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Robin Williams death not the only one: Study suggests same forces that drive comedy may be the flip-side of darker mental health issues


 TOM BLACKWELL | August 12, 2014 7:26 PM ET
 More from Tom Blackwell | @tomblackwellNP


From John Belushi (right) and Chris Farley to Robin Williams, the list of comedians who have battled substance-abuse or mental-health problems is a long one. Some experts think the demons that kill them may also fuel their comedic success.

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The irony could hardly be more glaring. An entertainer rendered wealthy and famous by making other people laugh takes his own life in the throes of severe depression.

Yet Robin Williams' suicide this week, despite the shock and grief it generated, was anything but unprecedented. From Richard Pryor to John Belushi and Chris Farley, comedians have an alarming tendency, it seems, to descend into the depths of mental illness and substance abuse, with frequently fatal results.

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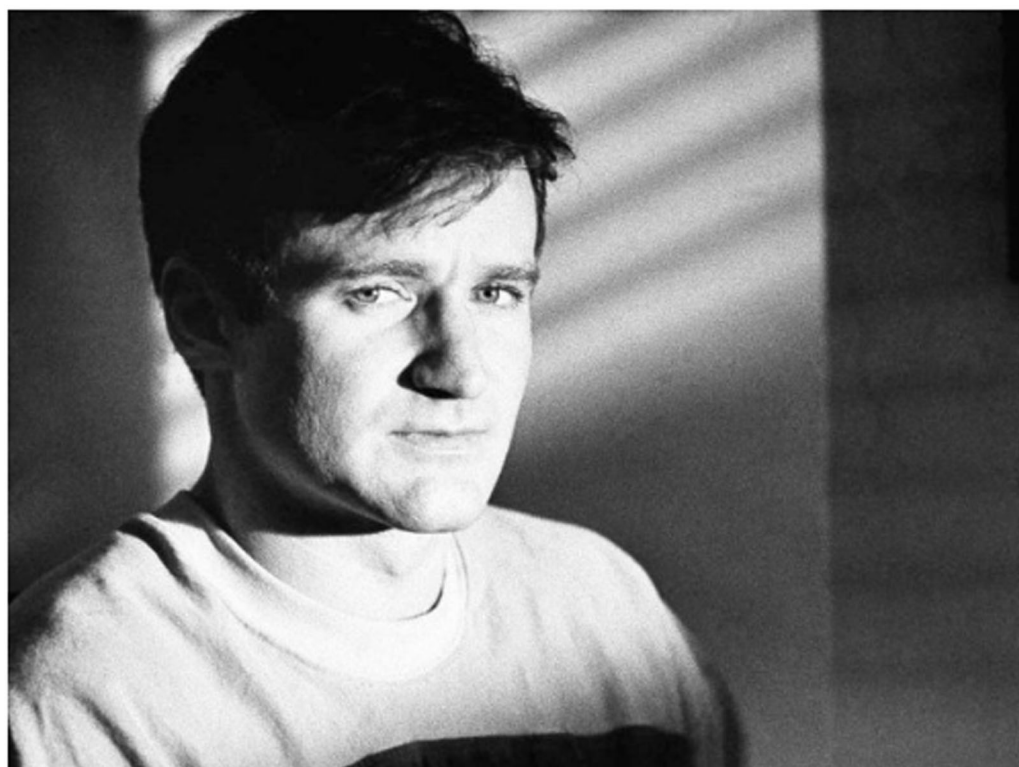
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Even as they act the role of professional life-of-the-party in public, many comics suffer behind the scenes from depression, bi-polar disorder and other psychological maladies, sadly capped in some cases by suicide or deadly overdose.

The phenomenon raises an unsettling possibility: the demons that kill some may be the secret to many comedians' success.



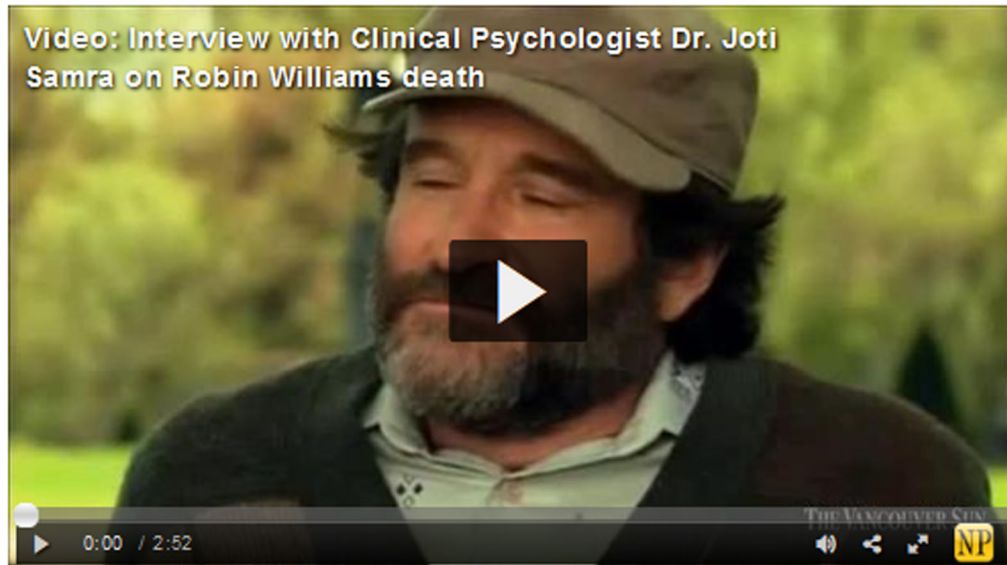
This 1982 file photo originally released by Warner Bros. Pictures shows actor Robin Williams as T.S. Garp from the film, "The World According to Garp." Williams, whose free-form comedy and adept impressions dazzled audiences for decades, has died in an apparent suicide.

A study by psychologists at Oxford University, no less, concluded earlier this year that comics have a series of traits linked to actual psychosis — but which also may be key to their funniness. Another analysis suggested that deep-seated angst is almost obligatory in an art that now emphasizes humorous confession over the old-fashioned one liner.

"I do think comedians today really value a laugh that comes from that place," said Amy Solomon, who interviewed dozens of them for a Princeton University thesis on mental illness and comedy. "Definitely people feel you kind of need it to fit in."

Meanwhile, a legendary comedy club in Los Angeles, its owner dismayed at the deaths of so many stand-up artists, hired in-house psychologists to treat his often-tormented talent.

Video: Interview with Clinical Psychologist Dr. Joti Samra on Robin Williams death



The final straw for Jamie Masada was the suicide in 2007 of Richard Jeni, who had more appearances on *The Tonight Show* than any other stand-up comic. The day before, he had visited Mr. Masada at the Laugh Factory.

"I lost a bunch of people, one after the other," the comedy impresario said Tuesday. "I didn't know how to deal with it. They are giving people, and no one gives to them, and I thought 'What can I do?'"

Mr. Masada, who instituted free therapy sessions in 2011, has worked with a who's who of American comics, from Rodney Dangerfield to Mr. Pryor and Dave Chappelle. Just six months ago, Robin Williams did a 35-minute set at his club.

Mr. Williams had spoken publicly about his drug and alcohol abuse, as well as his struggle with bi-polar disorder, and had been suffering major depression recently, his spokesman said. Still, it was difficult to penetrate the shell of jocularity he presented to the world — a typical quirk of comics, said Mr. Masada.

"I knew him 35 years but I never knew the real Robin," his attempts at an intimate conversation always deflected by humorous banter.

The list of other comics with serious mental-health or substance-abuse issues runs long. Mr. Pryor, brought up in a brothel and subjected to sex abuse as a child, once set himself on fire while free-basing cocaine, saying later he was trying to kill himself. Sitcom star Freddie Prinze took his life in the 1970s, John Belushi overdosed, Jonathan Winters spent eight months in a psychiatric hospital.

Across the ocean, absurdist comedian Spike Milligan had manic-depressive episodes throughout his life, while Tony Hancock, another British comic legend, killed himself in 1968.

I knew him 35 years but I never knew the real Robin

Still, there is little empirical evidence indicating whether comedians are more susceptible to mental illness, and not everyone believes they are.

"Is it perhaps merely that the juxtaposition between comedy and depression seems so stark?" Klaus Schuller, executive director of the Second City troupe in Toronto, asked Tuesday. "I tend to think it's more that comedy — and all the performing arts — are accepting places and outlets for the kind of free expression we rarely find in everyday life."

But Ildiko Tabori, the psychologist who treats Laugh Factory comics, said the evidence she has seen suggests stand-ups are certainly more prone to depression and bi-polar disorder.

The study of 500 comedians by University of Oxford experimental psychologists added a different dimension, reporting that the comics scored well above the norm on a scale for psychosis-like traits — linked to conditions such as schizophrenia and manic depression. Those personality quirks might help explain their ability to make people laugh, the researchers speculated in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*.

A muted version of schizoid characteristics, for instance, could produce "a greater ability to associate odd or unusual things ... to 'think outside the box,'" the study suggested.