

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Entertainers, Comedians, Actors, Geniuses and Psychoses”

The notion that creativity in art and science is connected with mental illness has long captured the public imagination. Many speculate that people in the entertainment business and creative people use performance as a form of self-medication. Researchers claim, "Comedians have personality types linked with psychosis, like many other creative types, which might explain why they can entertain." In fact, a study by Oxford University researchers suggests they score highly on characteristics that in extreme cases are associated with mental health problems. They seem to have high levels of both introversion and extroversion. I did a review and found tragic deaths or suicides associated with the following: 138 actresses committed suicide, including Margaux Hemmingway, Dorian Gray, and Marylyn Monroe; 216 male actors committed suicide, including Freddie Prinze, George Reeves (Superman), George Sanders, and Richard Farnsworth; 164 Musicians and singers committed suicide or had tragic deaths, including Janice Joplin, Michael Jackson, Elvis Presley, Jimmy Hendrix, Whitney Houston, Kurt Cobain, Mindy McCready, and Faron Young; 10 comedians committed suicide or had tragic deaths including Richard Jeni, Greg Giraldo, John Belushi, Chris Farley; similarly for 20 television personalities, including Don Cornelius, Dave Garroway, and 35 film directors who either committed suicide or had tragic deaths. Still, there has been very little research on whether these entertainers have psychotic traits (delusions, incoherence, and hallucinations linked to schizophrenia and bipolar disorder). But, a study in the British Journal of Psychiatry studied 523 comedians (404 men and 119 women) from the UK, US and Australia. The questionnaire was also completed by 364 actors as a control group, and by a group of 831 people who worked in non-creative areas. They found that comedians scored significantly higher on all four types of psychotic personality traits than the general group. The actors scored higher than the general group on three types - but not on introverted the personality aspect. Professor Gordon Claridge said: "The creative elements needed to produce humor are strikingly similar to those characterizing the cognitive style of people with psychosis - both schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Comedians tend to be slightly withdrawn, introverted people who may not always want to socialize, and their comedy is almost an outlet for that. It's a kind of self-medication." Swedish researchers found writers had a higher risk of anxiety and bipolar disorders, schizophrenia, unipolar depression, and substance abuse. They were almost twice as likely as the general population to kill themselves. Dancers and photographers were also more likely to have bipolar disorder.

In the America that I love, we feel that creative people are not more likely to suffer from psychiatric disorders than other people. But sadly, many "creative geniuses" seemingly pay a very high price to entertain us.

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