

# Kelly Leonard Yes, And

**Kelly Leonard:** [00:00:00] in improvisation we're doing as much unlearning as we are learning. So we're that, that first improv class is, yeah, don't judge yourself. Don't judge other people. Let's just like to be in this moment, walk this room, look at the other people in the eye, say something silly.

They're gonna say something silly. And then you realize at a certain point you've got synchrony with these people who are strangers three hours ago.

That was Kelly Leonard on psychologists off the clock we are three clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work and health.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in Mile high Denver, Colorado, author of Act Daily Journal, the Act Daily Card Deck, and the upcoming book Act for Burnout.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist, assistant professor at Brown [00:01:00] University, and author of the book Work Parent Thrive.

**Jill Stoddard:** And from Coastal New England. I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, author of Be Mighty, the big book of Act metaphors and the Upcoming Imposter. No more.

**Debbie Sorensen:** We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

**Jill Stoddard:** Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock.

**Jill Stoddard:** I'm here with Debbie to introduce today's episode with Kelly Leonard, and I have to say this is one of my favorite episodes because it was a little different, from the things that we typically do. And I will admit, I was feeling a little bit starstruck because Kelly knows and has worked very closely with a

Very famous and successful and funny celebrities. He talks in the, in the episode about how his wife was roommates with Steven Colbert, . . . And you know, I

think one of the reasons I really liked this episode is I've noticed that the older I get, the more I'm drawn to anything having to do with creativity or [00:02:00] fun or humor.

And I don't know if this is like an age thing or if it's because. Things in the world seem like they're getting progressively more dark, and so there's more of a longing. , but Debbie, what did you think about the episode? .

**Debbie Sorensen:** was so starstruck too, listening to this because, Some people I really admire in the comedy world, and I think comedy is really important and something that I.

Enjoy, you know, myself as a way to find some humor and some of the hard things that we're going through in life lately. And I kept thinking, oh, now I'm like four degrees separated from Amy Poehler and Tina Fey. Cause I know Jill and Jill talked to Kelly Leonard. And Kelly Leonard is friends and colleagues with all of these people.

So I had that response too, of just, it was, it was fun to listen to it from that perspective.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, I, I totally agree. And, and you know, he is just doing the coolest stuff using improv, , alongside [00:03:00] behavioral science and mental health. And you know, I think in our work sometimes we see people use humor almost as an avoidance strategy.

Like, I don't wanna feel my pain, and so I'm gonna make a joke instead. And what I loved about this episode is, is this is really the opposite of that. It's talking about the elements of improv, , and using humor as a way to promote wellbeing and psychological growth. And I, I just found it so interesting.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, I agree with you. It, I think it's really interesting because humor can be, like you said, a distraction or avoidance thing. Sometimes it can be a defense, right? Where people are unwilling to look at something and so they. They deflect with humor and it can be used in a hurtful way, right? Like when humor is mean or snarky.

, but I actually also think that humor can really, you talk about this with Kelly in the episode, it can help us connect, it can help us take a new perspective on things. And I was thinking of this book that I read recently and we, we [00:04:00] featured it on our psychologist off the clock book club. Several

months ago, which by the way, quick plug, if anyone wants to join us, we talk about all kinds of really fun books once a month.

So check that out if you're interested. , but the book I was thinking of is called Humor. Seriously, why Humor is a Secret Weapon in Business and Life. And it, it came out of this class that was taught at Harvard and now these two women that wrote the book go around and talk about how.

Have humor, how to use it, for instance, in the corporate world, how to use it to connect with people. And I love this book because it made me aware, I think of some of the psychological processes involved in humor, which really overlaps with your conversation today. And I was just thinking about how you have to really observe things.

You have to be flexible, you have to be a little. and paying attention, and that humor can be such a powerful tool and one that we can all hone in our lives and prioritize. [00:05:00] And so it's kind of cool to think, I think about that connection between humor and comedy and improv and psychology and how the two go together.

And I think there's a reason that they're doing this in the corporate world more and more. , Kelly Leonard talks about that, and they also talk about it in humor, seriously, that we can use it to tell a more interesting story, to build team camaraderie. And I think sometimes about the gallows humor, when I worked in a hospital setting, that having that humor really helped us get through some hard things and helped us deal with some really difficult situations.

And it helped us. helped us connect and feel like a team bond.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Well, and there's a reason they say laughter is the best medicine. . I mean, is there anything that feels better than laughing? It's the best, right? and I did. I really appreciated that. The element of improv specifically that involves ensembles, you know, it's related to exactly what you were just saying.

Is that connectedness, [00:06:00] that togetherness. And you know, in my episode with Mike Rucker about the fun habit, one of the things we talked about was having fun together. And you know, just that sense of community that I think we all really long for. and, and need, and that was a big element of this episode that I really appreciated.

And, and even, , Kelly talks about how some of the most successful comedians to come out of Second City, where he's worked for decades are those that, , he said they bring their troops with them, you know, the Tina phase and the AMY polls, and that so much of their success is really related to their kind of interdependence rather than, you know, kind of being solo acts essentially.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I just heard an interview with Eugene Levy who has worked with the same people from that Canadian group for decades and how,

**Jill Stoddard:** Christopher Guest, right? The

**Debbie Sorensen:** forget, Catherine O'Hara. Yeah. All those, they started their careers early and they riff off each [00:07:00] other and they have fun together and they've, their careers have.

You know, all been joined together for decades and how, what a meaningful thing that is.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, for sure.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I had the thought when I was listening, I should take an improv class someday, and then I was like terrified. No.

**Jill Stoddard:** The exact same thought. It was like too scary.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Too scary, which made me think maybe someday I should, you know, but I, I, I do think that it's interesting to think about that as like something that would be really a fun thing, but, and would have some real benefits, but also would be so terrifying to someone who has never done any such thing before.

**Jill Stoddard:** Well, we've talked about having a P O T C retreat. Maybe we need to make it an improv retreat. I'm going to Chicago at the end of this month, and I'm gonna go to Second City and take in a show and maybe, hopefully even meet Kelly. , in real life. But one of my favorite, favorite moments from this episode.

If you listen through to the end, you'll hear that Kelly and I actually have this sort of life-changing [00:08:00] shared aha moment that is something that, you know, I will take with me that will help me deal with some of those like scary kind of on stagey type moment. So we hope you enjoy this episode with Kelly Leonard.

Hey everybody, it's Jill here and I am super excited about my guest today. This one is a little bit different and I think you are gonna get such a kick out of it. Today I am talking to Kelly Leonard, who is the Executive Director of Learning and Applied Improvisation at Second City Works, his book Yes, and was published to Critical Acclaim by Harper Collins.

Kelly has spoken at Aspen Ideas Festival, Microsoft Twitter, TEDx Broadway, and has guest lectured at Stanford's Graduate School of Business and the Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago. He hosts the podcast getting to Yes. And for W G N Radio for over 20 years. He oversaw second city's live theatrical [00:09:00] divisions working with such talent as Tina Faye, Stephen Colbert, Amy Poller, Seth Myers, Keegan, Michael Key, and others.

He and his wife Ann Laba, were awarded the Creative Voice Award in 2019 by Arts Alliance Illinois. Kelly, welcome to Psychologists Off the Clock. Thank you for being here.

**Kelly Leonard:** I am so happy to be here.

**Jill Stoddard:** Oh, I'm so glad. Well, I have to say, when I was reading your book, I, I am, uh, in the process of getting blurbs for a book I have coming out, and I was feeling very envious that you have a blurb from Stephen Colbert himself right on the top of your book.

Yes. And

**Kelly Leonard:** Yeah. It, it, it helps when, uh, your wife was Stephen Colbert's roommate in college. That's actually not a bad place to start.

**Jill Stoddard:** Oh my gosh, I did not know that. How

**Kelly Leonard:** yeah, yeah.

**Jill Stoddard:** Wow. And so is, is he funny? Does she say he was funny all the time or just when he's performing?

**Kelly Leonard:** Well, uh, you know, luckily Stephen was actually in my first cast when I became the producer of Second City in 1992. So we, we both know him quite well and yeah, he's, he's [00:10:00] hilarious. He's also very serious. And, um, the, the person you get and you see. Not very different from the person who might be sitting in your backyard having a conversation.

So, and that's, that's the wonderful thing about a lot of the people work at Second City, and I think it's because they're improvisational training that they just sort of learn to tap into their sort of authentic voice. And they don't need artifice. They don't need, they're very vulnerable and they recognize that they're bringing a lot of themselves on, on stage.

And, and that is a unusual quality. And I think it is maybe one of the reasons so many famous people have come outta Second City from 1959 to present day.

**Jill Stoddard:** Oh, I was going to ask you that exact question is, you know, what do you think it is about improv specifically that seems to really promote success for these particular people? And of course I wanna ask you about improv and behavioral science and psychology and all of that. But for the performers that you've worked with, it does really seem like so many successful performers, [00:11:00] especially in comedy, have an improv background.

And that can't be a coincidence.

**Kelly Leonard:** not, uh, and I think it, it, it is, you know, you're honing your own individual comedic voice, which is the sort of professional training aspect of this. My wife just, uh, uh, sent in her her second book, uh, to Northwestern University Press, and it's called Funnier. And the title is based on, uh, she runs the first ever BA and comedy writing and performance at Columbia College.

So she's a tenured professor of comedy every, you know, parent's nightmare. Um, but the reason her book is called Funnier is that parents would come up to her at open houses and say, are you gonna make my daughter or son funny? And she's like, I can't make 'em funny. I can make 'em funnier. I can find that thing that they have and I can get the most out of them.

So that is one thing when it's just, uh, uh, someone who's like on the, on Lark. But it's another thing when it's Amy Poehler or Tina Fey who she both. And then you recognize, oh, they can do so much more. So you have that aspect. But then this improv thing, that's the crucial part, which is [00:12:00] you are taught, uh, that all of us are better than one of us.

Your job on stage is to just make your partner look good and to save them. And if everyone is sort of operating in that environment, incredible things can happen. And I think the, one of the things that you'll notice with a lot of Second City alums is when they become successful, uh, they carry, that carries a bad word.

Uh, they have a lot of other Second City alums with them, whether it's 30 Rock or Parks and Rec or the, you know, col, colbert's, uh, lake show. They, they, they bring their people because their people speak the same language. And, and then other people are invited into that conversation and they learn as well.

Like, oh no, we're, we're actually, you know, these sort of pro-social. Um, uh, aspects of, of even just simple self-regulation, uh, that improvisation brings out in individuals. It's, it's fantastic for great comedy and it's probably even better for being a good human being,

**Jill Stoddard:** right? I mean, just think about the, [00:13:00] the way the quality of our relationships could change, whether it's romantic relationships or friendships or parenting. I mean, I think about all the ways in which I do parenting wrong and if I were able to, you know, incorporate more of these, elements of improv.

This is, this is a challenge I sort of set my, for myself is how can I think, and I'll have to ask Kelly, like how might he be able to bring this to parenting? So maybe we can get to that in a minute. Cuz before we, before we, you know, I don't wanna put the cart before the horse and we haven't even talked to our listeners about improv in general.

I think certainly people know. this word means vaguely, but there are really quite a lot of, of specific elements that, that come into play with improv. So you've done this incredibly cool work bringing improv, you know, where it's not just performers performing, but bringing it into the, to, to the corporate world, the world of behavioral science, mental health.

So I, I wanna talk about some of those projects in detail, but before we do that, let's kind of orient our listeners. And I like one of the things you [00:14:00] say is that, Traditional quantitative skills alone don't guarantee success and our work, and it's really the soft skills that you were just mentioning, you know, listening and adapting to change and trust that, you know, this is really paramount to success, , in many different domains.

And that this is really where improv comes in, that these skills can be learned. So can you walk us through what these elements are and a little bit about like how they can help us regular non-performer folk

**Kelly Leonard:** sure.

**Jill Stoddard:** our listeners, you know, in our own lives.

**Kelly Leonard:** I, I think the, the, if we're talking about the root, so as people maybe understand Second City as, as a comedy institution, they certainly know the famous names that come outta here.

We do, and we've done this since 1959 and we still do it. Our, our main product is our, our resident stage shows, which are two acts of scripted comedy primarily, that is filled by a third act is improvised, and that's where we're making up the, uh, the scenes and developing it. But [00:15:00] everyone is trained thorough.

and improvisation. Um, and that work, um, the, the, the sort of origin story of that work I think is important to understand if you're gonna. Sort of see why it, its impact is so big. So in the twenties and thirties, there was a woman by the name of Viola Spolan and her job, she was working at Jane Adams whole house on the south side of Chicago.

And she was a social worker and her job was to better assimilate immigrant children coming into her care. And she and, and she had studied with a woman named Never Boyd, and they developed all these improv games that the kids would play, many of which were in gibberish or silence. Cause the kids didn't always share language and the games would bring them together to empathize and communicate and collaborate.

And her son, Paul Sills, was studying at the University of Chicago. He loved these games and he taught them to his friends. People like Mike Nichols, Elaine May, Alan Arkin, Barbara Harris, among others. That group forms the first improvisational theater [00:16:00] in America called the Compass Players in 1957. That morphs into the second city in 1959.

So,

**Jill Stoddard:** what started as an icebreaker turned into this kind of phenomenon?

**Kelly Leonard:** And what, what, what was social work looking at children from all these like, and they, and the, these kids were not, I mean, these are immigrant children coming to a new country, probably escaping some really difficult situations. And it's funny. Exactly. Trauma history. Um, uh, and, and one of my, uh, well worn phrases about our work is no one got into comedy cuz they're well adjusted. So, and I

**Jill Stoddard:** the same thing about mental health.



**Kelly Leonard:** Exactly Right, right. Yeah. The, the, the well worn me search, uh, concept.

**Jill Stoddard:** Exactly.

**Kelly Leonard:** So, so, so then you translate the, the, these games and these exercises and, and indeed they, they, they create incredible, uh, ways that people can co-create and collaborate together and create in credible comedy. And then what we recognized over a period of time is, uh, they [00:17:00] also produced these high-functioning ensembles and.

Again, the, the, the, it's not like we have the same casting director from 1959 to now. You know, it's not like even any of the same people. I mean, I'm one of the old guard and I started here in 1988. Um, it, it's just not that through line. Um, but what it is, is the pedagogy. What it is, is the ideas around, around, around the work and, and, and the recognition that there were some very good people who did the work here, uh, who really didn't catch on.

And some of them became famous. I'm not gonna name names, uh, but they weren't real good at improv. They weren't really good at sharing the stage. They didn't collaborate well, and they might have become famous. Uh, but what they didn't do is the thing that you see with Tina Fey, Steve Corll, Amy Po, Seth Meyer, all, all the, those folks is, which is like, oh no, they bring their troop with them.

They, they ensemble behaviors. I just, I don't know if you just saw that, uh,

**Jill Stoddard:** well with others.

**Kelly Leonard:** Play as well with others. Thank you. Uh, [00:18:00] Tina Faye and Amy Puller are going on tour. Uh, they're gonna do at least what's starting as a four City tour. Um, and I'm like, this is great. They're getting the band back together and

**Jill Stoddard:** Oh, that's amazing. I didn't know

**Kelly Leonard:** That just got announced yesterday. So, so I think you know, it, it's not when you know the story, when you know where this started and, and the place has gone, it isn't as surprising to people, and I like that we're a best kept secret. I mean, to, to me, the fact that we're allowed to marinate for a few decades inside the work meant it wasn't co-opted into something else because.

I have a friend, Neil Stevenson, who worked for IDEO for a long time, and we have this sort of mutual theory that once you submit a concept, let's say something like design thinking, and I love design thinking and I think it's important, but it becomes sort of like a fad. And then people move on to something else.

Like improv's improv. Improv. Improv is making it, it's not, there's nothing faddish about it. This is what it was ages ago and it's what it is now and it's gonna be what it is [00:19:00] later. And hopefully we might discover more nuance and other ideas around it. But basically at its core, it's like how do human beings best collaborate together?

And the wonderful thing about then working with the academic community is when you're like, oh, the science lines up with a thing we do. That's cool.

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm. Yeah. So can you talk a little bit about some of the, the main elements and then some of the specific games you, so, of course, probably the one everybody's familiar with, and is the title of your book is Yes. And

**Kelly Leonard:** That's right.

**Jill Stoddard:** explain what that means.

**Kelly Leonard:** So I think the, the, when we first. This exercise. Um, uh, my wife was leading an executive ed program at University of Chicago with Richard Taylor. Um, and for people who don't know Taylor, he wrote the book Nudge, he won the Nobel Prize in economics. Uh, also a very funny human being who, uh, was part of our friend Adam McKay's film, the Big Short, uh, and [00:20:00] Thayer, who was so funny cuz he is like, wait a sec.

Yes. And is a nudge. So the thing that we know from behavioral economics is that people's, uh, default position is to say no or do nothing. And the idea around yes. And is like, If that is our default, we need to practice not making that a fault. So the exercise itself that we teach people is we gather two people together.

Uh, and usually there's a, a number of these folks, but person A, person B. And we're, uh, we're gonna celebrate a reunion in a year of this amazing time we spent together. Person A, you're gonna pitch your ideas for the reunion to person B. Person B, you're gonna respond to every idea, uh, with the, with the idea of no, uh, in as many different ways as possible.

You can say no, you can say other things, but no, you're negating everything. And they do that for about a minute, not terrifically from for person A. If person B's aascu, they might enjoy that. Uh, and we switch places in person B pitches. And, and, and, uh, per person A, their cue is to respond. Yes. . And it's funny, [00:21:00] when we, after we do this for about a minute, we're like, okay, who liked that better?

Usually half the room who liked it worse, the other half of the room. And we say, yeah, because you're hearing a yes, but there's a butt there. And this is just a no with a bow tie, you know, it's a no with a top hat. It's not like you're not really getting a yes. You heard a yes. It wasn't a real yes. And then the third, uh, round, we say everyone has to yes.

And each, each other's ideas and, and we indicate that, don't think about budget. The, the laws of gravity aren't, aren't involved here. And so, yes, like you're seeing Led Zeppelin on the moon while you're eating sushi. That's great. What we understand from a creative point of view, when this stuff is applied at Second City and developing material that we will judge ourselves, we will judge others.

And that gets in the way of creativity. When we lose that and when we're truly creative, all these amazing ideas can come up seemingly bad ideas. But if we let those exist even for five minutes. Really incredible [00:22:00] things happen because let's just say this, what in truly what truly innovative idea didn't seem crazy,

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah,

**Kelly Leonard:** they all did because they're innovative by nature of the big, they haven't been done before.

And this, this bricka lodge that happens when you take one person's idea and another person's initiation, you build on it. You Yes. And is you end up in some really sort of exciting places. I'll even say, say that. Uh, let's take this step further. What we know is even if you're trained in this, you're still gonna block yourself.

Doesn't matter. It's, it's what human beings do. So we have a director, MC Napier, who created a wonderful, uh, part of a, uh, the, the creative process, the second city that he called Taboo Day. And the idea he gives to everyone is, there's six, usually six writer performers who are coming in. He says, your job is

to come in with three ideas each, that there's no way that Second City would ever allow to be put on their stage.

it's either financially it's too offensive, it's like, whatever, doesn't matter, [00:23:00] can't go on. They won't let it. Invariably, those ideas end up in the next show because we do it to

**Jill Stoddard:** it. It's like a paradoxical intervention.

**Kelly Leonard:** Yeah. Well, it's, it's, it's, again, it's the, the practice of divergent thinking. I mean, you, you can intellectually have the idea, this is the me search point, like you can have all the knowledge in the world, but if you don't know how to put it into practice in these unique ways, if you don't know how to upset the own, uh, uh, way of a pattern that looks at you, which is very hard to do, uh, then you're not gonna get to the sort of unique alternative.

So we're, you know, second city performers are, are trained in this, but even, even those sort of professionals need to find their world upset. And, and, and often the audience does that for them because we come to the audience for suggestions and they ain't. They are gonna say the thing they're gonna say, and we're gonna need that.

Uh, because this is a thing. It's very, it's a very pure art form. There are no plants. People always think there are, cause they can't believe that these people are just baking it up. [00:24:00] They're making it up. They're that good

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. It's so cool. It's, it's like brainstorming on steroids, but where you're really taking the editor, the filter, the judger, the self-consciousness, you know, all away, and then seeing what can kind of bubble to the top from that

**Kelly Leonard:** as a group and, and one, and one of the unfortunate things about the science in this area, which is we don't have good research because the idea of studying six people who do this for two years and how adept they are, it's just not a big enough size. So if I, I mean, I got into so many arguments with Nick Epley and some of the other scientists at the University of Chicago, like, brainstorming doesn't work.

I'm like, alright, when you collected your. Uh, 5,000 people who don't know each other for this, you know, five minute exercise. Of course it doesn't work. But when you looked at the championship, Chicago Bulls, or you look at like

these second city ensembles, the there's in incre or, or great bands that have stayed together.

There's incredible things going on there because they've sort of learned a [00:25:00] different kind of language and they have a different, a attitude sort of as they go together. So one of the things we're really trying to pitch and, and, and hopefully we're gonna get there with some of our academic friends, is study us, study the six performers over the course of a year, creating in front of audiences.

We tape every one of these shows and every one of these improv sets cause we wanna refer to it over time and, and see what is that interplay and what's happening, uh, that is unique to these folks that then anyone could take into their own world. Cuz we're just talking about making something out of nothing, which is what most of us have to do in our jobs every day.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right. Well, and so much of what you talk about as being important in addition to the yes and piece is this idea of the ensemble that you're learning to work in, groups that, you know, the idea of co-creation. You know, I think in the book you say, uh, dialogues push stories further than monologues, um, following the follower [00:26:00] listening and as opposed to waiting to speak.

I mean, so many of these things are, they're inter.

**Kelly Leonard:** That's right.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right. Interpersonal dynamics that ha And I love the, the fact that you, you used the word ensemble, and I think you even talk about how you specifically don't say team, because team more suggests competition, like you're playing against someone, whereas an ensemble is really all about cooperation.

Is that, is that right?

**Kelly Leonard:** That's totally right. And I, I had just interviewed, uh, for my podcast, uh, Ben Rama Lingham, who's got a new book called Upshift Turning Pressure into Performance and Crisis Into Creativity. And he's a guy who's done a lot of work with the Red Cross. Um, I think that's, that's where he's going for his next, uh, job.

And one of the studies he points is in the 1990s, uh, Henry Mik studied orchestra conductors, uh, with regard to their ability to bleed. And it was this

sort of counterintuitive idea, especially at the time, maybe less so now of top-down [00:27:00] leadership because they're silent and they're, and they're sort of leading silently, but they're also all about getting out from that group, uh, a certain kind of flow.

And, and yes, it's, it's individuals, but it's individuals together. So, and, and I think, uh, the research around group. It's also important here. So we've all heard the phrase, your, your team is only as good as its weakest member. And Shelda Patinkin, who is one of our, not founder, but pretty, pretty close to that used to say, well, in our work, your ensemble is only as good as its ability to compensate for its weakest member.

Cuz one of us is gonna be the weakest member at a certain time. So if you're having a problem with your computer, please do not call me, call my wife. But if you need a really good bottle of wine, I can order it for you cuz I know how to do that So we each have these sort of skill sets and wouldn't it be wonderful in corporate America if rather than saying, yeah, you don't know how to do a deck, you need to learn how to do a deck.

We say, [00:28:00] you know what? Kelly's really good at coming up with 25 ideas for the deck that then Jenna can put together. You know, so, so it's a matter of assessing sports context for, for people, which is like, you would never, if you're filling out a batting order for baseball, like. Just have power hitters one through, you know, it just doesn't make any sense.

You've got a lead off. Hitters got some speed, you've got someone else and you move them around of course, because there's a recognition in this professional sort of creative environment that all these people bring different kind of skill sets. And we know this across arts, we know this across sports, we know in so many domains.

And yet it's ignored. It's ignored in business. And I think it to some degrees in, in, in academia, not completely, but you know, certainly in business. And that's one of the things that I think it's main reason that a lot of businesses tap us is cuz they're like, how can we be thinking differently? How can we allow our people to be thinking differently?

And, and it does come down to people [00:29:00] and. It comes down to like, well, what, what do they, what have they learned? What do they not learn? What do they need to unlearn? And then what system are they operating in? And does it contain things like psychological safety? And oh, by the way, do you know what psychological safety is beyond the bumper sticker?

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Right.

**Kelly Leonard:** it's not just about, like, feeling good, you know? It's a, it's a safe place for,

**Jill Stoddard:** Failure, right. Vulnerability.

**Kelly Leonard:** and minority voices, uh, to speak up. And if they don't feel safe, there's, it's not

**Jill Stoddard:** it's not safe. Yep. Absolutely. My dad is an entrepreneur and he, he wrote a, a, a book that was like all these kind of little lessons, you know, people would ask him for advice all the time, so he thought maybe I should write this down. And so many of these little things have stuck with me.

And one of them, I mean, it's, it's very common sense, but still, I don't know that we necessarily follow it is know what you're good at and find great people to do the rest. And, and, you know, I think that's really a lot of what you're saying. And, and one of [00:30:00] his strengths was, um, retention. You know, people didn't leave his company very often, and I think that's because even if he may not have described it as this kind of ensemble thinking, I think that's exactly what was being achieved by figuring out, you know, what is everyone's strength and how do we maximize that to have an effective and effective ensemble in, in the office.

**Kelly Leonard:** I think this is where we mistake ideas around play purpose, meaning culture. They all feel very soft. And it's like, you know what culture is happening in your organization, whether you're doing anything about it or not. So do you think you should be doing something about it? And, and like, who is gonna answer?

No? And then you have to answer like, well, what are you doing about it? And, and if you're telling me it's the poster you put up in the break room, then I I am telling you, you're not doing anything.

**Jill Stoddard:** missing the Mark

**Kelly Leonard:** Uh, we had a moment. Uh, and, and, uh, there, there was a moment that I [00:31:00] experienced, uh, a colleague, and we got bought recently.

So Second City got bought, um, and the new owners were coming for a visit and my colleague and I were taking them on a tour and my colleague saw a piece of garbage on the floor and picked it up and threw, threw it out. And later we, we talked to 'em about so many different things and we're talking about all the different things.

And, and I remember later being told that that was the moment that they said, oh, the culture seems okay here.

**Jill Stoddard:** Wow.

**Kelly Leonard:** And I'm like, oh. And you know that, that story that gets told in, in so many business books when Kennedy was walking through doing a tour of NASA and he saw a maintenance worker sweeping and said, what do you do?

And said, well, I help put people on the.

**Jill Stoddard:** Love it.

**Kelly Leonard:** It's the best. It's like, yeah, no, I mean, and, and I, look, I started here, I started here as a dishwasher and, and I was never, um, I never felt less than, um, people like Harold Ramis who would come [00:32:00] and visit, would talk to me and not just talk to me. Like, hang with me and and, and then, and then the actors on stage.

Yes. And, and a colleague and a partner. And it's like, and everyone sort of felt like that. And it was like, oh, that seems important. Let, let's not lose that. And, and hopefully that's the thing. I know I fight for here all, all, all the time. And I think we still have it because you just want everyone to sort of feel like, if you feel like you understand the idea behind the idea and the why and the purpose, this, this idea of the magic that's involved with making everyone laugh at the same time, who doesn't want to be a part of that?

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah.

**Kelly Leonard:** That's the coolest thing ever.

**Jill Stoddard:** I wanna talk a little bit about the, the research piece of things in, in behavioral science and mental health. So when, when I was doing research for our interview, I was actually surprised that there were a fair amount of peer reviewed journal articles looking at the impact of improv in mental health.



And so some of the things I found, it's been used to effectively treat anxiety, depression, social anxiety, [00:33:00] specifically intolerance of uncertainty, caregiver burden and depression. And it's also been shown to promote divergent thinking, effective wellbeing, speaking confidence and self-esteem.

And I think that was just the first page of the return in my search. So you developed a program with your wife, Ann Libra, in partnership with Caring across Generations.

So this was to investigate the impact of improv on caregiver burden and depression. So tell us a little bit about that. I found this to be fascinating.

**Kelly Leonard:** Yeah. The origin story is funny. Uh, uh, second City caught on fire, and this was soon after I sort of step stepped down as a producer and didn't know what I was gonna do next. Um, and we were in these terrible temporary offices, uh, . It was Regis, uh, and the, I got in trouble. Well, we got in trouble, but it was particularly me for laughing too much.

And this was the receptionist be, I think they were anti joy. I'm not, I'm not sure, but it didn't seem like a winning philosophy to

**Jill Stoddard:** [00:34:00] happened to me in grad school too. I got in trouble for laughing too loud, and then the next week I got in trouble for not smiling enough. So, you know, you're in a pretty toxic environment when this is the kind of feedback that you're getting. You knew you had to get outta there when you were told you were laughing.

Too much

**Kelly Leonard:** Uh, happy, happy to get talk about the gender dynamics cuz I understand all that. Uh, but yeah, so I, I'm in this terrible office and I get a call from Adam Grant, so p folks know Adam at, at at Wharton. He, he's interviewed me for a number of books that I'm not in. So I don't know if my story if my particular stories aren't interesting enough.

But, you know, we have good conversations that, you know, whatever, I'm not, not in Grant book. Uh, but he had a friend moving to Chicago, her name was iGen Poo, who ran this group called Carrying Cross Generations. And he asked if I'd have lunch with her and like, of course. Yes. Uh, and we had just started this collaboration at the University of Chicago, uh, called the Second Science Project that looked at behavioral science through the lens of improvisation.

And my wife Ann led a weekly. Lab actually it was, you know, a couple times a [00:35:00] week and it would be improvisers and social scientists. And sometimes they bring in phenomenon. Sometimes we would, sometimes we're creating executive education programs. We actually ended up creating, uh, orientation programs that are still being used for undergrad grad.

And the law school actually uses 'em still. That, that basically are like, how do we embody the practice? Uh, that is going to also tie to the research, you know, whether it's individuation, um, self-regulation and, and any of these phenomenon. We did a lot. And, um, I had been up to the university observing one of the workshops when I went to meet iGen.

I, I failed in that. I didn't do a ton of research on her. Kind of glad I didn't, cuz she's so impressive as a, as a human and her credits. Uh, but

**Jill Stoddard:** a little intimidated.

**Kelly Leonard:** I would've been intimidated, uh, though, though that's not the way she rolls. Uh, and I sat, I, I said, I sat down. Do you wanna hear about my day? Because maybe this is a starting point and I just told her about the work we're doing and she's like, Kelly, this is [00:36:00] like what we need in the caregiving space where, where there is no training for these people in these human to human situations.

And in particular what you're talking about is a lot of like listening work. Um, and a lot of empathetic communication work. And, uh, I introduced her to an, we like hit it off immediately and her team was so great. And then, uh, when we, we debuted the idea at Aspen Ideas Festival, so Anne, myself and iGen, we were talking to David Leonard from the New York Times and we did a sort of a mini workshop and that's when our friend Ruth Alman from the Cleveland Clinic found us and.

How fun the first phase of this. So we ended up creating an improvisation for caregivers program that's still running. Um, and, and the research around it has shown, as you sort of all alluded to earlier, this, this reduction in burden, uh, this, this idea that people feel more agency in these situations because, you know, look, we can't, [00:37:00] we don't control the situations we're in.

Uh, the only thing we have control about, uh, of is our emotional response to them. Uh, and that, and that's easy to say, of course, but when you can practice the idea of like, all right, let me not go to shame. Let me not go to fear. Uh, let me, let me, let me just stay in the, in, in this moment and let me try, uh, in, in

this moment to, to just sort of exist and, and take what's come to me and sort of yes.

And it, and, and we, we have a phrase in our work, uh, you need to play the scene you're in, not the scene you wanna be in.

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm. I love that.

**Kelly Leonard:** And I think for, you know, the work in this program was so powerful. And then, you know, of course Anne and I, you know, dealt with this when our daughter got diagnosed with cancer and we are in these hospital settings and we're like, oh, I guess we gotta do our stuff.

Um, because we were terrified. Um, and we were not just frightened, right? I mean, what, [00:38:00] you know, it's, it's, it's everything and, and our ability to draw on that work. And, and one of the things that we, we, we drew a lot on, on the work we were doing at University of Chicago, in particular Nick Epley's work around, um, uh, individuation and, and, and, and the idea that human beings tend not, tend to not want to actually reveal a lot of detail about themselves.

Um, uh, and he, he has studies actually. Where they sent people, basically strangers on a bus. They sent them out there to start conversations with strangers. They measured how effective they thought those conversations would be and everyone thought they'd be terrible. And they worked and they were in fact, very positive.

And so we, we took that work at the university and turned it into exercises. And then, so, so when we are in Norris hospital room, and you know, you got so many different caregivers, like new nurses, surgeons, whatever, they're coming in, almost every single one of them, we, they'd walk in the room and I'd say, I'm Kelly, this is Anne, this is Eleanor.

She also goes by Nora. [00:39:00] We've both worked at Second City for 30 years and we have a hundred pound Bern Mount dog, mountain dog named Benchley, who's an asshole. Who are you? And then they would tell us because to not respond in some level of detail. And, and so suddenly it wasn't like I'm seeing the kid with. , I'm seeing Nora. And Nora has parents, and those parents have a place that they work and like, and it all sort of comes together and, and it's like, and, and our exercise when we do this is not that, it's how people grocery shop just

Describe how you grocery shop and guess what? It's gonna be filled with rich, weird detail that is gonna tell me so much about you. Uh, that, that I wouldn't have understood if it was just a, like, this is how human beings grocery show up. You know? So, so that

**Jill Stoddard:** tell me in, in a little detail. So you, so when in the article it was six two hour weekly sessions and each week was focused on a different theme. So can you give [00:40:00] an example or two of like some of the specific exercises and then like, ha, because you would do the exercises with the participants and then do like a, a debriefing afterwards so they would understand how what they were just doing is meant to like, uh, generalize to their role as a caregiver.

So can you talk a little bit about that, like one of the exercises and how that applies to like the different theme related to caregiving?

**Kelly Leonard:** So I'll give you, I'll give you one that's sort of an introductory exercise that we've used a lot, and it's called, I Am somebody who, so you gather this group in a circle, and, and the, the idea here that you're drawing on, which is we make a lot of assumptions about other people very quickly.

Um, and those might be wrong. Uh, in fact most of them are wrong. Uh, so I am somebody who is where you have the leader sort of say to the group, okay, I'm gonna announce attributes. Um, and when I announce an attribute that you recognize as something that is true for you, move to another part of the circle.

And it starts [00:41:00] with, I am somebody who identifies as a man. I am somebody who identifies this woman. I'm someone who identifies as non-binary. I am somebody who identifies as religious. I am somebody who owns. I am somebody who, and, and, and goes on and on, and suddenly, like the vegan owns a gun, And, and this becomes, this, this, um, uh, and I'll relate it to, to an another thing that my friend Heidi Brooks, uh, who's a teacher at Yale, she told me about this exercise that she started using with new cohorts.

So when she would have a new class come in, she would hand out a blank piece of paper and a pen. She goes, don't sign your name. Just write down some pain that exists in your life. And then she would gather all those and read them out one by one. That changes the room, that makes that group an ensemble.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah.

**Kelly Leonard:** these, these sort of kinds of nudges. So we do it in a certain kind of way of these attributes. Other people do it in these other ways, but it's all about how do I get [00:42:00] this, this group of people to understand that we can all be here for each other. That we all sort of contain multitudes, uh, that we might be capable of surprising each other.

Cuz I think the thing that we learned in, in the caregiving space was the burden is real and the burden is felt. The, the, the sense of being alone and the burden is so powerful. Um, but we are not alone.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right. It's kind of creating that sense of common humanity, that, that's part of the, like in our field, in the work of, um, compassion, self-compassion and, and compassion focused therapy, this idea that, you know, we, the word compassion means to suffer with, and that to be human is to no pain. And that, that is something that we all, that we all share and how healing it can be to recognize that.

**Kelly Leonard:** Yeah. And I think the, one of the really powerful things that came out, uh, and, and there's a paper coming out next year on this. It's taken a while. Cause we, we, we, we we're doing more, more studying [00:43:00] on it, but when we did the yes and exercise, the scientists were like, that's great. Um, we, there's actually research that can support, as we mentioned in behavioral economics and, and research, researcher on gratitude.

Uh, but then they said, but what happens when you can't? Yes. And the person, when you fundamentally disagree with the position, but you kind of need to stay in the conversation. That happens all the time. And we didn't know. And they didn't know. But what we came up with over the course of a few months is this idea of, thank you because, and so the idea is if we need to stay in this conversation with someone we don't agree with, we thank them for their information, which does set off the gratitude part of the brain.

And then we find anything no matter how small the, because, uh, of something we agree with. And the example I, I, I use is a real one. When our daughter got sick, she had friends who, uh, a friend, a particular friend whose parents were anti-vax well before it became fashionable. Uh, and we wanted the kids to stay in conversation and, and we didn't want to be at [00:44:00] odds.

And so I used thank you because I said, thank you, because you care so much for your girl. You don't want her hurt by these vaccinations. I care so much for my girl. I don't want her hurt by someone who's unvaccinated. The thing we care about is our girls.

**Jill Stoddard:** our daughters. Yeah. Oh, that's really amazing.

**Kelly Leonard:** and it worked. They, they were able to sort of communicate and facts, or not facts, but text and, and, and FaceTime and, and those sorts of things.

So, and I think for, for our audiences today that we're speaking to, this is such a poignant message because we live in a time. There's the, the words are all about canceling, um, and the words are about blocking. Um, and we're very tribal. Uh, and what, what does it mean to sort of take a beat? To provide a thank you because, and what I've discovered in, when I've done this is people that I normally disagree with, let's say politically, cuz

**Jill Stoddard:** sorry.

**Kelly Leonard:** about is the political [00:45:00] disagreement.

Um, that I end up agreeing with these humans on a lot more other issues. Uh, and, and that, and there's space and there's, there's space for, for dialogues. To, to your earlier point, if we're trying to get away from monologues, we all move to dialogues. We have to be in conversation and, and

guess

**Jill Stoddard:** And I think we, we have more w we're more alike than we are different, but we get so focused on the difference that it seems like it's everything but these kinds of Thank you because, or Yes. And conversations really open up kind of a larger repertoire for understanding

**Kelly Leonard:** Well, this is Dan Gilbert's work, right? And, and one of the things, I think he says this in stumbling upon happiness, which is if a, if an alien came down to earth and interviewed one person, they'd understand 90% of humanity. That's how much we share.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Yeah. So you also teamed up with researchers at University of Chicago, one of whom was Ayel at Fishbach, who I interviewed on the podcast for her book, get It Done. She was lovely. It was such a nice [00:46:00] conversation. And so that was another one where you were investigating the efficacy of some of these practices.

And I wanna quote you, there was a quote in an article I read that I just loved. You said, what I think we're building is an ever deepening and robust practice

where the arts can speak to the science and the science can speak to the arts. And I, ugh, I loved that so much. So can you describe some of the exercises you did when you were doing the research at at University of Chicago and what some of those findings were?

**Kelly Leonard:** Well, the big one for this study, and as you, as you know, and I learned, uh, as I started to work in, in academia, especially at a place like University of Chicago, which is they need the phenomenon to be hugely specific. We are gonna study this one thing and it's like, oh no, we have so many things. But in this particular case, we worked with all the new improv students who were coming into Second City.

So hundreds of people who are just starting their, uh, their work here and, and people who are doing that, especially in the beginning classes. It's not just folks who wanna be on center live. This is like everyone . [00:47:00] It's just people who wanna, they're might wanna re-skill. They just went through a breakup.

Who knows? They're all here for different reasons. And half the group were given just the regular instructions to this improv exercise, but the other half were given a prompt and they were told that this is going to be uncomfortable. That's. Ba basically as simple, simple as that. And what we discovered is that the people who were simply given that prompt, they had more success with the exercise, they stayed in it longer.

They were objectively doing kind of more interesting work as cuz we taped everything. Um, and, and, and then they, the iLet and her partners, uh, her co-authors brought this to, to other places. But, but this, this sort of profound simple idea of, oh, can we just tell someone that this thing is gonna be uncomfortable and that will help them succeed?

It's, it, it's revolutionary in how small it is, but also [00:48:00] if you look back at your life and, and the way you entered the workforce, or no one told me something was gonna be uncomfortable and to stick.

**Jill Stoddard:** No. Yeah, no, absolutely. Yeah. It's so powerful. And we, uh, my co-host and I do a therapy called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and a and a, and, and actually I have a couple colleagues who have brought ACT and improv together. So I actually did a, a workshop at one of our conferences that was all about ACT and improv.

That was awesome. And so they take the core elements of acceptance, commitment therapy, and kind of layer it together with improv. And I, you

know, I think what you're talking about here and, and what I I it's findings. At least partly represent is the idea of willingness or acceptance or, you know, the way I put it to, to clients is it's just getting comfortable, being uncomfortable.

It's like, if I'm willing to make space for discomfort, because most of the stuff you do that matters is gonna come with some level of discomfort. If you're willing to make space and have that, and your only response is not just to dive [00:49:00] for the comfort zone to avoid pain, then it really expands your, your options for, for what you can do if you're willing to do, you know, it's basically doing something that's hard as opposed to just this like path of least resistance.

**Kelly Leonard:** There's a great quote that my friend Scott Barry Kaufman introduced me to from Irvin Yolo, who's as I learned is the best. Uh, but he said, sooner or later you have to give up the hope for a better past.

**Jill Stoddard:** Hmm. Yeah.

**Kelly Leonard:** And that hit me like a ton of bricks. And it's this, again, when we're talking about what it means to be present, um, it, it's giving up, giving up that, and I know my own experiences in therapy, which have been hugely important, uh, were a lot about, oh, like I'm so trained in this work, but it doesn't matter that I'm trained in this work.

I am still, you know, trying to change a thing that happened ages ago and I. And it doesn't, [00:50:00] and it doesn't mean you don't, it, it's not living in a, um, uh, a non-reality. The reality is, of course, still there. But if I can tap into my, my, uh, pure present, um, and, and again, be fiercely present in the moment with the person who's crossed from me, um, I am going to be in a place where, oh, I can do work from here.

Uh, and I can, and I can potentially do like, nicely successful, successful work from here. Um, that is, and this is here. Here's the thing that's fascinating. I, I, you know, I, I hire talent at Second City for over two decades, and as part of that, we, in the audition process, we would see thousands of people, uh, day one.

So auditions take over a week or so, but the first day is like, Hey, just groups of 12 come in and, and we're whittling down, whittling down in this sort of thing. , it was, i with almost a hundred percent accuracy. I could tell who was not [00:51:00] going to survive the audition by the way they walked on stage.

**Jill Stoddard:** Wow.



**Kelly Leonard:** It, it, it's just, you know, they, they were in their heads.

They, they were sweating. They were, you would just tell and then, and then these other folks who would just sort of walk up sort of effortlessly or looking around or sort of being in the room and, and, and, you know, that becomes less interesting the farther you go with that, the, the, the distinction between who's gonna be great or who who's not.

But just in the, in the very beginning, um, tho those tells were so, so very, uh, apparent. Um, and I think that that is widely true for, for all as human beings when we're navigating things that are unusual or complex or, or difficult to comprehend

**Jill Stoddard:** important to us,

like the, every those thousand people that were gonna get on that stage wanted that so badly.

Right. And the more you want it, the more. You're gonna feel imposter syndrome and self-doubt and fear and all those [00:52:00] things. And like you were saying, like you know, it's like you can't control that.

That stuff shows up. You can only control how you respond to it. And you know what my hypothesis would be if I were to try to differentiate the

successful from the non-successful is, you know, our main goal in ACT acceptance commitment therapy is building psychological flexibility. And

what that means is our ability to be in the present moment.

Fully and without defense. O you know, aware of all our thoughts and feelings open to them, observing them, but not letting them drive our choices. What drives our choices is our values, who and how we want to be in the world. And I would bet that even though the people that you could spot up, you know, coming up on stage, they may have looked like they were more confident, I would bet my life savings that they still had self-doubt and imposter feelings and

negative thoughts and fear, right?

They all have the same experience. It's the ones that were able to like allow the space to just let it [00:53:00] be and still move forward with their behaviors

rather than getting like hooked by their thinking or trying to avoid or resist their feelings. That that's probably a big piece of the difference and, and both what makes people more successful when they're doing improv, but also I wonder if it's also what improv promotes.

**Kelly Leonard:** it. No, you're daily, so, so you do public speaking, right?

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Mm-hmm.

**Kelly Leonard:** As do I, I get nervous before I speak publicly. Of course you do. Like you do you

**Jill Stoddard:** because you

care about being competent and not

looking like an asshole.

**Kelly Leonard:** exactly. Uh, and I remember, uh, my buddy Allison Wood Brooks at Harvard, he was like, all right, Kelly, I got a technique for you cuz she's like, this is just very funny to me that you get nervous, but, and I'm like, I do.

And, and she goes, all right, so before you go on stage next time, say out loud, I'm excited. Rather than I'm nervous about doing this. And of course there's research behind this, uh, and I started doing it and I remember my wife Ann and I were hired to [00:54:00] talk to Twitter. This is back when Jack Dorsey ran it.

Uh, and it was all of Twitter and it was in San Francisco, same stage that Steve Jobs would always, you know, do the announcement on like the next iPod. So there's a giant screen behind us with us, bigger than ever, and it's the biggest crowd we've ever been. And I'm just like shouting at my wife, going, I'm excited to be here.

Are you excited?

**Jill Stoddard:** So

**Kelly Leonard:** I've never been so much exci. Exactly. You're the most desperate level of ex excitement. And we, and we, it went great and we got

through it. Uh, were we depleted afterwards? Absolutely. We went to go get Thai food and we're like, oh my God, what just happened? But, but, and because it's true. It's true for all of us.

And, and this thing is like I imposter syndrome. I don't know anyone who doesn't. My friend, uh, Linea Line Gandhi, uh, we had this long talk on the podcast about her imposter syndrome, and I'm [00:55:00] like, aren't you working with Danny Kahneman on his next book? She's like, yes. And I'm like, Lya, you're working with, like, this is, everyone else would

**Jill Stoddard:** he's a Nobel Prize winner.

**Kelly Leonard:** Nobel Prize?

It's Danny Kovan. I mean,

like, what is, and I'm like, okay, so I'm not gonna feel it. And then, and then the, the thing is now that I think back and listen, like, oh, of course. Like I, I, these are my friends. It's like, you don't think Tina Fey gets nervous before stuff? Or, or that

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, she, she's actually talked publicly about having imposter syndrome.

**Kelly Leonard:** Exactly. So, so it is just, and when you understand that it's, it's universal.

And then to your point, can you intellectually then bring in the sort of the body practice? Because this is the other thing that I don't think I realized that was so important about improvisational exercises is it's embodied learning. So it, it is not just the mind telling you something, it's as much the body telling your mind a thing.

And the work that I've, I did E M D R [00:56:00] in therapy, which was very powerful and, and led to a lot of discovery cuz I just, again, cuz like my brain is going on my, I am, I am creating a story for this thing and I am like that, that is what I'm doing and I needed to let, let that go. And why is my body doing a thing that I don't want it to. and, and, and as going through this, it's like, oh, I learned so much again by that letting go. And that's, that's difficult, uh, for us, especially I think in a western context. Less so in an eastern context, less so in an indigenous context, but certainly in the, in the western context, we, it's so, it's so brain, brain, brain.

**Jill Stoddard:** This tendency to overestimate danger and underestimate our ability to cope with it. Like that's the thing the brain is doing and all that, you know, we're so amazing is humans.

We have language, but that means we also have assumptions and predictions and judgements and all these things that can really get us in trouble.

**Kelly Leonard:** Yeah. And, and, and, and it's not [00:57:00] easy. Um,

**Jill Stoddard:** it is not easy.

**Kelly Leonard:** you know, we, um, we lost our daughter, uh, Nora to cancer, uh, three years ago. And, you know, you, you can have all the thoughts, you can have all the exercises, uh, that you, that, that are in your, your arsenal. And, and yet there's this incredible trauma and this incredible grief.

And one of the things, or maybe it's the thing that for Anne and I sort of ha has gotten us through, is recognizing that we can't be in isolation. So we were very public about this. I kept a caring bridge, uh, and, and in it every single day that she was sick. And for a year after she was gone. And because we work, we're very public people, we have lots of friends in the business who were very involved in this, who are noteworthy folks.

Uh, it meant that we didn't have to sort of suffer in silence. And I think the, the research that I've seen around connection [00:58:00] around what ultimately brings happiness around, uh, post-traumatic growth, um, I I, is not isolating yourself off and allowing yourself, hey, to ask for help, um, to, to allow people to sort of sit with you and sit with your, with yourself inside these things.

Um, and we don't have it figured out. No one has this figured out and these things, tragic things happen to people every day here. Here's the thing I didn't realize until I talked about my trauma very openly, is other people coming up and sharing the stuff they're going through that they don't talk about.

And I think we do that. at our detriment in every, let's just talk about productivity. At a business like you, do you want a bunch of people who are wounded, not talking about, do you think that makes your business better? I don't think so. So, so, and, and I think, you know, the, the, what we've gone through the last couple years with, with Covid and everything else, and the idea of mental health being something [00:59:00] that we have to talk about, it's like this, this isn't just a nice to have anymore.

Like you're gonna have to address this no matter what.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right.

**Kelly Leonard:** It's changed.

**Jill Stoddard:** It's changed. It's completely changed, and I, I think you're so right on about all of this and that it's no coincidence that, you know, COVID led to this mental health tanking. And it also happened to be a time where we were very, very isolated. And, you know, there's been a lot of attention on this, the, the world's longest longitudinal study that came out of Harvard, right?

That they've looked at every variable there is. And time and time again, the thing that predicts physical and mental health and wellbeing is relationships. And, you know, uh, Kelly McGonagal, who's another guest we've had, she talks about, uh, she has a very popular Ted talk about the upside of stress. And one of the things that we, we always hear about the cortisol and how bad stress is for you.

But what doesn't get talked about is that in addition to cortisol stress also releases oxytocin, which is our body's [01:00:00] tendon befriend hormone that's saying, Hey, you're stressed. You need to reach out to other people. This is what's gonna help mitigate that stress response. So I just, I think there is so much wisdom in that, and doesn't that circle right back around to this idea of improv and ensemble. And maybe a key ingredient here really is the benefits you get from being in community that it's terrifying to be in community because you're about to go be vulnerable and put yourself out on stage.

And everybody might laugh at you. Well, you want them to laugh at you, you know, ,

**Kelly Leonard:** We're left. Left with you

**Jill Stoddard:** laugh with you, right? But maybe they'll think what you say or do is stupid and not funny and they'll judge you and reject you. And it's terrifying. And it's terrifying because community and connection matters so much.

But when you have this yes and mentality, like nothing you do is wrong.

So it it becomes psychologically safe.

**Kelly Leonard:** is and, and because the other thing that we have recognized over decades and decades is the audience wants you to succeed. [01:01:00]

That is why they're there. So when I gave my talk, In DC on Thursday night, and I got jitters and I got up and I'm like, oh, every one of these people want me to do well.

And that was a very powerful orienting thing for me to then start to tell my stories and, and start to talk to them and, and allow myself to be sort of vulnerable. Vulnerable in that moment. Um, and and the other thing that we, , there's a very funny, uh, thing that we've been kicking around. So Second City gets hired for storytelling a lot.

And we joke about this because we're like, what do they mean? Because every time someone says, it's like, do you mean sales? Do you mean presence? Do you mean what, what do you mean? And we get, we get there and it's fine. And we we're able, cuz cuz we are very good at this. We've been in the theater, we

**Jill Stoddard:** You can improvise

**Kelly Leonard:** we can. So my, my, uh, my tenured, uh, professor, wife, uh, because she's now tenured, is on all these committees, and one of them is to, uh, [01:02:00] select the head of the film television department where she is, and she's been talking about every candidate at the end of their spiel says, at the end of the day, we're all storytellers.

And Anne's like, if they say that one more time, I am going to And, and I understand that because like, okay, well what, what do you mean? But what, when we talk about it, one of the things we talk a lot about with storytelling, uh, that we've discovered over time is start with you. What, what is your, where do you come from?

You know, where, where maybe it's your parents, maybe it's your kid. Uh, like, and these are the stories that I always start my, my keynotes with. And then I start interviewing other people. I'm like, oh, they tell that story and that's why they open with this. And I'm recognizing it's like, audiences don't want.

Your success story. Audiences want your fiasco. Audiences want your struggle. So what did you go through? Uh, and I will follow you, you [01:03:00] through that. If I'm just reading my resume, that is boring. Um, and so, so one aspect of, of storytelling is, and, and not, for, not everyone is gonna be in a place where

they can talk about the kind of traumas that I'm able to talk about for whatever reason.

I, I think it's just true and everyone shouldn't. But there are things about you that are true. There are things about you that maybe you have overlooked that are lovely little details about how you grew up, uh, where you come from. And when you share those, you're creating connection and creating relationship.

Um, and to, to your point, the studies are just so clear on this, that that is the thing that will make us happier, healthier. Wealthier and the wealth doesn't even really matter. Cause it's the end of the day. That's not the thing that makes us happy. It's, it's these, these sort of connections and, and, and the, and the quality of those connections, you know?

Um, so I think, [01:04:00] um, like all things, it's deceptively simple and in improvisation we're doing as much unlearning as we are learning. So we're that, that first improv class is, yeah, don't judge yourself. Don't judge other people. Let's just like to be in this moment, walk this room, look at the other people in the eye, say something silly.

They're gonna say something silly. And then you realize at a certain point you've got synchrony with these people who are strangers three hours ago.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, absolutely. Share the truth

about what you know, not just your highlight reel, the truth, because as humans, as we were saying before, we all struggle. We all suffer, and it's so much more relatable, and that's where that authenticity piece comes

in that we also were talking about earlier.

And this idea, this idea that audiences want you to succeed, this is huge because our assumption is that they're just waiting for us to fail.

Right.

The thing that makes people so nervous is everyone sitting out there is just waiting to insult and [01:05:00] reject and, and judge, right.

Everyone's gonna judge me, but you're so right. Like actually audiences want you to succeed and what a cognitive shift that could be.

**Kelly Leonard:** at what point did you go a movie, go to a movie and going, I hope the acting's terrible.

**Jill Stoddard:** right. No, you're right.

It's like pretty profound. But that's that like negativity bias, like

we do that to protect ourselves.

If I prepare for the likelihood that everyone's gonna judge me, then I guarantee I don't fail. But that's not actually how it works.

**Kelly Leonard:** Right. Armor, armor, armor, armor. It's just, Yeah.

Yeah,

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, exactly. So I came up with this.

Exercise after reading your book and your articles and preparing, and I've used it with several clients in therapy this week. And what I tried to do was sort of apply this idea of yes and to negative thoughts. And so what I mean by that, so people have all of these negative thoughts that can get in their way if they listen to them, if they treat them like reality or truth with capital T.

And you know, the, the original kind of [01:06:00] cognitive behavioral therapy was to weigh the evidence and try to come up with a better, more realistic thought. So if I have the thought, I'm a failure, I'm gonna weigh all the evidence that shows what a great success I am. And, but it just doesn't tend to work very well because what happens is our minds naturally go.

Yeah.

But yeah,

but, and we were talking in the beginning about how ineffective,

right. That

this can be. And it occurred to me that part of the issue here is none of my clients are having the thought I'm a serial killer. Like their thoughts are not so detached from reality. They're actually things that are grounded in some reality.



They exist for a reason. So I'll give you a personal example. My thoughts tend to be in this space of kind of like, I'm average, I'm mediocre, I'm not special. Like they're not, I'm a total worthless piece of crap, but they're in this kind of like blah place. And so I could list all my accomplishments to try to talk myself out of that.

My mind would just yell at me and I thought, you know, I think I can kind of, yes. And this,

and [01:07:00] it's like this. It's well, Yeah, I mean there is some truth to that, right? Because I'm not Michelle Obama or Oprah or Gandhi or any number of incredible

people out there. And I went to a state school and my parents went to state schools and got mediocre grades and Right. I think I have a fairly average iq. So like, yes, I'm average under that normal curve. And I mean, the fact that I'm kind of average and have still been able to like have this cool podcast and

talk to cool people like Kelly Leonard and write three books, like, so it, it's almost just adding to the story. So it's not trying to argue against the story.

It's not going down some, you know, spiraling into a a down the rabbit hole, but it's kind of this like, yeah, there are some kernels of truth to this and there's a little bit more to the story. And I tried that with several of my [01:08:00] clients and everyone was like, Huh.

Wow, that's really helpful. So it's

brand new.

So I'm curious what your thoughts are. Does

that feel like it's getting at the spirit of the Yes, and

**Kelly Leonard:** I love it. I, I love it in the, in the sense that, , do you know, uh, , Goffman's work from around 1959 where he talks about, uh, we are many selves. We have a, um, onstage self, an offstage self, and a backstage self.

**Jill Stoddard:** I don't know that, but I love

**Kelly Leonard:** So, yeah, I love it too. Uh, for obvious reasons in terms of the performance, sort of, uh, language.

But, but what I also love about it is this idea of we are constantly switching between those cells, and it doesn't mean that any of those are not authentic. I think the idea that the, the unfortunate cultural ideas and authentic self is not changing an authentic self has gotta be all pretty and good.

And we're like, well, that, that ain't true. If we , if we wanna go catalog everything we've done. Oh no, you don't wanna [01:09:00] look at all those, those thi I mean, thank God I didn't have to grow up with social media and the way that my children have had to grow up with. Um, so I think this, this idea of no, their, their ordinariness exists.

Uh, and, and I too, I didn't get into Northwestern, my wife did. I had to go to Lake Forest College. But like I did really well at Lake Forest College, , and I really loved it, and it helped set me on a path. So, so there's all those things that led me to where I, I am today. And guess what, you know what I'm doing today.

I'm sitting here talking to another human being. I'm not in the fetal position. Or if someone's in your office, you know what they're doing. They're trying to take care of themselves.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah.

**Kelly Leonard:** Uh, are you kidding me?

**Jill Stoddard:** Yes. I'm struggling and here I

**Kelly Leonard:** here I

am trying to do that. Yeah. And that's, that's that, that's that moment of the, the breakthroughs I've had in therapy, you know, uh, fireworks didn't go off

**Jill Stoddard:** Hmm.[01:10:00]

**Kelly Leonard:** It was more of like, oh, okay, you just pointed out something just like really, that that, okay, that's meaningful to me and it gives me something to sort of play with as I, as I leave here, and I know I'm gonna come back next week.

**Jill Stoddard:** And I was even thinking that like, you know, co-creation is part of therapy. It's a

little bit of an ensemble, even though it's only generally two people, unless it's a group. Listening is obviously a huge part of therapy failure. You know, these are all the different things you talked about in, in your book that, that are important to improv.

I mean, I see so many elements of it

in the therapeutic context

as well. I mean, you can kind of apply it anywhere

**Kelly Leonard:** true, uh, if you go back maybe four or five episodes of the Getting the s m PA podcast, I talked to Michael Sie who wrote a book called Therapeutic Improvisation, and he comes from a, uh, improvisational music background. He understands theater includes that as well. Uh, but it was exactly in terms of establishing flow, uh, co-creating the stories that you, you as a therapist, you, [01:11:00] you aren't a blank.

The idea that you, you could be, is not realistic. So what is it that you're, you're bringing? And then how do you listen in those moments? And this is the thing that we, what I've seen with great improvisers, and we've talked about people like Tina and Amy and Steven and Steve, all great improvisers, Keegan, Michael Key.

Another one is that they're listening is so sharp on stage. They're not just hearing the words being said to them. They're hearing the words that aren't being said to them, and they're able to provide that. And then the audience sort of recognizes together of like, I'll give you the best example. And there's a phrase in our work calling, making mistakes work for you.

Uh, two people will be improvising a scene and, uh, I'll identify my partner as Barbara and someone else, or she will refer to herself as Jill. Uh, and then suddenly everyone, like I know there was a mistake made and the audience knows their mistake made. And so what do I do? I could get a cheap laugh by making fun of the fact that they misidentify themselves, or I can talk about their secret [01:12:00] identity that just came.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right,

**Kelly Leonard:** The audience loves it. They like, cuz I've, they've witnessed me, saved this human who didn't know they needed saving.

**Jill Stoddard:** Because they're rooting for  
you,

**Kelly Leonard:** we're back to

**Jill Stoddard:** They want everyone to succeed.

**Kelly Leonard:** we not know this, that people  
actually want us  
to do  
well,

**Jill Stoddard:** know this?

**Kelly Leonard:** Ugh.

**Jill Stoddard:** All right. Well, Kelly, we this I could talk to you all day long.  
This is so fascinating. I have two other quick

questions. One, I'm asking for my friend Brett, who is a mental health provider  
and a performer and especially, and he does the act for improv.

And he wanted me to ask you if improv or animal, what animal would it be?

**Kelly Leonard:** Wow. It's not a cat

**Jill Stoddard:** No.

**Kelly Leonard:** and I don't think it's a dog. I was gonna go for a dog. It's, it, it,  
it's not, um, it might be a marsupial and I say that cause it's a funny

**Jill Stoddard:** yeah,

**Kelly Leonard:** Uh, but

**Jill Stoddard:** but but you carry each other

**Kelly Leonard:** You carry each other around. You got the pouching around.

**Jill Stoddard:** Cuz you can't be

**Kelly Leonard:** [01:13:00] It's not that. But also those, those, those marsupials, I think they can box. So I think the other thing is they're really cute, but they could also beat you up. So you've kind of got the range of human existence.

**Jill Stoddard:** I was, I was thinking Panda because they're so incredibly playful and hilarious, but they don't tend to beat each other up.

**Kelly Leonard:** don't, no Pa I

don't,

**Jill Stoddard:** They're, more, clingy

**Kelly Leonard:** I don't remember these secret aytes that were taking place in rural parts of, yeah, no, maybe that's not, but that's not.

**Jill Stoddard:** No, that is, no, that is definitely not real. So tell me what's next for the Second City, and especially when it comes to this idea of the art, speaking to science and science, speaking to the arts, you must have, you must have plans.

**Kelly Leonard:** Uh, so the, one of the fun things about hosting the podcast is getting to talk to all you, you, you interesting people, different interesting people. And, uh, Wendy Smith came on to talk about her book both and Thinking, and we had just this wonderful conversation and [01:14:00] afterwards, and we have a lot of mutual friends, so we sort of were familiar with each other's work.

And then she's like, maybe we could do something together. I know Wendy, like, here's the thing, come to Chicago, uh, we'll take you to dinner. We'll see a show and then we'll see. We'll have you watch an improv class. And I had my

wife Ann lead an improv class. So she brought some colleagues and it was one of those things where just.

everything kept like we, like we could study this, we could study this, we could study this and, and her stuff is not navigating complexity, but there was also what she was saying, and I think this is deep in the work and something that we started with the second science project we want to move forward with, which is when we talk about de and I, when we talk about inclusion, so much of the exercises that we are leading in these improv classes are about getting these groups together to encounter each other.

And one of the things we talked about when we were talking about the classroom, for the most part, we aren't, teachers aren't [01:15:00] doing exercises at the five minutes before class starts to get everyone together and oriented. And that's a mistake I.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, maybe they should be.

**Kelly Leonard:** This is, this is like, it, it, what's important here is it is the work you're doing important is, is the, is the interaction important?

Do you want people, uh, participating, um, then we just can't assume they're gonna be ready to participate. And because these kids are, and anyone is walking in with their stuff. And then how do they, how do you help them sort of shed their stuff? So we're, we're working on a, uh, an article together that was a, a conversation we had, um, earlier today.

Um, and then we're talking about more studies down the line that we could do together to sort of investigate the phenomenon that happens in these improv classes when people are, are doing even some of this just foundational work that sets up for other kinds of lessons. So that's exciting to me. And, and those conversations, uh, [01:16:00] seem to continually happen.

And, and it's like, I've worked here for 34 years and it's, it's sort of like, okay, well I got some more years. Let's, let's see what else we can, what else we can make.

**Jill Stoddard:** It's so interesting. I, I don't think, I think people will be surprised at like just how many applications there are for this that go beyond just entertaining audiences. So this, this has been so great. Thank you so much for, for joining me. I know people can find you on Twitter

at kl, second City. Where else can people find you?

Tell us the name of your podcast.

**Kelly Leonard:** The podcast is called Getting T Yes. And, and you can get that both on Second City's website and WGN Radio Chicago. Uh, I'm on LinkedIn, I'm on, uh, you know, Facebook is personal for me, so I don't do that, um, as much. And I'm on Instagram, and so yeah, I'm, I'm easily found. Uh, uh, and, and, and I, I encourage people to, Talk to us, talk to me like this, this, this work is ever evolving and, and you never know where it's going to go.

And there's so [01:17:00] many, just, you know what, what's great about improv is it's no longer a thing that you only can do in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. I think every college has an improv troop at this point, it seems like. Uh, so whether it's your school or whether it's a a, a local improv, try class and just sort of see how, how it feels.

And even it's not about you being an actor. It really isn't. It's, it's about you, uh, being a human. Um, and life ain't easy, and I think this stuff will help you.

**Jill Stoddard:** Great. Well, thank you Kelly so much.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Hey, psychologists, off the clock listeners, I'm gonna guess that if you got to the end of this episode that you also love to geek out about books in psychology.

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