I developed a problem over the course of the COVID pandemic - I had become antisocial. There are a few reasons for this, but a big reason is social anxiety. This is because I view people as "clients", that they are a bundle of needs that *I* have to meet. Coworkers rely on *me* to help them get their jobs done. Friends expect *me* to affirm their viewpoints and sympathize with their problems. At the very least, they are an "audience" that *I* have to keep entertained with stories and conversations that they find interesting. If *I* don't serve *my* intended purpose, *I* will be dropped from their lives and society will see *me* as a failure. Which is why when the COVID pandemic came around and forced everyone into a 1-2 year long quarantine, I felt the burden of other people's demands lifted off my shoulders. Sorry, I can't meet your needs, I am too busy quarantining.

But as the pandemic subsided and people started to gather together again, I found myself unable to get out of "quarantine mode". Staying at home had become too comfortable and the thought of living up to everyone else's expectations again was exhausting to think about. I felt my social anxiety intensify again. I could continue to stay at home, but my lack of socialization began to cause other problems. I became more stuck in my own head, ruminating over my own issues longer. Even my personal hobbies suffered - ideas for my projects were becoming stale as I wasn't getting out and experiencing new things, causing a shortage of inspiration. Worse still, I worried that I was falling out of touch with the rest of the world. As comfortable as I was staying at home, I knew I couldn't continue living like this. As such, I signed up for a variety of social activities I had a mild interest in, one of which included improv.

I have always enjoyed comedies and my interest in improv originated from that. In addition to making me funnier, I thought improv may improve my social skills, which would lessen my anxiety. Improv forces you to come up with engaging material right on the spot, which seems like a skill that a great conversationalist would have. If I got better at socializing with people, I would have less anxiety about my ability to meet others' needs, right? With this in mind, I decided to sign up for a beginner improv class for eight weeks. There was one class each week, lasting about 2-3 hours.

For the entirety of the first couple of classes and for the first half-hour of every class after that, everyone participated in what you could call "party games". There were a variety of them. One of them was the "beep game", in which someone says "beep" to the person next to them, who will then pass on the "beep" to the person after that, and so on. Another game involved one person standing in the middle of a circle of people. The person in the middle would suddenly and randomly pick someone in the circle and shout a command from a specific list. For example, if the command was "elephant", the person picked had to dangle their arm in front of their nose like an elephant trunk. If the person failed to execute the command in time, they would swap places with the person in the middle. We played a variety of games, but all of them had one thing in common. They require you to pay attention to the people around you at all times. Why was this important? In improv, there was no script, nothing you can memorize to keep you afloat on stage. You have to come up with things on the fly, and quickly too. But how do you do that? The very first step is to be aware of what is happening on stage: who is doing what, what is happening, etc. This helps you accomplish two things in this process. Firstly, it

makes improv much easier. It is much harder to come up with ideas on the spot instead of reacting to what is already there. Secondly, it enhances the whole performance by making it coherent. If you don't attempt to work with what is already set out on stage, the result would be a disjointed performance.

The same principle can be applied to socializing. **Half of the key to socializing well is paying attention to the people we are engaging with.** When I got socially anxious, I realized that I was hyper focused on myself. You can call it being "self-conscious". Am *I* saying the right thing? Am *I* behaving the way people want *me* to behave? Will *my* actions make people like *me*? Superficially, these questions may make it seem that I was being considerate. But I was actually selfishly focused on my reputation rather than connecting with those around me. The situation was awkward as it was obvious that I was more focused on garnering positive attention for myself than engaging with the person I was interacting with. However, when I shifted my attention to the person across from me, the anxiety lessened. I was no longer obsessed with my social performance and was instead more focused on having an enjoyable time with them, which resulted in a more enjoyable experience for everyone involved.

As the improv class progressed, the instructor taught us how to do character skits. We would be paired up and pick a character to play. For example, one person may pick being a stock-broker while another may pick being a corporate secretary. Then we had to improvise a skit with these two characters. The participants who did the best had the uncanny ability to see things from another person's perspective. They were able to identify how their character would realistically feel in and react to a variety of situations.

Putting myself in the shoes of the person I am interacting with helped me realize how my social anxiety impacted them. There was a time I was pissed off with my coworker not picking up his load of work on a project we were working on together. He could tell I was pissed and became anxious about it. This led to him buttering me up with over-exaggerated compliments and trying to make friendly small talk. But his attempts honestly pissed me off more. On top of dealing with my heavy workload, I now had the job of putting his anxiety at ease. This made me realize that when I am anxious, I tend to look for external validation to soothe myself and put the onus on others to provide that. This puts them in an even more uncomfortable situation. Realizing that my anxiety had an impact on those around me motivated me to reduce it. Instead of focusing on myself, I focused on what others are thinking and how I can put them at ease if they are uncomfortable. For example, instead of blindly apologizing for my mistake repeatedly and trying to get a positive response out of the other party, I may apologize once and see if they want to flesh it out more. If they do, we would continue on the topic. If not, we can move on to a more comfortable subject. The latter situation tended to lead to better outcomes.

Towards the end of the course, the class performed full blown improv skits. It is common to think that in order to be good at improv, you have to be funny yourself. Though that is true to a certain extent, it is not the full story. The most jarring improv skits I saw during my class was putting people with incompatible senses of humor together. A particularly painful skit involved a high energy bro trying to do slapstick humor with a relatively more reserved individual. They were

both funny individually, but that joint performance was unsettling as they missed each other's cues. In fact, it is less painful to watch a scene with two people who aren't as funny individually but share the same wavelength. This allows them to come up with a coherent scene, making the performance at least comfortable to watch.

To really clique, what matters is not how "interesting" or "socially adequate" or *(insert positive adjective)* you are as an individual, but how compatible you are with the people around you. It is easy to think that you have to be a certain way to socialize well, that you have to be interesting, funny, or normal - all adjectives that are subjective to begin with. As a result, if you had an awkward encounter, it is your fault that you are not enough. But the truth is, compatibility may matter more than we think. There are times in which I feel socially awkward in one group of people because I had nothing in common with them. Then there are other times where the conversation just flows because I share the same interests with the people I am hanging out with. This made me realize that there is a possibility that a good conversation might be more predicated on the "chemistry" between you and those around you rather than your own social abilities as a person, which significantly eased my anxiety about my social performance.

Initially, I thought improv would leave me with a funnier sense of humor and improved social skills. And to a certain extent, it still did. But it also made me realize that focusing on others is equally, if not more important, than honing my own abilities. This is an important insight that not only helped me feel comfortable on stage, but also had a significant impact in my day-to-day life. In addition to easing my social anxiety, it also improved the quality of my social interactions and opportunities as I make more effort to be in tune with the people around me. In this way, improv not only impacted the way I approach the stage, but also the way I approach the people in my life.