Improv Therapy (CIT) for Treatment of Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD)*, Sheesley, Pfeffer and Barish (2016) offer a literature review of the art form of improvisational comedy and its use and impact in the mental health sector, particularly in The United States where the famed comedy school The Second City has been delivering Improv for Anxiety in Chicago, Illinois since 2012. The authors argue that "improv is a novel treatment for SAD by harnessing the following therapeutic elements: (a) group cohesiveness, (b) play, (c) exposure, and (d) humour" (Sheesley et al, 2016 p.157). While The Comedy School Wellbeing Project is not identical to Comedic Improv Therapy there are similarities and studies of CIT offer insight relevant to our project.

Chicago-based psychologist and anxiety specialist David Carbonell claims that "social anxiety is all about inhibition and self-censorship, and that's exactly what improv helps flip around." (Toohill, 2015, online). Furthermore, where crying is often the emotional reaction of interest to psychotherapists, CIT is innovative for its emphasis on laughter. There is strong evidence which documents the benefits of laughter, particularly social laughter. These benefits include promoting social cohesion, aiding communication, improving emotional health, and having a knock-on effect to improved physical health as well (Bennett and Lengacher, 2006; 2008; 2009; Yim, 2016). It turns out the phrase 'laughter is the best medicine' does hold merit.

Year 1 of The Comedy School Wellbeing Project in Numbers

| | |
|--|---|
| <h1 style="color: #e67e22;">6</h1> <p style="color: #e67e22;">Taster Sessions</p> | <p style="color: #e67e22;">To give potential participants an idea of what the 7-week course would be like, we delivered 2 ‘no-strings-attached’ taster sessions before the start of each 7-week course.</p> |
| <h1 style="color: #e67e22;">3</h1> <p style="color: #e67e22;">7-Week Courses</p> | <p style="color: #e67e22;">The 7-Week Introduction to Improvisation courses involved learning and practicing improv tools and techniques through exercises and games. The complexity of the activities would build week on week and each course culminated in an informal ‘sharing event’ to an audience of friends of The Comedy School, SLaM, SHARP and participants’ friends.</p> |
| <h1 style="color: #f1c40f;">2</h1> <p style="color: #f1c40f;">Nights out to live comedy</p> | <p style="color: #f1c40f;">During the second cohort, we organised a comedy night at The Ritzy Cinema in celebration of World Mental Health Day. Alongside professional comedians, 3 participants from the first cohort performed to a sold-out public audience. 12 participants on the current cohort went to the event. During the third cohort, 6 participants went to The Comedy Store to watch the famed improv troupe, The Comedy Store Players.</p> |



Community Participation



5 new volunteering opportunities

★ **World Mental Health Celebration at The Ritzy** ★

65 Tickets Sold to the Public
12 Students Attended

3 FORMER STUDENTS PERFORMED ALONGSIDE PROFESSIONAL COMEDIANS!

| Demographic Data (n=22) | |
|-------------------------|-----|
| Age | |
| 35-39 | 5% |
| 40-44 | 16% |
| 45-49 | 16% |
| 50-54 | 42% |
| 55-59 | 16% |
| 60-64 | 5% |
| Ethnicity | |
| White or White British | 43% |
| Black or Black British | 14% |
| Asian or Asian British | 5% |
| Mixed Heritage | 10% |
| Not stated | 29% |
| Gender | |
| Male | 41% |
| Female | 41% |
| Not stated | 18% |

Lessons learnt about impact

Out of the 25 people who completed a 7-week course, 21 completed the Warwick Edinburgh Wellbeing Scale (WEWBS) at the start and end of their course. The WEWBS is a widely used and academically validated tool that measures both behaviours and attitudes that contribute to overall mental health. The same questions are asked at the beginning and end of the course and a change of 3 points on the scale is considered 'meaningful'.

The results showed that 91% of the 21 participants who took both the before and after questionnaire experienced a 'meaningful' positive change in mental health and well-being. We are limited to what conclusions we can draw from these results because the data-set is small and potentially skewed by Attrition Bias¹. Additionally, we were not able to track the majority of participants after they had completed the course to understand the impact of the course beyond the 7 weeks. Nevertheless, the results are promising.

Two case studies (John and Lucy) illustrate what people experienced during course and John was enthusiastic in sharing how improv has impacted his life since the 7-week course. The case studies and qualitative data from the participants' journals that they wrote in throughout the course indicate that the social element of The Comedy School Wellbeing Project was a key contributor to experiencing positive outcomes.

¹ Attrition Bias occurs when participants 'drop out' of a project before completion and therefore do not take the end-line questionnaire. The Comedy School Wellbeing Project saw an attrition rate of 40% and therefore there is a risk that the only people who responded were those who had a very positive experience.

Case Study: John

John has been involved with SLaM for two years on and off having been through two 'spells' with them. Near the end of his second spell, his therapist suggested that he tried The Recovery College, because while it's still part of SLaM, it gives people avenues to look outside the health system. The Comedy School Wellbeing Project's Introduction to Improvisational Comedy course and after initial hesitation, he decided to attend a taster session after which he signed up for a 7-week course. John participated in the course in the summer of 2016 in the first of three course cycles delivered in 2016-17. At the time of the interview, he had been involved with improvisational comedy consistently for 9 months. After completing the 7-week course and has continued to come to drop-in improvisational sessions at The Comedy School in Camden and is attending the South London drop-in at Maudsley as well.

Reflecting on his journey with improv, John emphasised that by nature he is "quite reserved, introspective and inward looking" but the course changed all that. He recognises that while those are good qualities, they can also be inhibitive he felt blocked from taking risks, made decisions quite slowly and struggled with change. ***"Improv bought out a side of me that's been hidden my entire life. In the course, and in improv generally taking risk is positive, constructive and life affirming. I can honestly say that, for me, it's been a life changer and now I'm such an enthusiast!"***

John says that overall, he feels that he is in a positive place in his life, which is a change from the past few years, and he is optimistic about his future. He's a more relaxed and happier person, which is a change that he attributes "50% to the improv", as he's involved in other things as well that have been positive. The course taught him techniques that have reduced feelings of anxiety and low mood: ***"when I feel anxious or in a low mood, I say to myself 'okay, let's go into improv mode' and I just improv my way through it! There's nothing to fear, just go for it!"***

John is very passionate about improv and encourages anyone to give it a go. As a person of 60 years of age, he was concerned that he had come into the field quite late in life and that he would be in an arena for young people, but his age

hasn't made a difference to his experience at all. Recognising that comedy isn't for everyone and knowing the risks that come with trying something new and putting yourself out there, he still encourages anyone at any age or ability to give it a go and sees real potential for comedy to be used as a tool to help people with their mental health.

Case Study: Lucy

Lucy joined the course because her counsellor saw in her that she was passionate about acting and drama, but didn't have space to express herself. She saw this course in The Recovery College Course catalogue and thought it would be a good opportunity for Lucy to further develop her performance skills and have space to express herself. Lucy's counsellor brought her to the taster session.

Remembering her first day, she says she didn't even take her coat off and wanted to run out of the room even when asked to say her name, but over time, the more she got to know the other participants, she was comforted by the fact that they were all going through similar things, just in different ways. It was very challenging for Lucy to participate at first, she always went to the sessions, but didn't volunteer to play the games and act the parts like some of her other classmates did. Luke (the facilitator) recognised this and encouraged her to give one of the exercises a go, which she was still hesitant to do. ***"Luke was saying 'Lucy, why don't you give it a go', but I just couldn't do it. Then a man in the course said to me 'I know how you're feeling. I feel it too. Why don't we go up there together?' and it was then that I really realised that we were all in this together to support each other and that I didn't have anything to be afraid of. From then on, I loved it!"***

Having spent much of her adult life without friends, Lucy said that one of the biggest things that she learned through the improv course was to listen to people and to give them a chance. ***"I have a phobia of people, which has to do with my past, but on this course, I got to know people and everyone is different, but they're all so nice and that's really helped my mental health to be honest."*** Changes that she's seen in herself is that she has more patience for people, smiles more and is engaged with all parts of life around her.

One of the key things she's taken away from this experience is that during the 7 weeks, Lucy learned to like herself and she's decided that moving forward with her recovery is worth it. ***"I feel good about myself and like I know who I am. It's not gotten rid of my mental health problems, but it's made me like myself more than I ever have before."*** Lucy has also learned that she's funny! ***"People have always told me that I'm funny, but I would say 'no, I'm not funny. I'm scatty' but I now I know I'm funny!"***

Lucy has plans in place to move forward with her recovery and hopes to continue with

improvisational comedy. She's excited about the drop-in sessions in Maudsley, however being in the evening she is not yet attending them as it still gets dark quite early. Her counsellor said that while she saw many changes in Lucy throughout the course, that she found the course finishing quite difficult and began to relapse. She felt that the weekly gathering of the group and the socialisation that that brought was a key contributor to the change that was taking place for participants and that then not having that group made it difficult for Lucy to embed the progress she had made during the 7 weeks into her everyday life.

Towards a deeper understanding of impact

While these initial results seem promising, we still have more to learn before we can fully understand the impact of The Comedy School Wellbeing Project. To deepen our understanding of the project's impact, we need to understand the causes of attrition and the longer-term impact on participants. We will continue to use the WEMWBS immediately before and after the 7-week courses and then we will contact participants 6 weeks later to take a follow-up measurement. The journals will be slightly modified to draw out richer qualitative data from participants during the course. We will also monitor participation and attrition data more closely and record observations and reflections from the facilitators. Finally, we will aim to get a deeper understanding of the mental health needs of the people who participate in the 7-week courses. This enhanced data set will help us understand the impact of The Mental Health and Wellbeing Project with more clarity.

Lessons learnt about the project delivery

Each of the delivery cycles was fine-tuned as a result of ongoing reflective practice. Here's what we learned over the course of the 3 cycles.

The taster sessions played a crucial part. None of the participants had previous experience with improv and many of them had no previous performance training. The taster sessions allowed them to get a 'no-strings-attached' idea of what the 7-week courses were like and if it was right for them. The taster sessions also allowed us to widen our reach of potential participants and give more people the chance to do some improv, even if it was just a one-off event.

A social night out facilitated group bonding. It was observed that group cohesion was stronger after The World Mental Health Celebration at The Ritzy Cinema and trip to The Comedy Store. Strong group cohesion is key for improv to work. Tickets to these events are paid for by The Comedy School, and outings will continue for the 2017-18 delivery year.

It's important to have the right people in the room. It was helpful to have a person with a background in mental health in the room supporting the facilitator and to be able to support participants if they had an issue or needed to talk without disrupting the flow of the group. It also an ethical consideration to ensure that the course facilitators are equipped to support the participants and their mental health as needed. A Peer Tutor is now provided by SHARP for all the sessions. It was also observed that a gender balance amongst the group and in the session leadership was helpful.

Next steps

After a successful first year of The Comedy School Wellbeing Project, we are happy to have secured funding from Comic Relief to continue to deliver comedy courses with SLAM and SHARP and learn through robust evaluation.

The improv courses will continue with 2 more cycles of 2 taster sessions and a 7-week course (1 in summer term '17 and 1 in autumn term '17). Responding to demand for opportunities to continue practicing improv in an open non-clinical environment, The Comedy School now runs monthly drop-in sessions at School of Communication Arts, The Brix at St Matthews Church in addition to the drop-in sessions in Camden.

In addition to the improv courses, The Comedy School will also offer 3 Stand-up Comedy courses. These will run in the same cycle of 2 taster sessions followed by a 7-week course. Stand-up is being offered because of demand from participants on the improv courses and as we have a successful track record of using stand-up as engagement and educational tool, we are looking forward to introducing it to our work in the mental health sector.

Get involved!

If you would like to get involved in this project by giving your time or donating, get in touch with Keith Palmer at keithpalmer@thecomedyschool.com and visit our website to learn about [Give with a Giggle](#). With a small monthly donation, you can support The Comedy School's charitable work and receive valuable kickbacks such as discounts on courses, hot desking space and tickets to live comedy!

References and further reading

Applied Improvisation Network. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 May 2017.

Aylesworth, A. "Improving Case Discussion With an Improv Mind-Set." *Journal of Marketing Education* 30.2 (2008): 106-15. Web.

Bennett, Mary Payne, and Cecile A. Lengacher. "Humor and Laughter May Influence Health. I. History and Background." *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* 3.1 (2006): 61-63. Web.

Bennett, Mary Payne, and Cecile Lengacher. "Humor and Laughter May Influence Health: II. Complementary Therapies and Humor in a Clinical Population." *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* 3.2 (2006): 187-90. Web.

Bennett, Mary Payne, and Cecile Lengacher. "Humor and Laughter May Influence Health: III. Laughter and Health Outcomes." *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* 5.1 (2008): 37-40. Web.

Bennett, Mary Payne, and Cecile Lengacher. "Humor and Laughter May Influence Health IV. Humor and Immune Function." *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* 6.2 (2009): 159-64. Web.

Bermant, Gordon. "Working With(out) a Net: Improvisational Theater and Enhanced Well-being." *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (2013): n. pag. Web.

- Elliot, I. Poverty and Mental Health: A review to inform the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's anti-poverty strategy. Web. 2016
- "Improv Classes for Anxiety | Improv for Anxiety Program." *The Second City*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 May 2017.
- Louden, Kathleen. "Improv for Anxiety: A Stand-Up Therapeutic Tool?" *Medscape*. N.p., 14 Apr. 2014. Web. 30 May 2017.
- "Mental health facts and statistics | Mind" *Mind: for better mental health* N.p. Apr 2017. Web. 08 July 2017.
- NHS Lambeth Clinical Commissioning Group. "Heathier Together" Five-year strategy: 2014/15-2018/19
- Sheesley, Alison Phillips, Mark Pfeffer, and Becca Barish. "Comedic Improv Therapy for the Treatment of Social Anxiety Disorder." *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 11.2 (2016): 157-69. Web.
- Steitzer, Caitlin. "The Brilliant Genius: Using Improv Comedy in Social Work Groups." *Social Work With Groups* 34.3-4 (2011): 270-82. Web.
- Taggart, Francis, Sarah Stewart-Brown, and Jan Parkinson. "Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) User guide". Version 2 (2015
- Tint, Barbara, and Adam Froer. "Delphi Study Summary: Applied Improvisation Network." (n.d.): n. pag. 2014. Web.
- Toohill, Kathleen. "So Funny, It Doesn't Hurt." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 11 Sept. 2015. Web. 30 May 2017.
- "Warwick Medical School." *Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 May 2017.
- Yim, Jongeun. "Therapeutic Benefits of Laughter in Mental Health: A Theoretical Review." *The Tohoku Journal of Experimental Medicine* 239.3 (2016): 243-49. Web.