



London

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2024;387:q2219<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.q2219>

Published: 14 October 2024

Why I . . . perform comedy

Consultant psychiatrist Benji Waterhouse talks to **Helen Jones** about his other life as an award winning stand-up comedian, best selling author, and screenwriter

Helen Jones

“I work part time, usually filling gaps in the NHS’s emergency on-call rotas—and there are plenty of those,” says Benji Waterhouse. “Locuming gives me the flexibility to work around commitments and deadlines for my other jobs.”

Waterhouse first started performing stand-up comedy when he moved to London to become a psychiatrist and believes that comedy can be a way of making people think about taboo subjects and health education. “I’d struggle to get audiences to listen to me talk about suicide and schizophrenia for an hour, but if you add some sensitive humour, they can tolerate it,” he says, having recently returned from a sold out run at the Edinburgh Festival.

“And the good thing about being a comedian-psychiatrist is that if anyone ever heckles me, I know it’s just because they didn’t get enough attention as a child. Once a punter shouted, ‘You are the worst comedian I’ve ever seen.’ And I just thought, ‘But what’s this really about?’”

Waterhouse first performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 2014 and reached the final of comedy competition *So You Think You’re Funny?* which has previously been won by Peter Kay and Sarah Millican, among others.

“I’d never performed in front of 400 people before and the buzz was addictive. There’s nothing like it. Nothing legal anyway. Comedy helps to make the intolerable more tolerable and for that reason I think the NHS often runs on gallows humour. Along with strong tea. Doctors are notorious for turning to certain vices to cope, but I think writing jokes is one of the healthier defence mechanisms,” he says.

Waterhouse adds that colleagues who see him perform usually tell him how brave he is—“which seems odd when some of them work in high security forensic hospitals with mass murderers. They do also usually thank me for publicly speaking about the dire state of mental healthcare in the NHS.”

And how do patients feel about being talked about on stage? “Everything is anonymised, and patients are never the butt of the joke. Interestingly, I’ve only ever had complaints from patients for not including their stories,” he says.

As well as performing, Waterhouse writes. During lockdown he joined an online writing course, got an agent, and his book proposal for *You Don’t Have to Be Mad to Work Here*¹ resulted in an eight way bidding war and became a *Sunday Times* bestseller in May 2024.

He describes it as “a fly-on-the-padded-wall account of NHS mental health services that also looks to bust some myths. For example, there are no padded walls.” He adds, “It tries to give a voice to those with serious mental illness who are ironically often left out of the mental health conversation.” It has already been optioned for television, and he is busy writing the screenplay, while working on his second book—working title *Maddening*—and preparing for a national book tour in May 2025.

How to get started as a stand-up comedian or comedy writer

- Jot down funny things you notice in a notebook or on your phone. The best comedy often stems from real life
- To borrow Stephen King’s advice on writing—“Sit your ass in the chair . . . and write.” It really isn’t more complicated than that
- Finally, run your ideas past friends or, better still, try an open mic night. Strangers are brutal but honest editors

¹ Waterhouse B. You don’t have to be mad to work here. Vintage Publishing, 2024. <https://uk.bookshop.org/a/11853/9781787333178>