

# Is the 'sad clown' image myth or reality?



The myth of the sad clown is a pervasive and enduring one, but is there any truth to it? Robin Ince, comedian and broadcaster, explores this common perception in a Radio 4 Documentary "Tears of A Clown". The show is both frank and funny, and provides a bountiful amount of food for thought.

It features the well-known voices of comedians such as Stephen Fry, Kenneth Williams, Jo Brand and Josie Long. It also includes hilarious clips from the man who has brought this subject to the fore, Robin Williams.

Williams' recent suicide rocked the world of comedy, and brought sadness and disbelief to his legions of fans across the world. Robin Ince explores the subject in a sensitive and honest way. He discusses the relationship between comedians and mental health, with input from comedians and academics, biographers and psychotherapists.

Edinburgh is arguably the spiritual home of countless comedians, and every August we share our city with many of these self-confessed clowns. I've been fortunate enough to spend time with many comedians over the years, and yes, lots of them exhibit self-doubt, and a need for approval and admiration, but don't we all? Isn't that just part of the human condition? On the whole, those I have met have dark moments and yet they also express the pleasure of spending their lives doing a job that they love.

As comedian Josie Long succinctly puts it in the documentary, her comedic performance "doesn't just come from tragedy, it also comes from a natural, joyful propensity for showing off."

I asked Robin why he thinks the sad clown myth is so prevalent and persistent. "I think one reason is the idea of dramatic irony – 'oh look, that human that makes so many people laugh is actually miserable' – this means that it is a better story for documentary makers – so Kenneth Williams or Tony Hancock are focused on, rather than other comedians who were just jolly, as that is not such a sustainable and alluring narrative. Also, comedians express what lies within them (or at least some of them do), so Simon Amstell can stand on stage and talk of existential angst; most people do not have such access to expressing themselves so specifically."

A particular highlight of the programme is the no-holds barred honesty of the comedian Jo Brand. She is well known for her sardonic humour, but her experience as a psychiatric nurse means she is uniquely placed to comment on this subject with a greater degree of knowledge and empathy than most stand-ups.

She muses: "I think there must be something in clichés or they wouldn't be clichés. I think comedians are quite emotionally disturbed people, there is an over representation of comedians who have lost a parent when young." "These sort of catastrophic events do not bode well for future mental health." she says, with characteristic dryness.

Jo Brand, for all of her sardonic wit, speaks eloquently and intelligently about both the theory and the human experience of mental health. She explains that human beings and their mental health is a complex issue, and she considers whether the 'tears of a clown' perception, although it holds a grain of truth, falls short of telling the full story.

Robin Ince agrees with this, saying: "There are comedians who have been racked with demons, but there are stand ups who perform well into their eighties, such as Bob Hope and Groucho Marks."

The show is by no means sad or depressive in tone. Hilarious

clips from various comedians, particularly Robin Williams, ensure it is light, entertaining and yet accurate.

Robin Ince ensures there is a balanced, objective view by asking the professionals in the field of mental health to provide their take on the subject. Some recent academic findings found comedians measured high on both depressive and manic facets of personality.

Robin Ince agrees: "The life of a stand up is a self - inflicted bi-polar life of extremes. You can go on stage and have incredible highs, then you're alone in a hotel. These self- imposed extremes of highs and lows can put you in a mental place that perhaps is not the best place for humans to be."

Josie Long is particularly honest and insightful in her description of the mental stresses and strains of the life of a stand-up. "It can be very hard to cope with putting yourself out there to criticism" she admits. The added stress of being funny when, frankly, you are having a bad day must add an extra layer of stress that the majority of us don't have to deal with. Most of us can retreat into the haven of our family and friends if low mood or other mental health issue occurs. Those in the public eye don't have this luxury. The tour dates are booked, the audience waits expectantly. The comedian seems to feel, rightly or wrongly, that 'the show must go on'. Audiences, particularly the discerning Edinburgh audience, can be quick to register their disapproval if they feel their chosen performance does not meet their own subjective, individual view of what is funny. Comedian Barry Cryer admits, "Its brutal, you are naked. If you don't make them laugh, you're dead."

But, to look at it another way, it's not just performers who experience cognitive dissonance in their everyday lives, we all do to some extent. Does stand -up comedy allow a creative outlet for this common issue? Robin Ince describes the

Edinburgh Fringe show 'Cheaper than Therapy' where stand ups explore and share their experience of therapy and the idea of stand up as their therapy. He describes stand-up as both 'the disease and the cure', and admits to being one of those for whom comedy is in the blood, a way of life, something that he has to do.

The Edinburgh Reporter asked what helps him during these extremes of high and low. "I think what keeps me grounded is a mixture of the needs of my family, especially my son; plus I can be grounded by my fortune that what antagonises me can be expressed nightly."

Could it be that emotional difficulties and mental health problems are common among the population, but performers are more willing than most to express it?

Robin replies: "We are hopefully approaching a stage where people can be more honest and less embarrassed by mental health issues, the mind and brain is being increasingly understood as is what leads to depression and bipolar etc. but there is a way to go. It does seem that odd childhoods and problems are common amongst artists, but that doesn't mean such things are exclusive to them"

How much does the media contribute to this common perception? Ince and his guests assert that recent TV documentaries depicting the lives of comedians Frankie Howerd, Kenneth Williams, are less than balanced, protesting "There was hardly any hint that Frankie Howerd was funny".

Robin Ince freely admits that he is not reaching any definite conclusion on the subject," I think there are no definite answers, but I will keep pondering and I am always fascinated by any new psychological paper, though sometimes it may reveal more about the psychologist's presumptions."

"After doing the documentary, I think comedians are surprisingly mentally healthy. They are often oddballs, and

the highs and lows may seem exaggerated by the extreme nature of energetic showing off for two hours a night then silence in a soulless hotel, but the ability to return to the stage night after night, whatever might have happened the previous day, seems to show a more effective carapace than we might imagine.”

The Documentary Tears of a Clown is available as a BBC Radio 4 Podcast at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04n20v4>

See [robinince.com](http://robinince.com) for details of Robin Ince on Tour in UK, Australia and US.

If you need to talk to someone about anything which is troubling you, then the Samaritans have a 24/7 helpline T 08457 90 90 90 or [click here](#) for details of a number of other organisations who offer help and counselling.

