



## Playing with the Pandemic

*In order to truly laugh, you must be able to play with pain.*

—Charlie Chaplin

**P**RACTICING GROUP THERAPY IS A LOVE OF MINE, AND I PRACTICE AND LEAD GROUPS IN VARIOUS FORMS. At the time that the COVID-19 pandemic started to appear in other parts of the globe, I was leading or co-leading several groups: social therapeutic process groups, an improv therapeutic process group for people with social anxiety using movement and play, three groups for couples, and more. Having developed group skills over 35 years of practice, I have learned not only to listen to the group dialogue and the emotionality of conversation but also to notice the subtle movements, silences, eye motions, and energy in the room that speak to the dynamic created by the interaction of pain, connection, openness, joy, disconnection, and intimacy. However, with the pandemic, new challenges and possibilities were presented, and changes were required.

### Group Therapy Challenges and Outcomes

I had always been reluctant to participate in or lead therapy sessions, whether individual or group, online or by telephone. I do participate in long distance learning and supervision. In the training sessions I've attended as a participant, I tune out too frequently for my comfort, which has felt disrespectful to the leaders of those learning groups. Being fully present and tuned in to all of the nuances that come with person-to-person sessions is very important to me. Pre-pandemic, I believed that the cre-

MURRAY DABBY, LCSW, is a psychotherapist, teacher, and performance activist based in Atlanta, Georgia. He has a long-time group therapy practice. Murray cofounded The Couples College and Curtain Up, Anxiety Down and is a lead trainer at the [globalplaybrigade.org](http://globalplaybrigade.org). He is a longtime associate with the [eastsideinstitute.org](http://eastsideinstitute.org). Married to his greatest friend, Lori, they have a wonderful adult daughter. Among other hobbies, you can often find him performing music and singing around town.  
[murray@atlantasocialtherapy.com](mailto:murray@atlantasocialtherapy.com)

ative intuition that grows with experience required face-to-face meetings and that both individual and collective growth depended upon in-person work.

Then the pandemic hit the world, spreading beyond China and Europe and moving into the United States. I had all of January 2020 to start thinking about whether to move to a fulltime online format, though I must admit I was in denial. As we watched the virus spreading to Seattle, parts of California, and right near my old neighborhood in New Rochelle, the move to an online format seemed inevitable. At that time, I was running and co-leading six groups and had scheduled upcoming trainings and group consultations, along with a full load of individual and couples sessions that I felt relied on face-to-face contact. While there is much to share about the general transition of my practice, my improv group therapy format gave me the most pause. I wondered anxiously how I could run a therapeutic improv group online, where we couldn't make use of the full body work and movement that improv relies upon.

I have partnered with improviser, creativity coach, and theatre director Lesly Fredman in creating and running *Curtain Up, Anxiety Down* groups for the last 7 years. Our groups consist of 8 to 12 members, from college-aged to people in their 70s, working on severe social anxiety of all kinds. We help people deal with social fears, perfectionism, fear of failure, obsessional processes, paranoia, higher functioning autism spectrum challenges, and the emotional inhibition and isolation that frequently come with social phobia or social anxiety.

I have learned that the mechanisms and effects of improv have tremendous benefits for adults who have trouble socializing. It had that effect on me when I first tried it, in 1996, at an all-weekend social therapeutic conference/workshop where I performed in front of 150 people. I was terrified! Before this experience, I remember being intrigued with finding a way to do some kind of stage performance as therapy ever since attending training with Virginia Satir in the early '80s. Satir mesmerized me and the audience by constructing a family dynamic improvisationally as an onstage performance using the participants' responses. However, I was quite shy and thought I could never consider doing this. As a child of immigrant parents—Iraqi-Jews—I was encouraged by my family to quietly assimilate. I did just that: learned to listen, fit in, and not talk much. As a result, I became extremely uncomfortable in social groups. Fortunately, as a musician, I learned to perform on a stage, which helped me to survive my quiet adolescence and young adulthood. But the experience of participating in group conversations was excruciating. After a few bouts with different therapists, I entered a group where it took me 2 years to speak.

Back to the improv workshop I attended, the risks I took did not come easily. My experience of standing on stage, tasked to improvise a performance of my life in one minute, was mortifying. As I acted out the story of my life, I repeatedly yelled loudly that I hated being on stage. Subsequently, I was asked by the supportive improv director to create a poem on the spot out of that experience. This was a transformative moment for me. It ultimately helped me move from having to evaluate everything I say, judge my words, including everything from giving public talks to small talk, to relating to conversation and presentations as a more creative and improvised activity.

Doing improv can create fun situations where people can play with making mistakes and experiencing failure and let go of the longstanding internal judgments and criticisms that can crush spontaneity. In the therapeutic improv group, when somebody in

the group makes a mistake, we make sure that it is loudly celebrated by the group. This helps people overcome the fear of being shamed. We find that people, many of whom may tend toward introversion, will suddenly discover, "Oh, I have a voice," or "I can say things spontaneously and people enjoy it." They notice that people applaud or build on what they are saying. Lesly would remind the group that you don't have to be funny. Scenes can be serious, and humor will organically happen. Clients who tend toward introversion come to find that the vast world of their inner voices has value in a public sphere.

Pre-pandemic, the value of being together in person seemed a critical part of the group. The experience of proximity, seeing each other, dancing together, touching, moving our bodies, and being visible to others seemed critical to growth. We wondered whether the group could do this work on Zoom. Could an online group provide the value to members that the in-person group had? We had to creatively develop ways to do groups: for example, to create the order of a circle by numbering people. We used facial exercises as a way to get people acclimated to the severe discomfort of looking at themselves by asking the group to bring their faces up to the screen and camera rather than disappearing, which was the inclination of many group members. Since many were working from home, we dealt with some embarrassment people felt about opening their living spaces to observation.

Some of our first exercises were simulating phone conversations between Zoom boxes or asking folks to take an object in their room, look at it in a new way, talk to it, and have another group member perform the voice of the object. We created a mock support group for emotional saboteurs, that is, those internal critical voices that undermine risk taking and spontaneity. We helped people look at their internal voices and personify them as characters, giving them names and a personality. The group members then played out those characters in a simulated group therapy session about how effective they are as saboteurs in order to improve their undermining. We also created a way to overcome inhibitions in doing improv scenes by choosing pairs to develop a scene together while the group watched. As all of us became more comfortable with the medium, the flow of the exercises seemed endlessly creative.

The group members were learning that they could create the group environment by performing as if a "head taller" than they are (Vygotsky, 1978), or by performing as other than who they thought they were, by bringing their experiences, history, and conflicts into the performance. Like good actors, they could simultaneously be who they were and perform as other. As I understand it, that is the fascinating dialectic of performance (Salit, 2016).

Play and performance are critical to my understanding of growth and human development. My training, in the '80s, at the East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Psychotherapy in New York, an international training and research center for social therapeutic and performance activism and a think tank for humane approaches to human development, taught me about performance studies. Human development can mean many things. The Institute's powerful characterization of development is different from its frequent uses in childhood stages of growth, social planning, fundraising, and other contexts. The Institute approaches development as something that we as human beings create, by continually transforming our circumstances. I like to think of it as a theatre-like stage we perform on (living room rugs will do) where new forms of play

and life are possible. This is in contrast to a more linear notion of climbing a ladder to reach a next stage. Developmental psychologist Lois Holzman (2020) would say, “As we change the environment and world around us, we change ourselves, and as we change ourselves, we change the world.”

The move to a performative and improvisational paradigm is valuable in giving people the experience of our capacity to shape ourselves and our world. This has particular importance to me given my sensibility that psychotherapy needs to have relevance for changing the conditions of our lives. People will often say, “I am seeing things in entirely new ways,” or “I had not noticed things before that were right in front of me.” The value of seeing things in new ways, or seeing old things in new ways, means you are creating possibilities and hope. Instead of being only bound and shaped by the culture we live in, often individualistic and isolating, people begin to get the experience that we may have the capacity to be culture changers, whether in the workshops or in other social settings.

### Taking Improv to the World Stage

Paralleling and responding to the onset and quick global spread of the pandemic, a new organization, The Global Play Brigade (GPB), came into being. The GPB has sought to provide a portal for collective development. The inspiration came from three improvisers, one from China and two from the United States, who teamed up in late January 2020 when the intense quarantining took place in Wuhan, China. People were isolated at home without others to connect to. The improviser from China reached out to nearly 100 homebound residents and, together with U.S. improvisers, created a virtual space in which to play improv games in a large group.

As the pandemic engulfed the globe in March 2020, these improv leaders began to reach out to improvisers, performers, clowns, and therapists around the world, including me, to create a voluntary organization that would offer free improv for people impacted by the pandemic. As a group, it is our belief that integrating play, improv, theatre, clowning, and therapeutics is vital for creating hope, possibility, development, and emotional well-being. We see ourselves as part of a new global surge of needed human creativity. We hope to build a global community for change, part of which is the creation of equitable access for people economically, socially, educationally, and culturally, with the ultimate aim of contributing to the end of discrimination and poverty. We were inspired by the words of Arundhati Roy:

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (Roy, 2020)

Through social media, the GPB created a way for people to sign up for free virtual play workshops for adults, children, activists, and anybody really, to participate in anything from learning language and dance, playing together, clowning, stress relief, teen spaces, sharing and playing with politics, and more. We offered free participatory workshops in numerous languages, in all time zones, led by some 160-plus people who joined the organization.

We decided that we would offer play in two categories. The first one we considered pure play, that is, play for play’s sake, for fun, laughter, relaxation, and connection. The other category we called “Voices,” which is meant to be more therapeutic play, giving people opportunities to share their pain, joy, struggle, resilience, and aspirations. Of course, the distinction is not so cut and dried; the focus of these groups took many forms. I signed up to be in the “Voices” group. The creative work allowed me the opportunity to improvise, find creative means to explore therapeutics, and partner with people around the world to collaborate and find new resources for learning.

While in the midst of the pandemic, like many human beings, I was becoming more reflective, recognizing the fragility of our social structure and all those daily life circumstances previously taken for granted. In this moment, and perhaps because of it, the explosive fight for racial justice took the foreground. Beginning with the outrage over the public execution of an African American man, George Floyd, in Minneapolis, and continuing with several other incidents of racial violence across the country, many people all over the world, particularly young people, are taking to the streets and to social media. We watch as mostly peaceful protests sometimes break down and are often sabotaged. Nevertheless, the global surge of protest gives hope and strength to people addressing longstanding systemic racism.

As a child of the ‘60s, I would typically be outside participating in some kind of organized protest or march. However, I could not do so mid-pandemic for fear of jeopardizing my health and that of my life partner. I began to explore the possibility of creating a protest on Zoom through the Global Play Brigade. I created a workshop series called Protest and Play: Creating Power and Connection Worldwide. The first one was focused in the United States to address racial injustice. I developed this workshop in collaboration with theatre professional Kat Koppett and conducted exercises that gave participants an opportunity to create political memes out of our group. We performed protest stances on Zoom, created sounds, songs, and signs of protest that were photographed, distributed, and used in our own social media forums. We also created improv exercises specific to protesting social injustice. Participants were instructed to express their emotional feelings and passion in gibberish, with another participant translating what they said and how they said it. The fun thing about gibberish is that people tend to show their passion without having to worry about words. The subsequent translations created a powerful intimacy that participants described as helping them feel less isolated at home and more powerful in a socially active community. This experience would be hard to achieve by reading or listening to the news at home.

I also initiated international Protest and Play workshops. For example, I teamed up with Fernanda Liberali, an activist and professor from São Paulo, Brazil, and Charly Ford, an African American improv comic from Atlanta, GA, to create a workshop that was internationally diverse and multi-lingual. People attended from Brazil, Peru, Costa Rica, Mexico, the United States, Canada, and Austria. After showing videos and participating virtually in demonstrations around the world, led by women from Chile fighting against rape, we led an exercise where each person in our Zoom rooms briefly shared the challenges in their own country and highlighted those that were priorities for them. Out of this came some beautiful performances of unity and connection; break-out groups created multilingual poetry to present to the whole group. Participants expressed that the workshop led to an experience of shared connection, love, ownership,

and commonality.

My personal interest in slow reflection then led to an effort to explore slowness and silence in a playful and therapeutic way. Along with Annie Rose, a professional performance coach, we led another workshop called *Playful Reflections: A Place to Clear, Share, and Connect*. In developing this workshop, we wanted to explore the speed and quickness that we often experience in life, especially in this historic moment of anxiety and loss. We wanted to create a workshop to help people appreciate the value of slowness and silence. For example, we adapted an exercise created by Cathy Rose Salit, called “Gorgeous Conversations” (Salit, 2016). In this exercise, we had each member share how they were doing in this very conflicted, tumultuous moment in history, and then pass the conversation along by asking the next person to reflect. That person had to sit quietly for 10 slow seconds before responding and then share their emotional experience of what was said, then their own experience. They then passed the question to the next person. This slow thoughtful experience of listening and sharing created a powerful sense of emotional connection, honesty, and intimacy in a group of people, many of whom had just met for the first time.

### The Dialectics of Collective Development Embedded in Performance

Exploring the power of performance in therapeutics brings me to the implications performance has on my view in understanding human life, resilience, activism, development, and who the human being is. One of the challenges I have experienced with the practice and study of psychotherapy over the years has been how to address dualities that are inherent in the practice and teaching, such as mind-body, inner-outer, or thought-language. A duality of particular relevance to this article is the individual-society dialectic. Given my cultural history, I have come to appreciate the inseparability of my cultural history from my persona, my sensibility, and the struggles I have experienced and grown through. I appreciate the personal and experiential home that the American Academy of Psychotherapists (AAP) has provided to therapists who embrace the complexities of relationality and experience in facilitating movement. I would love to add the social therapeutic view of human beings into the mix, to share how I experience the complexity and the dialectic approach of human beings. Social therapeutics, seeing life from a performatory perspective, may be useful here.

Developmental psychologist Lois Holzman and Cathy Rose Salit, founder of Performance of a Lifetime and chief organizer of the GPB, presented at the Taos Institute, “Why Be Half Human?” (Holzman & Salit, 2020). In this talk, they shared that a traditional view of psychology tends to address one side of the human being. That side consists of seeing human beings as (a) shaped by our environments, (b) tool users, (c) adapters to culture, (d) members of identity and geographical communities, (e) learning to behave, and (f) shaped by our history, that we are who we are. Note that these descriptions tend to be passive. In the paper, the authors point out that we are more than these characteristics. We also live in a dialectical space where we are simultaneously (a) shapers of environment, (b) tool creators and makers (c) culture creators, (d) community builders, (e) performers (note a much broader sense than behaving) and (f) continually becoming. Note the contrasting sense of activity and activism in these descriptions.

We are seeing in this moment that millions of people are creating new forms of being

with one another, new forms of cultural communities. Of course, we have been doing this since the dawn of the human species. We continually create culture even while aspects of our society remain intact, even resisting change. On the one side, we are a “behaving species” in so far as we learn and adapt to the rules of the societal world, whether it is stopping at the red light, where to place our knife and fork, or learning how to behave in front of our teachers, employers, our spouses, and our therapists. At the same time, we are performers. We are able to bring brand new performances, improvisations, passions, and new ways to be with others, using all we have experienced and learned in the creation of something new. We are simultaneously who we are and who we are becoming. For me, the notion of the simultaneity of being and becoming is exemplary of what it means to think about human beings as a performative species. Great actors understand this. They use who they are, their history, to perform who they are not. Young children do that, too. In therapeutic work, clients can learn to move from an evaluative stance to an improvised stance, using language improvisationally to discover new experiences.

To close this paper, or to offer a way to continue, I want to offer a statement made by Lois Holzman, who said,

Playing, as we understand it, is beyond imagining, beyond dreaming, beyond learning social skills, beyond cognition. It’s a social activity that brings new possibilities into the world. Playing is about experiencing our society and species consciousness. Over and over again people of different ages who have stopped playing—because play is either disallowed or only something little kids do—have said to me after playing for the first time in years, things like, “It helps me belong;” “I don’t feel so alone;” “I created something with these other people;” “I never saw my boss except as my boss, but now we created a new relationship.” We can play with anything, we can play with words and sounds, we can play with fear and anxiety. We can, indeed, play with the pandemic. (Holzman, 2020)

I hope we can all play with the pandemic to help lead the people we work with to humanely create a world that is better socially, emotionally, intellectually, and politically. ▼

### References

- Holzman, L. (2020, July 7). *Playing through the pandemic: Some thoughts on play, happiness and human development*. Loisholzman.org. Retrieved from <https://loisholzman.org/2020/07/playing-through-the-pandemic-some-thoughts-on-play-happiness-and-human-development/>
- Holzman, L. & Salit, C. (2020). Why be half-human? How play, performance and practical philosophy make us whole. Draft chapter to appear in *Social Construction in Action*. Taos Worldshare: Taos Institute.
- Roy, A. (2020, April 3). The pandemic is a portal. *Financial Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>
- Salit, C.R. (2016). *Performance breakthrough: A radical approach to success at work*. New York: Hachette Book Group.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind and society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.