Is There a Link Between Humor and Depression?

August 14, 2014

Recently, the tragic death of Robin Williams sparked an intense online discussion about why some of the best comedians in the world seem to develop depression. From John Belushi and Chris Farley to Richard Jeni, there are countless examples of how comedians and tragedy seem connected. Time.com explored the issue in an article that asked whether there was a scientific link between humor and depression.

Although research on the topic is limited, a few compelling studies might in fact show a link. One 1978 mental health research project conducted by the late Samuel Janus, PhD, a psychologist in New York City, found that many of the comedians he interviewed over the course of 10 years (many of them Jewish) experienced trauma during their childhoods.

Another study from Oxford University surveyed 523 comedians and compared them with a control group. The scientists found that the humorists' creative processes were strikingly similar to the cognitive thinking style of people with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. The study suggested that some comedians may use their personalities as a form of self-medication.

But many other psychologists disagree. An unpublished study on the link between humor and depression at the University of Colorado suggested that such a link may actually be a result of our own perceptions of comedians.

"Our research has shown that the act of trying to be funny makes people seem more troubled than they might actually be," said Peter McGraw, PhD, a psychology and marketing professor at the University of Colorado, who worked on the study.

There may be no scientific agreement on the issue, but Williams' suicide does help reveal the complexities of depression and how mental illness can affect anyone, anytime, regardless of their success or outward appearance.

Click here to learn the signs of underlying depression in yourself or in loved ones. If you, or anyone you know is having an emotional crisis, call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/robin-williams-links-humor-depression-26040-3356