

Creating Your Living

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Techniques and concepts derived from the psychotherapeutic method called “psychodrama” can be adapted for use in non-clinical contexts, in education, religion, business, and even everyday life. In this latter sense, here are some approaches that you might find useful:

1. Think of life as a play, a drama, a series of scenes. You are the co-playwright, the script-writer for this mixture of sit-com and soap opera. Your goal is to have the characters respond in the best way possible. Now in the TV sitcoms and soap operas, the scriptwriters have folks take their foolishness, their pride, shame, secrecy, and deception to an extreme, and suffer the funny and tragic consequences. We need to do the opposite, though; imagine what the wisest, most modulated, thoughtful, caring, uplifting responses of all the parties might be.
2. Specify the facial expressions, the body movements, and the words spoken. Actively resist the tendencies of the mind to drift into psychological abstractions, or generalities; recognize these are used to blur the situation and let us drift into small clouds of “I don’t know” and “they’re just jerks” kind of thinking—cop-outs, actually. Take on the responsibility—the ability to respond with a broader and more flexible role repertoire—of imagining the specifics. It is a bit more risky, but there is another set of back-up protection that you can use:
3. Speak of events as if they are provisional scenes, making them sort of playful, slightly experimental. Use phrases such as, “Let’s try it this way.” “Can we explore some different possibilities?” “If I were to respond this way, let’s see what would happen.” In this way, you generate a slightly playful and therefore more fail-safe context. Your responses can more quickly be exposed to feedback and adjustment. This is contrast to the common situation in which you feel on the spot and you have to respond one way or another.
4. Use the technique of replay: Say things such as, “can I take that over?” or “I didn’t like the way that came out. Let me revise it a bit.” You can say, “Let’s go back about three interactions and try it from a different angle—this approach isn’t working.” By expecting others to allow you to do this, you are inviting them into a more dramaturgical, play-like context, one that can explore alternatives rather than serve as a kind of “test.”
 1. (In a sense, this whole approach is meant to break away from the school-based conditioning that life consists of knowing the right answers and being able to satisfy the teacher in a once-and-for-all performance, which is subliminally presented as a paradigm of what life is about, but it is profoundly misleading. Life is really more an ongoing experimental improvisational laboratory.)

5. Instead of using the psycho-babble generalities that have become the pseudo-helpful ways we play one-upsmanship with each other, shift into role talk: Identify and name more neutral roles that describe the different viewpoints operating in a situation, and if possible, imagine what those roles might be. Often these are actual people who are in a particular role, and sometimes they are just one of the roles that person plays, or one of the roles inside your own mind. It's a very useful language for working with the complexities of the psycho-social field. It takes a bit of practice, but gets easier.
6. Here's the crucial skill: Imagine what it's like to be in that role. Draw out your imagination for a while, probing it with various questions: What makes you happy in this role? Sad? Angry? Scared? What are the disadvantages of this role? Advantages? Apply this act of imaginative role taking to others, let go of your egocentricity for a while and look at the world from their predicament. This is the heart of empathy! (See appendix on pg. 4).

Working from this exercise, you can identify more accurately the concerns of those who seem to be opposing you, or others with whom you may have some tensions or frictions.
7. Recognize more clearly the principle of warming-up, the need to activate the dynamics of associating various ideas, intuitions, and the like, and this cannot be done by direct will. It must emerge gradually, along with any activities that diminish anxiety. Building trust, generating a context of patience, gentleness, friendliness, experimentation, playfulness, good humor, and other positive emotional tones all helps. Physical activation—getting up and moving around, also helps, as does active involvement, learning by doing, experimentation. These factors generate the optimal receptivity in the mind for a flow of imagination, intuition, and inspiration.
8. Recognize that your responses also are types of role playing. For example, there are five or six levels of self-assertion, and by recognizing them as different roles, different ways anger or demand can be expressed, you can modulate them. You may be tempted to fly into a temper, but recognizing that as a 4 or 5, your judgment can pull you back to whatever number is most fitting. You can move gradually in your escalating levels of intensity, and do so consciously, rather than by habit or automatic reactivity. Other emotional reactions can also be explored as to the strength of their expression—flirting, dis-interest, excitement, guilt, etc. Differences in how they are expressed, depending on the situation, can make all the difference. See webpage re types of anger:
<http://www.blatner.com/adam/level2/anger.htm>
9. Cultivate your capacity for improvisation. This is a skill set, and it may develop through exercise, become more refined. Spontaneity isn't something you either do or don't have, it's something you can learn to do, and do more effectively. If you overdo it, it's something you can learn to modulate. Theatre games are especially useful, and can be modified for your purposes, as can other role playing and simulations exercises.
10. Consider using more "as-if" imagined scenes in your interactions. It's a way to explore alternatives, and can often be very emotionally satisfying, even if the outcome doesn't play out in "real life."

11. Explore using the different parts of self technique—implicit in a role-theory way of thinking about psychology: In certain situations, instead of thinking you have to give a single response, say, “Well, part of me thinks... But there’s another part that feels....” You might even add, “And, you know, there’s a third part (or fourth part!)...”

A variation on this technique is to consider when and with whom you may do this, but with some people, adding “I wouldn’t ordinarily admit this to you, but...” This is the equivalent of the use of the dramatic technique of the “aside” or in the movies, the “voice over.” The point is to recognize that there are extra levels of disclosure, and sometimes you want to let the others who can hear you in on what you’re thinking. Of course, this must be used with discretion.

12. You can use a similar technique to work out your own inner conflicts. In states of confusion, consider that what’s going on is that you are suffering from a conflict in which the different parts are arguing so loudly and interrupting each other so insistently that you can’t hear yourself think. Become an inner strict and authoritative manager and mediator, saying, in effect, “Look, I promise to listen closely and caringly to every one of you. But I need to hear only one at a time! So you’ll all have to be quiet while I listen to this part.” Then interview one of the voices, draw it out, imagine its answers. Some people actually set up chairs and sit in each one in turn. You might also have a friend help you with this.

13. Back to one of the first items, thinking in terms of specific words. You can use this—it takes a bit of practice at first, then comes rather naturally—in your closer relations. Arrange for both of you to understand that you can ask for the words you want to have said to you: “I’d like to hear you say.. (and then use the exact words—not some general abstraction).” In a relatively positive relationship, in fact we can’t read each others’ minds and deliver exactly the right words. It’s like expecting others to know when your back itches and exactly where and how to scratch it.

We have to resist the pervasive temptation to believe, “If he cared, he’d know what to say,” which masks a deep reluctance to reveal vulnerability, of showing that you want to hear something positive. Once you break through this phony game, relations can be so much nicer!

14. Know there is a method for conflict resolution, using this role taking approach. See my webpage article on this subject: <http://www.blatner.com/adam/level2/conflictres.html>

Many discussion of underlying conflicts are avoided, foolishly, because the people involved don’t have any sense of how it might be worked out if it were faced head on. When you know there is a method, it can encourage people to use it.

15. Related to number 8, above, become more alert to the dimension of nonverbal communication, and realize that these are part of your role playing. The challenge is to become more aware of how you come across, and one way to do this is to know about the different categories of behavior. Then you can practice using your face, voice, position, gesture, and other dimensions so that they will be effective. This isn’t phony. Rather, the habitual patterns that you’ve developed and that tend to kick in automatically are really what’s phony because those old reaction patterns represent not the you now, but who you used to think you were or were supposed to be. They’re from the past. You are the director and playwright of your own life now, so you have the right to choose

how you'll act in response to the needs of the moment. See website paper:
<http://www.blatner.com/adam/level2/nverb1.htm>

16. Knowing how to empathize can be so helpful when dealing with other people's grief or sense of loss. So often people feel helpless and alienated in such situations. The key is to practice the skill of imagining what it's like to be, in relation to various aspects of the other person's life. See paper on grief work: www.blatner.com/adam/psyntbk/grief.htm
17. Analyze your dreams by imagining that they are little dramas sent by your subconscious mind that reflect your overall life predicament, your deeper attitudes. Allow each part of the dream to come alive, as Disney does even with chairs and walls, and to speak. After all, you chose that color wall with those cracks, rather than some other color or form; speak about what these symbols are trying to say. This is pretty close to poetry interpretation, too—it's just a way of letting your imagination and intuition have a technique for channeling insight.
18. Thinking of life as a drama serves as a way to deepen your sense of personal meaning, to envision your life as a thick tapestry of lessons, struggles, and other dramatic themes. For many, life can easily fragment into a mess of events—there's a bit of art in re-organizing it, making it a somewhat coherent piece of theatre, a good story, with many sub-plots and interweaving themes.
19. Drama is the spice of life, the extra exclamations, the groans, the squeals of delight, the gasps of surprise, that add depth and flavor to an experience. While many situations call for an understated, low key response, there are also a fair number of contexts in which more lively ways of behaving are called for. Cultivate this capacity as a part of your role repertoire.

In summary, when you can recognize that you're playing many roles in your life, you can more consciously play with the way you're playing them, and from this you can explore and discover new ways of being creative. Shakespeare said (through one of his characters) that all the world's a stage and all the men and women in it merely players. But by recognizing the dramatic nature of life, you can liberate yourself from this "merely player" role by becoming the co-director and co-playwright of your own life. You can create your own living.

You can find out more about psychodrama in books and articles by Dr. Blatner and others by browsing his website: www.blatner.com/adam Or emailing him: adam@blatner.com

Appendix:

Dimensions of Role Taking:

- * Every role has its own set of **advantages** and **disadvantages**.
- * In the course of the experience of every role there are imagined / remembered “**events**” which evoke the different "primary" emotions:


