

Hollywood comedy club offers laughter, therapy

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SLIDESHOW

THUMBNAILS

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Dr. Ildiko Tabori, the psychologist in residence at the Laugh Factory, believes comedians have a higher propensity for depression and bipolar disorder. REBECCA PLEVIN/KPCC

Most nights, at [The Laugh Factory](#) in Hollywood, you'll find professional comedians on stage, making people laugh.

But several flights of stairs up from the club there's a wood-paneled office with a wine-colored couch that, legend has it, was once owned by Groucho Marx.

Comedians come here to talk to just one person, about all the things that aren't funny.

"There's relationship issues, there's depression, substance abuse issues," says Dr. Ildiko Tabori, one of two psychologists in residence at The Laugh Factory. "There are concerns about their career, concerns about financial matters, loneliness."

Tabori and the other therapist are at the club most weeknights, to provide support to the comedians at no charge. The club pays the therapists for their time.

The unique program was the brainchild of Jamie Masada, The Laugh Factory's founder and CEO. He launched it long before Robin Williams' apparent suicide. Disturbed by the suicides of several other comics, including Richard Jeni, Masada says he decided to start hosting the psychologists about three-and-a-half years ago.

"They lose a comedian every year to a suicide or an overdose or something to that effect, and it was hard on Jamie, losing people that he knew on a very regular basis," says Tabori.

Tabori believes that comedians have a higher propensity for depression and bipolar disorder. They also face the fear, insecurity and anxiety associated with what she calls the hardest job in the entertainment industry.

"Depression that's unprocessed is paired with the loneliness of the road and the stresses that comes with being a performer in and of itself, and it makes for a really difficult, complicated match," she says.

She says that sometimes causes comedians to self-medicate with drugs, alcohol, and pills.

Such struggles aren't always visible to the audience, says comedian Johnny Sanchez, who starred on MADtv and voiced one of the animated characters in Happy Feet.

"Because we're making them laugh," Sanchez said, people, "automatically think our lives are perfect."

But it's not true, he says. The audience just needs to pay closer attention.

"A lot of times, if you listen to comics, they're talking about their pain, in their comedy," he says. "It's there, but everybody's laughing because they can relate to it: 'Oh, the divorce!'"

Sanchez says once the stage goes dark, and the adrenaline wears off, comedians can feel overwhelmed by stress.

"We're on this high after we do a set," Sanchez said. "Then we go home, and we realize, you're only as good as your last set. And then here comes the pressure."

Comedian Brett Riley has been doing standup for 15 years. He's familiar with those career and financial pressures. He says at first he resisted going upstairs to talk to a therapist. But he decided to try it after other comics urged him to go, and he's glad he did.

"We're bombarded with expectations of ourselves," Riley says. "And as an entertainer, those expectations can get out of control. Me being a new dad, me being a married man, you want to live up to certain expectations that you have for yourself."

Erik Griffin, who's on the Comedy Central show *Workaholics*, says he hasn't gone to see the therapist, despite the stress in his life. He says perhaps he and other comics don't seek out help because standup is such a macho world.

"You have guys who think, 'I don't need to talk to anybody!'" he says. "Or they think like me: 'I go on stage and I deal with it.'"

"Maybe that's not right," he continues. "Maybe they do need to talk to somebody. Maybe I need to go talk to somebody," he says, breaking out in laughter.

Psychologist Tabori hopes more comedians will ask for help in the wake of Robin Williams' apparent suicide. She shares an e-mail she recently received: "Thanks for keeping me and so many friends alive."

"And that, to me, is the best thank you I've ever had in my career," Tabori says.