



Transcript:

Episode #PLACEBO: Coping Ideas From a Real Live Sad Clown

John Moe:

It's the Hilarious World of Depression, placebo edition. I'm John Moe. A few weeks ago, I offered up some suggestions from listeners for unusual things they've tried to help their depression that actually worked. Not talking about cures, just things that, even odd things, that provide temporary relief for some reason: depressive ibuprofen, and we got a lot of responses even since that show.

Marianne Hughes listens to the latest news from Disneyland on podcasts, long, involved podcasts about what's happening in Disneyland. She skips the regular news and soaks that up for an hour or so. Because how else would you learn about the new lounge experience at Tomorrowland?

Jonathon Paul Hanes keeps score at baseball games. It's an exhaustively detail-oriented and largely pointless exercise. It gives your brain a chance to stop stewing for a while. Theresa Jackson plays Minecraft and especially enjoys digging ridiculously deep, elaborate mineshafts. And @RebaRiley jumps on trampolines while listening to talks by motivational speaker Tony Robbins.

I mean you gotta try things, you gotta experiment, you gotta find something that works for you. Because let's face it. The brain is this weird tub of goo, and there's really only so much we know about it. So trial and error, why not? Why not try some weird stuff.

Jonna Nummela: My name is Jonna Nummela, and I'm now back in Helsinki, Finland after living seven years in the UK.

Moe: Jonna, and I was so excited to learn this, is an actual sad clown, a depressed clown, just like in our theme song. That theme song is called "Pagliacci."

Nummela: Yes I suppose I am a sad clown. I perform as I'm a comedian, and I perform as a clown as well. And a Pagliacci is a well-known legend amongst clowns, but before my diagnosis, it was just one of those jokes amongst many, really. But once I got depressed, it suddenly got a bit more meaning to it.

Moe: Pagliacci, by the way, is the name of a character in the opera of the same name, and it's an opera that is very hard to summarize quickly, but there's betrayal, stabbing and a clown full of sorrow and rage. It's not a comedy. Don't bring the children. All right, back to Jonna. She had been struggling with mental health issues for a long time, but she was doing okay. She was living and working in London doing theater, doing comedy, and then the Brexit vote happened. And as a foreigner, she didn't feel welcome anymore. The depression spiked up, and some bad habits returned.

Nummela: I've always turned to self-harm since I was 11, and I think that was the clearest manifestation of my depression at the time. I did cutting and used to give myself carpet burns and take really hot or cold showers or give myself bruises. That sort of thing, but cutting was my go-to thing at the time.

Moe: Before long, it was affecting her stage work.

Nummela: I was doing standup and feel like I was pushing my sensitive, creative side a bit too far. I think my anxiety got me fired up, and I developed this fear of public speaking. And there was one time just before a gig that my fear of embarrassing myself and the weight of the world on my shoulders grew so big that I just had a full-blown panic attack, which is ironic because I ended up embarrassing myself. I ended up running out of the room crying hysterically.

Moe: But, here's a phrase I never thought I'd say: clowns to the rescue. She developed an alter ego as a new way of putting herself out there.

Nummela: I create multiple characters, but my go-to character is Dorothy Fale.

Moe: And she is a clown who I assume fails at everything?

Nummela: She fails miserably at everything she tries to do. She's also very sensitive and can't really control herself in any public situation or any situation. I think Dorothy is my alter ego for all those fears. They can kind of safely manifest themselves in Dorothy. When I can't go around and express them, I can do that through her, which has been brilliantly helpful.

Moe: There are YouTube videos of Dorothy Fale – in one of which she attempts yoga but ends up tumbling down a hillside. Developing a clown is one therapy method. Another is something that Jonna rediscovered after returning to Finland.

Nummela: Sauna is a part of our national identity. It's the only way to describe it. We don't have many successful products coming out of this country apart from Sauna and Father Christmas and Nokia. And that's about it. And Sauna out of those three, I'd say, is the most successful one. It's the place we used to go to be born and die – it was the heart of the house. My dad would say if Sauna can't fix it, you're dead. Sauna was a place you'd go fix everything. It was before antidepressants or any kind of medication. That was the place you'd go and try to heal yourself. And I guess when I moved back, I found that old wisdom in that Finnish culture, and now I go to Sauna as much as I can now.

Moe: Jonna cautions that going into a very hot room, often naked, often with strangers, no one talks much, might not be for everyone. But in Finland, that is huge. What isn't all that popular in a Sauna is what Jonna brings in with her.

Nummela: When I go to Sauna, sometimes I take some ice cubes with me, and I run them across my skin where I used to cut myself because I'm trying to recreate the extreme sensation without violence but with changes in temperature. They feel that little bit colder. They create that sensation and separates me from all the hotness that's going on around me. They work for me. It works even better when I can go for a cold swim after. If it's winter, I roll around in the snow or go ice swimming.

Moe: I scream a little just imagining doing that. But yes, way better than cutting.

Nummela: Both in Sauna and as a clown, the same rules of failure apply to me. In both, you're naked, literally or metaphorically, in front of other people. So you sweat, your makeup runs, you have to be in that moment. You have to embrace that moment, and eventually, you have to give up and embrace that failure because if you try to stay in the sauna forever, you'll die. And if you try to force people to laugh as a clown, you'll metaphorically die.

Moe: Here's Jonna in a clip from a 2014 staged reading of her one-woman show: "Suicides and Small talk.

Nummela (clip excerpt): "23rd of December 1988. Finnish. Finland. That's actually how you say it. Yes, it's a very beautiful country. Have you been? Oh, not that many people have. Just because we share a border with them, I'm telling you the truth, I'm not the one you're looking for. I've only been there once and only for one day, without a Visa. That picture was approved by the police. It is a valid document. Why would I lie? I never lie. In fact in 2012, when Finnish people were asked to describe themselves in three adjectives, the most common ones were honest, reliable and true. Apparently, we're also shy, direct, slow, reserved and punctual. So you can imagine our office Christmas parties."

Moe: Jonna Nummela from Helsinki.

Moe: A few more tips you've passed along: Deborah Gaskill says she spends times with her llamas to alleviate her depression. I guess that only works if you have llamas. I mean you can spend time with someone else's llamas, but please ask first. Don't just sneak into their barn and chill with their llamas.

Hanni Torpe buys scary books intended for kids and teens. It's something she did when she was young, and now that she's older, she finds it comforting. All those kids escaping from ax murderers? Yeah, she could relate. She felt understood.

@webbyfoot says milkshakes. You have to use a straw because then it takes longer. It's not a cure for depression, but it's a brief rest and you get a milkshake, which is a double winner, really. "Claws of Light" says exercise and skinny dipping. And "breaderdays" eats a bunch of cashews. Heard they help your mood then read that that's a myth and then ate them anyway because the combination of psychosomatic solutions and cashews was good enough.

So here's some homework for a future placebo episode of The Hilarious World of Depression. What song do you listen to when depression, our old pal Clini-D, is getting the best of you? I'd love to hear about a song and the connection you have with it. You can email us, yes we finally have email, at thwod@americanpublicmedia.org. You can also find us on Twitter at @thwofd.

The Hilarious World of Depression is a production of American Public Media. Our executive producer is Kate Moos. Special thanks to Nate Toby. Our recording engineer this time around is Zach Rose. Our Technical Director Veronica Rodriguez. Rhett Miller wrote and performed the song "Pagliacci" that you hear on this program. If you are in need of immediate help, if you are in danger, please contact the National Suicide Prevention lifeline: 1-800-273-8255. That's 1-800-273-8255. The 8255 also spells out T-

A-L-K. Be sure to swing by iTunes and give us a rating and write a review: it really helps us out. I'm John Moe, bye now.