



Dick Cavett – host of the original *Tonight Show* and *The Dick Cavett Show*

Dick Cavett's career dates back to writing for Jack Paar, host of the original *Tonight Show* in the early 1960's. He went on to host *The Dick Cavett Show*. And he got many people to open up to him: Mohammed Ali and the famously private Katherine Hepburn. President Richard Nixon tried to take him down. In the midst of talking to all of these famous people, Dick Cavett had a secret: depression. It started when he had just left Nebraska for the Ivy League in 1954.

"I think the first one that would be considered a textbook genuine one was freshman year at Yale. It was mysterious because I couldn't have been in more bliss than being there in my freshman year having a wonderful time. Suddenly I didn't want to get out of bed and if I got out, I didn't want to go to class. All of the lighting effects seemed to have changed to gray. I wanted to go home. It started out feeling a little tired one day and the next day feeling more tired in the same way. And in a day or two thinking, 'This is worse.' I went to the Yale infirmary where a nice lady who seemed like a friendly librarian suggested that I walk more and use an Oral B toothbrush. So I was in expert hands."

There was a phrase called 'student let-down'. Apparently this is common among freshman in college. Nobody I don't think knew then or knows now exactly why."

"I don't think I heard the word depression used. In the time I was at Yale, there was a suicide every year at Princeton. None at Yale, but they are appallingly frequent among freshman college students. And that was in the days before all the fun of drugs was around, so it's probably lucky in that sense."

His depression lingered for a while, but eventually let up. Cavett graduated from Yale and went out into the world. He tried standup, worked as a store detective. Finally, he broke into comedy as a writer and worked his way up and up to hosting *The Dick Cavett Show*. He met a lot of people in the entertainment industry who had symptoms that we might now recognize as depression.

"Poor old Judy Garland. She was on one of my first shows on ABC. She died a week later. She was great fun. You would never think, looking at her, that she was depressed. We finished the show, I said good-bye and walked a block to my office. I came back about a half hour later and somebody came out and said 'She's still here, we can't get her out of the dressing room.'"

"It wasn't until some years later that I knew exactly what that was. Actors who are in a play, and have depression but can function, don't want the third act to come around. They are in a

setting they know and they know everything that's going to happen. I heard an actor once say "I slowdown in the third act, especially on tour. I don't want to go back to a cheap hotel room with a bottle of vodka on the dresser. Vodka is the best thing you can take to deepen your depression. Alcohol, being a depressant of the central nervous system, will make you worse. But you feel better for a little while."

Sometimes he interviewed famous guests while he was experiencing a relapse of depression. One of them was Sir Laurence Olivier.

"I wanted to be under the rug. I thought "I should be thrilled, I've been looking forward to this for weeks. He's in the next room upstairs and I want to go home. During the taping I thought 'Olivier and Joan Plowright are much too smart not to know that they are talking to a man whose brain is busted.' I'm taking pauses that are 20 seconds and I'm looking at a cue card and I don't know what it means. Somehow I got through it. But I never wanted to look at that show."

Years later, Marlon Brando, a man no stranger to depression, heard that story. Brando told him to go home and look at the show.

"I looked fine. The pauses were not there. My eyes even sparkled a little. I called him and asked 'What was that?' He said 'I call it automatic pilot and it takes over for performers and sad people like us.'"

Laurence Olivier had a brutal attack of depression in mid-career. He was starring in a classic play and it took the form of stage fright. Another great performer, Groucho Marx, also experienced depression.

"How deep, how long, how often, I don't know. But he would say 'Life's a pretty sad business.'"

Cavett says, years ago, Hollywood was filled with stars who exhibited all the signs of depression. A lot of them self-medicated with booze like Richard Burton and Liz Taylor. They couldn't be open about it if they wanted to keep their careers.

"There was such a stigma. You didn't want to be called a cuckoo. You'll never get a job. Don't let them find out."

Dick Cavett was funny and political before Jon Stewart. He could give a smirk to let you know he spotted BS before Letterman ever had a show. And he could be just as silly as any current late night host called James or Jim or Jimmy.

Through all of it, Dick Cavett dragged his depression along.

"It came back quite a few years later. I started doing my own show and it came back during that time. I was hospitalized for a time with it. Then I knew a lot more about it and knew this was the real thing. Various pills were tried on me. They didn't do much if anything. What really ripped me out of it was ECT."

ECT is electroconvulsive therapy, formerly known as electroshock therapy. It might be shocking to hear it spoken of positively. It's often considered an arcane method of treatment. It used to involve heavy doses of electricity pumped through the brain of a patient who was not under anesthesia. This sometimes resulted in memory loss and even broken bones. The more gentle approach that evolved later involved lower doses of electricity and anesthesia and much better results. It's used with patients who haven't responded to other treatments. Sometimes it clicks them into feeling a lot better. That was the case with Dick.

It's easier to talk about a problem once it is under control and you can look back on it.

"On Larry King was the first time I spoke about it on television. I wasn't scared by the stigma of it, the horrible stigma of it still. I thought maybe I can do some good. People all around me are coming out of the closet so to speak, saying they suffer from it. In some cases I knew and in some I never would have guessed."

"There's a reward in talking about it because people will come up to me and say "Mr. Cavett, I'm a big fan of yours and I want you to know that you saved my father's life. When he saw you talking about depression, he decided that if it can happen to Cavett, I don't need to be ashamed of it.' This may be the only good use of celebrity that I can think of. That and fund raising."

Cavett said he was once close to suicide.

"That was scary. It was surprising and I thought 'Why would I do that?' The only answer I could think of was 'That will instantly stop this. Because anything but this will feel better. That's the thing about depression. It leads to death and that's why it needs to be treated."