



GET UP
Stand Up

The next generation of female comics is facing their darkest fears, revealing their deepest secrets, and—mic drop—receiving applause and acclaim for it. *Women's Health* explores the ways they're spinning tragedy into comedy, and how laughter can get you through life's biggest trials too.

By Anna Breslaw



(ditto, Sarah Silverman), and simultaneously self-deprecating and supremely catty (forever indebted to Joan Rivers). But the latest breed of XX-chromosome comedians has broken through to a whole new level of self-revelation—we're talking anxiety, bipolarism, anorexia, death...nothing is left off the stage.

FLAWS AND ALL

That brand of disclosure is particularly liberating because, for so long, female comics have been marginalized with an asterisk. First it was: **Actually, women can't really be funny.* Then it was: **She has to be a recognizable type: the nerdy, awkward girl. The frustrated housewife. The hottie with a filthy mouth.* But as public opinion of feminism has evolved, fearless female comics who refuse to be typecast have said, *Kiss my asterisk and just give me the damn mic.*

Take Ali Wong, seven and a half months pregnant, joking about her earlier miscarriage, exhausted from her grueling schedule, and taking tongue-in-cheek aim at Sheryl Sandberg. ("I don't want to lean in. I want to lie down.") Aparna Nancherla, likening beautiful models she sees on the street to "self-esteem pickpockets." Or Maria Bamford's offbeat material about her struggles with bipolar II disorder. ("Thinking of suicide? Don't do it! Not the season for it! Late fall.")

Much has been said about how laughter heals, but today's performers are updating this wisdom: With them, laughter kills. It kills anxiety, fear, loneliness, the stigma that makes us self-isolate and self-denigrate when we're going through a tough time. These ladies are doing a deep dive into their flawed psyches and not only coming up laughing, but making us laugh too. And it turns out that can be therapeutic on both sides of the footlights.

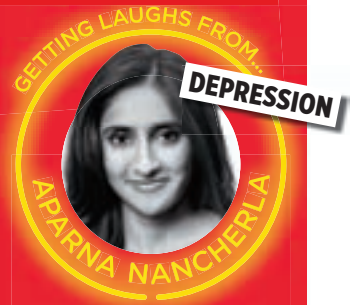
"Good evening, hello, I have cancer. How are you? Hi, how are you? Is everybody having a good time? I have cancer."

This is how comic Tig Notaro began her set at L.A.'s Largo in 2012. Within the previous four months, she'd been hospitalized with a severe bacterial infection, her mother had died in a freak accident, she'd gone through a breakup, and then, just a few days before the Largo show, she had been diagnosed with stage II cancer in both breasts. When the audience seemed flummoxed,

Notaro asked if she should switch to "silly jokes." Someone called out, "No, this is f-cking amazing." In a later set, Notaro refined her approach, recalling how she often used to trash-talk her small breasts. "I started to think that maybe my boobs overheard me, and were just like, 'You know what? We're sick of this. Let's kill her.'"

This time, belly laughs.

Wait, joking about cancer? And it worked? We've seen female comics riff on being promiscuous (props, Amy Schumer), politically incorrect

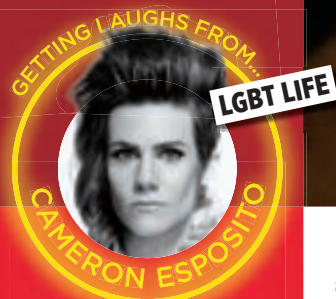


HOST AT NEW YORK CITY'S UPRIGHT CITIZENS BRIGADE THEATER SHOW, *WHIPLASH*

"I had always struggled with depression and anxiety, but over the last two years it really started to hit me hard—it was taking up so much of my brain. I wasn't motivated to write about anything else, so I had to work around it and write through it. Sometimes it was tough to get a reaction, because a guy can be a 'lovable loser' in a way that a woman often can't. We're painted in this role where, if we're sad, someone needs to help us. I actually think hitting this resistance has made me better at not shying away from stuff when it might not get a laugh right away, because I've seen that it has resonance in some people's lives."

CRACKING UP

Psychologist Ildiko Tabori, Ph.D., has had a unique insight into the psychic connection between comedians and their audiences since 2011, when she signed on as the therapist in residence at L.A.'s Laugh Factory. She was hired after the drug-related death of comic Greg Giraldo; owner Jamie Masada felt that the club's comedians needed some professional support, and Tabori stayed on to provide ongoing treatment for a few. She says what comedians go through in mining their pain is akin to the artistic process: "It's like drawing, or painting, but their canvas is the stage. When you get [your issues] out, they lose their power."



COCREATOR (WITH WIFE, RHEA BUTCHER, ALSO A COMEDIAN) OF TAKE MY WIFE ON SEESO, NBC'S SUBSCRIPTION STREAMING SERVICE

"When you're gay, it can be invisible, so there's all these micro moments of coming out. Like you're going to get bagels and someone says, 'Picking up bagels for your boyfriend?' And you have to make this decision in the moment and say, 'No, girlfriend.' Onstage, it's easier, because I can control it. When I was doing stand-up before anyone knew who I was, I would always come out at the beginning of the set. It didn't make sense to talk about my life otherwise, and it was a way of creating a safe space for myself." Her career also coincided with the marriage equality movement, which Esposito calls "an enormous gift."

Comics bring much the same baggage to therapy that the rest of us do—relationship issues, financial issues, family issues. But when they get to deeper problems or trauma, Tabori relies on a technique called normalization, which involves showing someone that what they're going through is understandable and that they're not alone.

Then the comedians do something magic with that feeling: They, in turn, normalize those issues for their audience simply by putting them out there. So when you hear Nikki Glaser, a former anorexic, riff on body image, or Liz Miele reference her "rotting family tree" because of their rampant mental illness, it can help ease your inner critic about your high insecurities or your OCD.

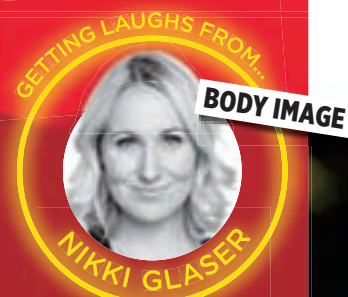
This normalization—otherwise known as empathy or connection—is especially important in these days of BS-loaded social media. We spend time crafting a glowing online image, partly to keep up with everyone else's fabulous online life, says therapist Melody Wilding, L.M.S.W., a

life and career coach who works with female entrepreneurs and millennials. "But where do we go to process this mess that we're dealing with on the inside? There's a longing for honest conversation."

THE GOOD FIGHT

Inevitably, not everyone loves this messy, unapologetically estrogen-centric humor. Whenever an outspoken female comedian breaks through, plenty of (mostly male) Internet trolls crawl out of the comments section to put her back in her place. Take, for example, the huge online backlash after the all-female *Ghostbusters* reboot was announced, with the nastiest harassment directed at Leslie Jones. Months later, hackers leaked explicit nude photos of her, along with her driver's license and passport.

How do you come back from that? Easy. "These comics are dealing with the blowback the same way they've dealt with their issues," says Tabori. "They're moving right through it and getting back to the material and the intelligence and who they are."



HOST OF COMEDY CENTRAL'S NOT SAFE WITH NIKKI GLASER

"The fat kid in class makes a lot of jokes to get friends, which is basically what I did in high school when I was anorexic. I did stand-up in college but it was just a bunch of jokes that weren't real. Then I discovered people like Sarah Silverman and started getting personal. It became a healthy way for me to talk about what I was going through. What surprised me was how it clicked with the women in the audience. No matter what I said that was dark or super weird that I felt was just about me, there was always someone who related. Making them laugh was powerful. There's going to be so many empowered women just from hearing us speak frankly. Whenever I see female comedians who inspire me...there's this cavewoman instinct. Like, I want to have a daughter just because these women exist."

And who they are is a hugely successful lot. Tig Notaro? She's now the star behind the Amazon show *One Mississippi*, which got critical raves when it debuted in September. Amy Schumer snared two coups this fall: the first female comedian to headline Madison Square Garden, and the first to make the *Forbes* Best-Paid Comedians list. And after a brief hiatus, Jones returned to Twitter in early September. She tweeted: "I will always be funny. Been through a lot in my life and I ALWAYS GET BACK UP!"

FROM LEFT: HENK BADENHORST/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF SUBJECTS (ESPOSITO, GLASER); FREDRIK BRODEN



"I BECAME A COMIC AT 41"

Writer Terri Trespicio went to comedy school—and all she got was a totally new perspective on life.

The first stand-up I ever did was at Gotham Comedy Club in Manhattan in August 2015. My body felt like a shaken bottle of Pellegrino, bubbles of adrenaline fizzing against my skin. I had a shorthand list of my set tucked in my pocket,

scribbled on a folded index card (online date, Eileen Fisher, pole dancing).

Then I told my opening joke—and it bombed, because there was no punch line. I paused and said, "Let's trash that one." That's when I got the

laugh. Lesson number one: Own the bomb. By the time I stepped off the stage, I was hooked.

How did I—a writer, public speaker, and brand strategist by trade—find myself here? Six weeks earlier, I had enrolled in an Intro to Stand-Up class in Manhattan Comedy School (an idea I had toyed with for years). Instead of giving us a lecture on the secrets of stand-up, our teacher said, "Who's first?" One by one we got up to the mic in the cramped, fluorescent-lit room and did our first five minutes, cold. Nerve-racking, yes. But none of us was all that great, or all that bad. (Okay, fine. Some were really bad.) We weren't there to instantly "be funny," but to find the funny through editing jokes, nailing the timing. There is no textbook, no lecture. You learn it by doing, period.

It had taken me a while to get to the place where I was able to handle that. While I could be funny in my job, it seemed another thing entirely to walk onstage at a club and pursue funny head-on. Too intimidating. But finally, I figured out that waiting for confidence is a waste; I told myself I would become confident by doing it, like I had everything else in my life, from writing to speaking to sex.

A year into doing stand-up, a friend asked me what I hoped to get out of it. "How serious are you?" she said. I'm as serious about it as I am about anything I'm willing to risk that much embarrassment for—which is to say, very. You don't do scary stuff because it doesn't matter, but because it does. And I've got a new kind of cred now. It's actually how people introduce me at cocktail parties.

More meaningful to me, though, is that while I've always looked at the world through a comedic lens, that lens is now sharper. Screenwriter Nora Ephron said, "Everything is copy," and for a comic, everything is material.

The other day at lunch, I was telling friends about this stupidly hot man I'd met at a party, and how I didn't think twice about giving him my number. "Really?" one of them said. "Of course! Are you kidding? If he'd asked for my social security number, I would have been like, '146-73...'" and that got a resounding laugh from the table. I filed it away for my next set.

So yes, my confidence has grown. But the true draw: There is simply nothing in the world like holding a hot mic in your hand and watching a crowd lean in, hungry for what you're going to say next.

SO...

CAN YOU LEARN TO BE FUNNY?

Absolutely, say experts. Here's how to harness it—without even getting on a stage.

WHY IT WORKS

It Charms and Disarms "Humor opens doors," says Martie Cook, M.F.A., a professor of film and television writing and creator of the brand-new Comedic Arts program at Emerson College (yes, you can now get a degree in comedy!). "When you make someone laugh, their defenses go down, and they become more receptive to you."

It Connects Us "The best part about women's humor in particular is that it reminds us we're not alone," says Gina Barreca, Ph.D., a professor of English at the University of Connecticut and author of *If You Lean In, Will Men Just Look Down Your Blouse?* "There's great relief in that, and joy too."

It Changes the Power Structure "Comedy takes power away from things that threaten us," says Cook. "When we can poke fun at a thing, we challenge its hold over us." Consider how groundbreaking TV shows, from *All in the Family* to *Transparent*, have used humor to change the way we perceive issues like racism, sexism, and gender discrimination.

HOW TO DO IT

Find Your Inner Comic "We all have the capacity to make people laugh," says Cook. To get better at it and refine your own brand of humor, she says, pay attention to what makes you laugh most. "Start seeing the world through that lens, and sharing it." Once you understand what's genuinely funny to you, says Barreca, "your voice becomes truly authentic. And with that comes real power."

Don't Try Too Hard "Humor is fundamentally social," says psychologist and humor researcher Gil Greengross, Ph.D. That is, it's how humans relate; we're wired for it. A study in *Ethology: The International Journal of Behavioural Biology* found that laughter usually happens in response to mundane (not knee-slappingly hilarious) statements. You don't have to be a total cut-up; even just an ironic inflection can get a laugh.

Study Improvisation An improv class is not only fun, it can hone a powerful skill, says Cook: your ability to go with the flow while making others look good, which has clear benefits in the professional world. —Terri Trespicio ■