

A Funny Thing Happened

On The Way To Recovery...

Stand-up comedy classes are being trialled as a groundbreaking new strategy to help men manage poor mental health, process trauma and rewrite their personal narratives. And they could soon be available via GP referral, too. **It's a funny idea but, as *MH* learned, it might just work...**

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COMEDY IS IN
THE SPOTLIGHT
AS A TOOL TO AID
MENTAL HEALTH

T

he west wing of St Pancras Hospital isn't an obvious location for a Friday night comedy show. A swing board outside reception bearing The Comedy School's colourful logo is the only indication that you're in the right place.

This part of the hospital houses the Veterans' Mental Health Transition, Intervention and Liaison Service, an NHS support system for former members of the armed forces. But tonight – for one night only – the centre has been transformed into a makeshift comedy club, with a stage, microphone and rows of seats, plus an expectant audience, mingling by a buffet of sandwiches and cakes.

The aim of the event is to recruit volunteers for a pilot stand-up comedy and improvisation course, executed by The Comedy School and evaluated and sponsored by the NHS via Op Courage. Through storytelling, team-based exercises and creative self-expression, the hope is that the course will provide veterans with a safe space in which to process their experiences.

There's a reason the term 'barracks humour' is used to describe an ability to view bleak situations through a comedic lens. As we wait for the show to start, one attendee, Richard, a former colonel who served in the infantry for 28 years, offers an example of typical military humour. 'When it's driving horizontal rain and there's nothing else you can think about, you scream into the wind, "Well, on the bright side, at least it isn't raining!"'

He goes on to quote a story from the Falklands war that he recalls reading in a book as a kid. 'A soldier steps on a mine, suffering severe injury, and he cries out, "I've lost my leg!" Another nearby replies, "No, you haven't, mate – it's over here.'" He chuckles. 'I loved the idea of that sort of dark humour in adversity.'

If it sounds like he's being flippant, he isn't. The men and women in attendance here are acutely aware of the impact that military service – and the transition back to civilian life – can have on mental health. Many of them lost friends. Richard never discussed his mental health struggles with his colleagues while he was serving but was 'forced to confront it' after leaving the army. Now, he says, he's growing more comfortable discussing his PTSD. Which is what brings him here tonight.

The show opens with a slot from host 'Mr Cee', a professional comedian and long-time Comedy School tutor who is candid about his own mental

health struggles, including losing a job he loved and breaking up with the mother of his children. He talks about crying in the back of a taxi on the way to his mum's house, his personal items packed into a box on the seat next to him. His story is sad and vulnerable, but – the way he delivers it – it's also very funny. (You had to be there.)

After the show, there's a panel discussion and Q&A addressing the proposed pilot course and NHS study. Naturally, not all of those present will choose to sign up; comedy isn't for everyone, there's a strict vetting process for volunteers, and other support avenues are available to those concerned that joking among fellow vets may trigger unwelcome memories.

But, for some, it's a risk worth taking. One panel member, former paratrooper Neil Davies, who used stand-up comedy as part of his own recovery from PTSD, puts it this way, 'Along with the trauma, I'd buried all the good times. [Comedy] forced me to dig down into my trauma memories to "find the funny". Laughter heals, that's certainly true. And if you can relate trauma with humour, in the third person, it makes it safe.'

Stand Up, Speak Up

There are natural parallels between the psychotherapeutic process and comedy writing. Being funny requires introspection and self-awareness. To develop a coherent comedic narrative – whether you intend to share it on the stage or around the dinner table – you first have to listen to the stories you've been telling yourself.

Moments of difficulty or disappointment lend themselves naturally to humour. Securing an interview for your dream job, for example, isn't 'funny'. But discovering that the person interviewing you is your ex-wife's new boyfriend? Well, that might well be.

Humour is also a long-established coping mechanism. Arguably the first person to popularise the cliché of laughter as 'the best medicine' was journalist Norman Cousins. In his 1979 book, *Anatomy Of An Illness*, he details his self-prescribed treatment for a painful autoimmune disease:

consuming as much comedy as possible. Laughter, according to Cousins can 'free the body of the constricting effects of the negative emotions'. It's an analgesic – and perhaps an antidepressant, too.

The concept of humour as a therapy was forefront in Keith Palmer's mind when he founded The Comedy School, a not-for-profit organisation with a mission to use the art of joke-telling as a tool for social good. An actor, writer and comic himself, Palmer's true passion was – and is – delivering workshops to marginalised groups.

It started with prisons. Palmer wanted to use comedy as an educational device to 'add a bit more interest and fun' to the usual courses that improve literacy and communication skills – and turn inmates into gagsters. To date,

The Comedy School has delivered courses in prisons around the country, as well as within secure hospital units such as Broadmoor.

A psychologist's report on one workshop delivered at HMP Liverpool quotes an inmate, interviewed using the pseudonym 'Kaguta', who frequently found himself caught up in fights. In the report, Kaguta says

how writing and performing stand-up for fellow inmates taught him new ways to manage his mental health, as well as opening up a dialogue with his mother – who, in true comedic tradition, was subject to some gentle ribbing in his set. 'I try to laugh things off now,' he says. 'You can be angry, and you can come here and do a set about how angry you are. It's all about teaching people how to cope.'

Buoyed by their success within the criminal justice system, The Comedy School launched its Wellbeing Project in 2017 to deliver workshops within the mental health sector. Volunteers for a pilot course were sourced from the South London and Maudsley NHS Recovery College, spanning 'a whole diverse range of people', says Palmer. 'For example, it could be you're dealing with the CEO of a blue-chip company who had a breakdown.'

The Wellbeing Project has been refining its offering ever since, and seven-week courses now cover stand-up, improv, podcasting and mime, culminating in a final showcase in which attendees can perform in front

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of a small audience. A psychologist's report evaluating workshops held from March 2018 to July 2022 concludes that there is 'strong evidence of very positive outcomes' for 'overall wellbeing, communication skills and confidence'.

Currently, Palmer says, The Comedy School runs 'about six or seven' mental health-focused courses each year, reaching 400 or so people in total. The veterans' workshops are just the latest addition to the roster.

Palmer sees 'a very clear parallel' between the skills needed for a good improv performance and those required to live with variable mental

health. (Improv, for the uninitiated, is unplanned live theatre. For example, your co-performer might walk on stage and say, 'Excuse me, sir, you're sitting in my chair,' and it's your job to react.)

'Where some people might have previously felt the need to control and know everything, they can learn to go with the flow,' Palmer explains. 'If you imagine someone who gets very anxious... if they do an improv course, they can learn to enjoy the unexpected and cope with not knowing what's going to happen next.'

As for stand-up? Living with mental illness might not be a laugh a minute, but people can choose to find black

humour in their situation. (Watch Netflix's *14 Minutes Of Comedians Reaffirming Mental Health Struggles* on YouTube for some examples – but consider this your trigger warning, it's heavy going.) 'It's about them laughing at themselves, a bit of self-deprecation. Them owning their illness, and being able to talk about it,' Palmer says. Which is often the hardest part.

Feedback Isn't Failure

Mr Cee – the comic who hosted the veterans' showcase – has been delivering workshops for The Comedy School for several years, and was one of the pioneers of its mental health-focused courses. He also has his own history with depression.

Two days before he recounted his experiences on stage to an appreciative audience, he told *MH* the same story over the phone – only without the punchlines. Before he transitioned to comedy, Mr Cee held a well-paid job for an insurance company in the City. Then it fell to pieces: he was made redundant during a restructure, bagged a new job and then lost that as well. He was embroiled in an employment tribunal. He broke up with the mother of his children and struggled with being apart from his sons. 'I felt like I had every single bit of my identity stripped from me,' he says of that time. 'It's the closest I've ever been to real depression, suicidal thoughts and everything.'

Joking about these events on stage for the first time was an eye-opener. 'I realised how many people had gone through a similar experience. That's when I started learning how comedy is a healer. There were people in the audience going through the same shit I was. Now they could see the funny side of the situation, too.'

Stand-up truly saved his life, he says. 'With every problem I've faced, comedy has been the thing to guide me through it. It got me to talk, whereas if I wasn't doing stand-up, I probably wouldn't talk. The hurt and the pain would still be inside me.'

In his workshops, Mr Cee helps participants to break down their mental barriers. He teaches 'ice-breaker games' designed to help people relax and reveal more of themselves. He encourages them to be silly and share embarrassing stories. 'We need to make everyone feel that the environment they're in is a safe one,' he says.

A favourite exercise is a twist on the classic 'hot or cold' children's game. An object is hidden in the room and one participant must find it – applause means they're close, while boos mean they're further away. The point, he explains, is to strip the emotion out of the audience's response and reduce it to raw data.

'There are only two things that will happen to you on stage: the audience laugh or they don't,' he says. 'But at the end of the day, it's only feedback. It's the same in life. There's no failure, just feedback.'

This year, Mr Cee is embarking on one of his most ambitious projects yet: helping to deliver

a comedy course for men at risk of suicide, funded by an NHS grant through the North West London Integrated Care Board and backed by the charity Rethink Mental Illness

The course, which started in February this year, is led by comedian and university lecturer Angie Belcher, founder of Comedy On Referral, which – in the same vein as The Comedy School – offers stand-up classes via social prescribing. Suicide is not a subject these comedians take lightly, and Belcher and Mr Cee worked alongside mental health practitioners, men with lived experience of severe depression and who'd lost loved ones to suicide, to co-produce the course and ensure the exercises and games were responsible, sensitive and effective.

Comedy is clearly not intended to be a replacement for traditional talking therapy or medication, but rather an addition to current offerings – or an alternative. Prescriptions of antidepressants are on the rise and, though many find them helpful, they come with side effects (the latest of which is 'emotional blunting', according to a study of SSRIs by University of Cambridge scientists).

As for talking it out, some studies suggest that men tend to prefer side-by-side socialising (engaging in shared activities) over more intimate face-to-face conversation, and male friendships are more likely to flourish in a group setting. Some may find group learning preferable to the psychiatrist's couch.

'We know that suicide rates are higher among men, who are often less likely to talk about their worries,' says Lourdes Colclough, head of suicide prevention at Rethink Mental Illness, which is keen to explore innovative, community-based solutions. She hopes that this course 'will bring a system change to encourage creativity'.

The Hero Of Your Story

Comedian Belcher, who holds a master's diploma in psychology, previously led a successful six-week NHS course for trauma survivors in Bristol, the result of a year-long research project. ('There were some people there who didn't talk for three weeks,' she says. 'People had some big mental health stuff going on.') This is her first time working with men identified as at risk of suicide.

Belcher sees little gender difference in the way the men and women she

SEIZING CONTROL OF THE NARRATIVE CAN HELP PEOPLE DEAL WITH TRAUMA



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

Writing your story lets you recast your role. You can be the hero, not a victim

teaches express themselves. But she does acknowledge that men are more likely, on average, to 'internalise their grief, their anxiety or their fears', rather than seek solace and support among their peers. She worries, too, about the current economic situation. 'It's one of the indicators, I think, that someone's going to take their life – financial issues.' In many ways, the suicide-prevention project is essentially just a men's talking group. 'But we're just not calling it that.'

Writing your first comedy act has similarities with undergoing psychotherapy. 'In order to know who you are on the stage, you need to know who you are off it,' says Belcher. 'And sometimes people haven't looked at that.'

If you're considering writing or performing stand-up comedy yourself, you might want to ask yourself these questions. Who are you? What does your comedic persona look like? What's your backstory? What's your world view? What's your campaign? What's your conflict? What's your tragedy? 'Because comedy doesn't come from the nice, sweet moments of your life, it comes from conflict,' says Belcher.

In writing your story, you have a chance to recast your role. You can be the hero, not the victim, with astute observations and quips. 'You can even lie,' Belcher says. 'That's the thing about stand-up, it's not a documentary. It's analysis. It's an art form.'

Like Palmer, Belcher believes stand-up has benefits away from the stage, too. Comedians have a different way of looking at the world, even when off duty. 'They're always looking for the funny, always thinking about who they are, they're probably quite self-aware,' she says. Comedy, after all, isn't just what happens when you sit down to write, or crack a joke in the office kitchen. It's about finding playfulness, humour and human connection in everyday situations.

Men who are battling with their mental health are, in Belcher's experience, often holding on to a lot of anger. 'I think a lot of suicide might come from our anger and our resentment and our frustration with the world.' Through stand-up comedy, we can learn to face the harshness of the world with humour. 'Rather than fighting fire with fire, you can [express yourself in a way] that might actually calm and diffuse the situation,' she says, 'which is an amazing and heroic thing to do'.

Humour Is A Healer

Will Reynolds is a comedian from Bath who's been performing stand-up for almost a decade. He was born with cerebral palsy and hydrocephalus (fluid on the brain), and in 2018, he required 'a lot

You Have To Laugh...

There's no shortage of comedians turning the struggles of mental illness into moving – and yes, sometimes amusing – material. If you want to explore your own emotional wellbeing through humour, here are just a few places to start



Chris Gethard: Career Suicide

Comedian Gethard's unfiltered one-man show about learning to manage his depression and anxiety isn't always an easy watch – but it is both moving and enlightening.



John Moe: The Hilarious World Of Depression

In his interview-style podcast, Moe speaks to fellow entertainers about life with mental illness. His book by the same name blends humour with serious commentary.



Maria Bamford: The Special Special!

Bamford performs blunt stand-up about issues such as her nervous breakdown and time spent on a psychiatric ward. This show has two audience members: her parents.



Stephen Fry: The Secret Life Of The Manic Depressive

Though not played for laughs, this documentary explores the impact of living with bipolar disorder (including some of its upsides) via celebrities and the public.



Paul Gilmartin: The Mental Illness Happy Hour

This weekly, hour-long podcast addresses some heavy themes, with guests including fellow comedians, friends of Gilmartin's and mental health professionals.



James Acaster: Cold Lasagne Hate Myself 1999

A two-hour comedy special written about the worst year of the comedian's life, including a painful break-up, the resulting breakdown and his experiences with therapy.

Laughing Matters

of brain surgery', which culminated in a four-month hospital stay and a prolonged period of illness. Then the pandemic hit. 'I was really high risk,' he says. 'I was one of the people who literally didn't go out for two years. Which is a really tough thing.'

Reynolds, who knew Belcher as a promoter and fellow comedian, was referred to her trauma-recovery course in January of last year.

'Normally, people expect you to be so reverent of trauma,' he says. 'It's refreshing to be able to laugh at it.' He contrasts this with the 'weird solemnity' that so often clouds the conversations that surround mental health or chronic illness, even within traditional support groups. It's not always easy to take the piss out of yourself, after all. 'Someone will often go, "Oh, it's not your fault." I know this is not my fault... that doesn't mean it's not funny.'

In fact, Reynolds says, 'some of the funniest things that have happened to me, have happened to me in hospital'. Imagine, for example, being recognised by a local comedy fan when you're midway through urinating into a hospital bottle in preparation for emergency surgery. (That the fan was a surgical nurse only makes it slightly less awkward.) 'He said, "Don't you do stand-up?" You know that weird, inappropriate point to laugh? Like... I don't know, someone farts at a funeral or something. It's that.'

Reynolds references the Shakespearean role of the 'fool', who acts as a mediator between audiences and the author. He sees comedians as playing a similar role today: middlemen who are able to distil complex subjects for their audience. Similarly, it's his belief that comedy can act as an intermediary between a traumatic past and future healing.

Stand-up comedy is certainly not a cure-all, he concedes. 'But if your mental health is a massive wall, then it might be the first chip in that wall, which makes you think, "Okay – I can actually get through this."'

The Comedy School is a non-profit organisation and relies heavily on volunteers and donations. To learn more, sign up for a course or offer support, go to thecomedyschool.com