



Eight comedians; one chronic mental illness

When it comes to depression, everyone's story is different. But a lot of time, the stories can be pretty similar. In this podcast, there are common themes that rise up in conversations with comedians.

There was a pretty specific age range during which most people first felt depression. Some were as young as five, some as old as 21. But for a lot of them, it hit right down the middle: during the cracking voice years, the unexpected hair years.

Jake Weisman, standup comic

Jake is based in LA and one of the writers and stars of *Hampton Deville*, an up and coming sitcom on *Comedy Central*.

"The first time I had depression was when puberty hit in seventh or eighth grade. I remember feeling very dark thoughts all the time. Like not wanting to be alive. I remember being kind of an asshole. I hated myself so much. I remember every day, having this layer of sludge over my brain. I felt stupid and unworthy of everything I had and I kind of hated myself. I would be really sarcastic to people."

Awareness of how much you could hate yourself comes up a lot. Also, how much you could detach from the world. Sometimes how much you didn't want to be there anymore. Another theme that kept coming up was confusion about what was going on. You don't have life experience to identify it. You've never felt anything like this before.

Mike Drucker, standup and a writer

Mike has worked on Jimmy Fallon, *Saturday Night Live*, he's co-writer of an upcoming Bill Nye's show for Netflix. But before all that, he was a confused teenager.

I think in high school I was a glum kid. I had one or two good teachers who said 'I think you have depression.' I said 'No I don't.' As if I had something to gain by denying it. I knew I did. But I thought that's like something you see in really bad commercials. I thought 'I'm not like some woman looking out the window during a rain storm feeling bad about myself.' I just thought 'I just don't want to be alive.'"

Denial is another recurring theme. Denial is a product of stigma. Even kids get the sense that they shouldn't talk about this because having a mental illness is bad and wrong and I'll get locked away and have to wear a strait jacket in a padded room. You think 'I will convince others and I will convince myself that I'm fine.'

The way you address stigma has to do with how much privilege you have. If you're not part of a group that routinely get discriminated against you can be out and proud about your depression because you have people to support you. This was not the case for Jordan Carlos.

Jordan Carlos, standup comedian

Jordan has appeared on MTV, *The Colbert Report* and *The Nightly Show*.

"I recognized something was wrong with me. But therapy is not something big with black people. We don't do it all that often, or it's not spoken about. It's definitely stigmatized. So speaking my truth and going to a therapist was very difficult for me. But I did it."

But he didn't originally want it. What Jordan wanted was a cure.

"I thought my therapist would say 'Take a little Zoloft, take a little Xany and you'll feel better buddy'."

If your leg is broken, you go to the hospital. If your mind is out of whack, you go do the doctor. Several people in this podcast wanted to treat their mental illness the same way. Have someone set it right, let it heal and forget about it.

Michael Ian Black, actor, comedian and author

Michael is part of the comedy group, The State and has been on t-v shows like *Ed* and movies like *Wet*, *Not American Summer*.

"What I was looking for was a magic pill. I was looking for some sort of anti-depressant that would alleviate the symptoms and allow me to go about my life in such a way that do not require therapy. I think ultimately, I was just afraid. I was afraid to dredge up whatever there was to dredge up."

He got his pills though.

"Whatever SSRI they put me on seemed to work. In a couple of weeks, I definitely felt better. I was on that for a while, then I let the prescription lapse. I went years before filling it and in those years, I got depressed again. I'm back on medication and have been for years."

There's a reckoning that people seem to have about meds in these interviews. Figuring out whether you want to treat depression with meds is a bit like choosing whether to own a car. Is the cost of owning it, worth it for all you get? Or can you get by riding public transportation and walking? You evaluate your needs, your life style and you make a call.

Jenny Jaffe, comedy writer and performer

Jenny is currently writing for the *Big Hero 6* t-v show. And she is the founder of You Are OK, a nonprofit dedicated to de-stigmatizing mental illness for young people.

“I’m a big proponent of meds. Taking meds for me is like the first time I put on eye glasses as a kid. I thought ‘Wow, this is the level of detail with which other people get to see the world.’ That’s what taking meds felt like for me. My brain is processing things as they come in and not necessarily looking at everything as another reason to have a panic attack. And I’m letting go of thoughts more easily and I’m not necessarily wanting to kill myself. It doesn’t change who are, it just levels your personal playing field a little bit.”

Jenny uses meds to treat her depression. And also her OCD. She came to terms with that after listening to comedian Maria Bamford talk about. Other people carry anxiety disorders around with their depression. That’s super common.

The next theme that keeps coming up is that depression almost never rides alone.

Sara Benincasa: writer, comedian

Sara is author of a one woman show and book called *Agorafabulous*. It’s about her struggle with agoraphobia, the fear of going outside. At 21 she was a college student for whom depression treatments did not work and things started falling apart.

“I was afraid of leaving the house. I was not eating because it’s really hard to access food when you don’t leave the house. I was at Emerson College and half way through my junior year. Agoraphobia is like painting yourself into a corner. For me, the desire for suicide became this ceaseless drum beat. I lost a bunch of weight. When you’re not eating, your brain gets pretty stupid, pretty fast. Eventually I became afraid to leave my bedroom. I lived in a one room studio apartment in Boston and I was not functioning. My friends called my parents and said you need to come and get her. It was a terrible time.”

Her parents came and got her to a doctor. They helped her recover. Today she goes to colleges to talk about mental illness. A common character in these stories is the helpful parent. It helps a lot.

Bill Corbett, writer and comedian

Bill Corbett is known for his work on *Mystery Science 3000*, where he was the voice of a robot puppet that made fun of terrible movies. In the 90’s, the show was a huge hit. He was on a press tour in New York where he was supposed to appear at the Museum of Broadcasting where he was supposed to cement the show’s historical importance. He knew about his depression, but had blown off treating it. On this tour, he drank and partied his way through the city. What happened next may not surprise you.

“I think we did the national CBS show. I never made it to the Museum of Broadcasting. I woke up on the day we were supposed to go and I couldn’t get out of the hotel room. I couldn’t bring myself to move or do anything except feel like I want to cry. I got myself to Newark Airport shaking and got myself home.”

“I managed to white knuckle out of it. I would have high functioning months at a time and then crash a little bit. I have a couple of core things that I do which is exercise, meditate. I’ve been so resistant to medication until the last year. I tried it before and I gained a lot of weight. I felt sluggish so I thought it’s not for me. In the last ten years they’ve come so far. As a couple of months ago, I got on it and I thought ‘That is the thing that I needed.’”

Bill extricated himself from that hotel, he got home to Minnesota and then he really considered killing himself because he could not go on like that any longer. He checked into a hospital for a few days instead and got some treatment and was better after that.

Suicide comes up all the time these interviews. For people with depression, it’s always out there as a visible path. For Mike Drucker, these thoughts are always top of mind.

“The first time was in high school. Nobody in my family had a gun. I spoke with Andy Richter and whenever we talk about gun laws, I say “‘If my parents had a gun, I would have killed myself by now.’ It sounds like I am saying that in a joking cadence. But people should not underestimate the difficulty of trying to dissuade suicide to someone who is thinking of suicide. If it’s inconvenient you won’t do it, at least you won’t do it in that moment.”

Aparna Nancharla, writer and standup comedian

Aparna works in New York. She’s worked on *Late Night with Seth Myers*, she’s appeared on *Conan*.

“When I first started performing, I took it really hard. I would get very frustrated. Part of it was the depressive’s mindset that says ‘Oh you’re just wasting everyone’s time.’”

She says, being on the road can get pretty lonely.

“Sometimes when I’m on my own, I get very existential. I’ve been finding ways to cultivate a better mood, but I have to be constantly vigilant that I don’t go into that mind set of constantly questioning ‘What is the point of any of it?’ I find that meditation helps a lot. It helps you calm down. Exercise helps maybe more with anxiety but also with depression. I focus on mundane details of daily life which grounds me.”