

On creativity and mental health



Actor and comedian Maria Bamford discusses making work about your real life and the complicated relationship between creativity and mental health.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3455 words.

Tags: [Comedy](#), [Acting](#), [Mental health](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#).

Your work is really remarkable. Not only are you hilarious, but you have really opened people's eyes to the various ways we can approach talking about mental health.

Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

I'm curious about your process and the challenges of making public-facing work that is truly personal. It's so much about the real intricacies of your own life.

I mean, it could be—and this is negativity talking—but it could be sloth? It's just easier to talk about what *is* than making something else up. And now, you know, I'm aging, raging against the dying of the light, et cetera, et cetera. And so I go, "Oh, how can I make something that's useful?"

As for this [Noooo-CD Kickstarter project](#), I know there's a lot more information out there about OCD intrusive thoughts than there was obviously when I was younger, but I thought, "Oh, people seem to be still weirded out by it." So I wanted to make something funny about it, or something that is at least funny to me about it. And if nobody's interested then, oh well. The great thing about Kickstarter, if no one's interested, then it doesn't get funded. So rather than me having to drive 45 minutes in Los Angeles traffic to hear from someone after I've eaten a Caesar salad and feel a little sleepy, just to hear them go, "Yeah, no." This way I can do it myself.

You have a history of taking the reins and making things yourself and creating things for the internet, so it doesn't feel like a totally crazy left turn. You understand the practicalities of doing such a thing, which is valuable.

I am in charge of it. That's why I'm doing it very slowly. I was like, "I can only make three episodes a year." And one of them is already done, so it's basically two episodes a year. So it's going to be the slowest made web-series ever if it does happen. And I just like the idea of that, of slow business versus show business. But it is so painfully wrought over time that you're almost like, "Wait, what was this about?" Five years in. I think it's funny to do it that way, mostly just because there's an accepted idea of pumping out content where you've got to have something glorious every few seconds. So with this project, the disappointment is built in, you're already mad.

I also thought it was cool that the project page for the project is very transparent about how much it actually costs to make something like this. I think that is interesting, because it also pulls back the veil a little further for people who have no idea, even if you're doing something yourself with your own little small team, it's still more expensive than people realize. There's such smoke and mirrors around the entertainment business in general, so I like that this shows how much it costs, who you have to hire, and how much they need to be paid.

It's also to keep myself honest, you know? And also to just admit that I'm not just going to do this out of the goodness of my heart. For me, part of the creative process is about getting paid for my work and knowing that the work is valued. I want to know that there is an audience. Also, working with others and doing a production really isn't my strong suit, I'm not great at it. So I want it to be worth everyone's time. Stand-up, I would do for free. I try not to, but I would. It's so easy and low overhead. But something where it's like, "Oh, it costs a chunk of change," I think I'd rather see if anybody else is interested first. Because, yeah, I'm older. I'm not a superhuman person. I need to eat french fries and have them delivered. I don't want to make my own french fries, but that's going to cost me.

I was obsessed with your show, *Lady Dynamite*. I know from friends who are actors that the grind of shooting a series is very intense. And then when you are the central figure in the series and the show is based on your life, that has to be a lot. What was your takeaway from that whole experience?

Well, it really cemented to me what my limits are, right? I am a 12-hour day person tops, and I need to have an hour where I just fall over in a heap in the midst of those 12 hours. And then I need to have 12 hours between the next two shifts, which is very unusual if you're the star. There are labor laws to protect kids, but unless you are actually a child, it rarely works that way. There are penalties for working extra long hours, but to get around that and get things done faster, they'll just say, "Oh well, we'll pay penalties, we'll have to pay you extra." So you end up getting three hours of sleep, but you're paid a ton of money, which might not always be worth it.

That being said, the show was such an exciting experience for me. I mean, it really couldn't have been better, but the only thing I was able to do was act in it. I didn't have the wherewithal to write or direct or have anything to do except for spit out the lines. So there were moments of hilarity. But yeah, it was also beyond my abilities, is what I'm saying. Being a star of a TV show, it really was hard. They'd have someone pick me up in the morning and drive me home at night because I just was like a little doll, if you will. They were very understanding and tried to accommodate me the best they could. They made me a tent on set where in between setups I could just go in there and lie in the darkness. And it made a huge difference for me, because I was just like, "Oh my god, I can't even look at anybody, just for a little while."

There's real wisdom, I think, as you get older, no matter what you do, about just being real about what you're good at and what you're not and truly what your limitations really are and just owning it.

I know people meant well, but it was challenging. I remember when we're making the TV show, they were like, "Well, why don't you switch meds? It's your meds that are making you sleepy." And I'm like, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no." Yeah, I'm not going to do that.

Yeah, the perfect time to change your psychiatric meds is probably not right when you are in the middle of making a tv show.

[laughs] Perfect idea. Just cut your meds and see how it goes. Yeah. But that's also embarrassing. I hate being limited. I would rather be great at everything. I want to destroy in any kind of comedy room. I want to be able to make anybody laugh, even if it's in a different language, even if it's not a laughing-appropriate situation. Like, it's not even a comedy show at all. It's a crime scene. I go to crime scenes and see if I can make people laugh, just to take on the challenge.

I have a dear friend who's been sober for over 30 years now. We were at an event once and they were offering everyone champagne. After she declined, they just wouldn't let it go. The woman was like, 'Not even one little sip? What can that hurt?' And my friend was like, 'Ok, I'll take a sip, but can I come live on your couch in a couple of weeks? Because that's where this leads me.'

Right! It might be a little slower than that, but get ready.

I was following your social media postings during the height of the pandemic and you did this thing that I thought was amazing. You would choose people who responded to your tweets and they could do a one-on-one zoom

with you, wherein you could try out new material on them. I thought that was so amazing, but it also made me wonder what it would be like for both parties and how weirdly challenging it might be to make a stranger laugh over zoom.

Well, I'm an introvert, and again, I'm kind of old, and I somehow have this thing where I go, "Of course people want to hear me talk!" So there's this initial bizarre assumption that there are people out there who will be interested. I mean, you'd have to ask the people who've gone through it what it was like for them, but for me it was really helpful and fun.

I mean, I've done that thing where I've listened to somebody's act over Zoom one-on-one and it's just been delightful. I have some laughs and it's just for me. And I've only had a couple weird ones where there weren't a lot of laughs, a couple where people were doing fairly intense chores while I was going through my material, which I totally get. And that was very funny in its own way. I'm trying out bits, they are folding laundry or something.

But yeah, for me, I'm much more of a theatrical comedian. I like rehearsing. I know exactly what I'm going to say. That's what I always liked about stand-up—the ability to plan—because I am fairly shy and I don't have a lot of experience speaking off-the-cuff. So yeah, that's my comfort level. So that's why I did the Zoom shows. It wasn't just to work on my material, it also provided the opportunity to connect with somebody. And the fun part was that sometimes people would open for me. I'd go, "Would you bring me up onstage after you do five minutes?" And then I would time them. If they were a comedian they'd do their five minutes, or if not maybe they would sing a song or read a poem, then I'd I'd do my thing. So hopefully we both got something out of it. I gave most people a tee-shirt, unless I didn't have their size.

I mean, people will be talking for eternity about what they did during the pandemic and how it changed things or didn't. But I do think one of the very weird and amazing results of the covid experience was that you would have these interesting experiences with people, even if it was through the guise of technology, that you might not have been able to have any other way. It was fascinating to me.

Totally. I loved that the world was kind of opened up. Like, "Oh, I'm talking to somebody in Australia." Or I had the biggest one-off show I've ever had because it was like 2,500 people online at once to watch me.

And how was it to get back in front of live audiences again after that?

Once we went back to performing in person, it was so exciting to be with people. It was weird how it completely, to me, transformed this material that I had been doing for a year online into something totally different. It was weird. It was like it bloomed or something. It was neat.

Are you someone that's always writing? When you're developing materials, do you make notes? I'm just curious how that process works for you. Comedians can have such different ways of working.

Well, right now, I have an hour prepared and I'm going to shoot a special. And so, yeah, I'm just trying to decide which things to cut, but I also rewrite it a little bit every time I do it, a little bit, put different things in. But yeah, it's like a painting. One day it's done...unless, of course, you run past it one day and then you go, "Oh, I just need to dab something on there to make that a little better..." Maybe that's not a good metaphor, but my husband's a painter. I'm trying to think of something that I'm writing now in my brain box. My current hour is about trying to belong, trying to be a part of things while not wanting to have any responsibilities of being a part of things.

Such as?

Yes, I'm married, but are we doing everything together? No. Yeah, I'm an American, but does that mean I'm going to have to stand up and sing that song? The thing is, I desperately do want to be part of things, and yet I'll do everything I can to get out of it by just being an irritant, by questioning stuff, by biting the hand that feeds

me. There is a constant pattern in my life of me going, "Thank you for the job! Now it's my time to teach you a lesson."

I feel that as a gay person sometimes. Like, do I have to do like that and listen to this and wear that?

Yes. I'm also in all of the 12-step cults and I love them so much, but they're completely bananas. They are just so crazy and rigid in these very strange ways. I'm totally into harm reduction. I just think if somebody's trying to do better, don't shame them and take away their coin. Or I don't know. Everybody gets coins. But yeah, that kind of stuff. And also, I have the same thing with comedy. I'm a comedian, but then there's some things about that that I don't love. Like the whole idea of, "You got to make everybody laugh." Really? I don't know about that. What if I don't like them? And vice versa.

Well, the culture of comedy is complicated. Some of it is really not great.

Oh my god, no. We've got traveling sex offenders. Thank god they don't have to be registered because we can follow them on social media. They're on tour. We know exactly where they're at.

Your work is very unusual. I appreciate that it sometimes, at least to me, veers into this other world that blurs stand and performance art. Do you still run into audiences that don't know what to make of you?

Yeah. I mean, what I do...it's very specific and a lot of people really love it. But not everyone. I mean, I just bombed at this event that was a benefit for schizophrenia research. I opened for Howie Mandel, and I always forget that at benefits, I should not take the gig just because whoever hired me is a fan. The man who runs the organization, who has schizophrenia, is a big fan. The people who they're trying to get money from in Napa Valley who are drunk off two bottles of wine? Not big fans. They would like to hear Howie Mandel tell them some heteronormative material that is charming. They do not want to hear me going into characters, et cetera. Yeah.
[laughs]

When you are in front of an audience and you have that realization that this is not your crowd, that they are not feeling it?

Well, you have to do your time. So I did. I know some people embrace the bomb, but what happens... There's something, it feels like, beyond my control and my body just kind of starts to shut down. I start shaking, and then I also get this weird rage. And so I start enunciating my jokes and projecting them louder or getting to a whispery tone.. either it goes one way or the other, louder or whispery. And I don't seem to be cognizant. I always have these great plans of mindfully being curious about the moment when I'm bombing, but it's almost like I black out. I'm just like, "Oh god. Oh god." It just feels so bad. Like, "Oh my gosh, I'm ruining somebody's good time. Somebody was having a great time when the first comic was up, and now I'm ruining everything and we're all in this pickle together." And it's really shocking. I don't understand why there isn't some technology to fix it, like legs that help people walk out of the room. If only people could grow legs! [laughs]

One question I had when thinking about your Noooo-CD project. For people who might not be familiar, what does it mean to deal with intrusive OCD?

Well, I'm not a professional mental health person, so I don't know how to explain it in a technical way, but what I've been told is that intrusive thoughts are a kind of OCD. Also, I should say that there is the International OCD Foundation, IOCDF, and then there's treatmyocd.com, which is a commercial enterprise, but they got great information on the type of OCD that I'm going to be trying to do the series about. And, again, this is only one specific person's experience, but the idea is this. Okay, the classic OCD that everyone thinks about usually involves washing your hands. So the intrusive thought involved there would be like, "Oh, I just washed them, but I touched something else so they're not clean." So you've got to make sure that you've washed them six times—counting or whatever before you leave the house—and those thoughts themselves, those are intrusive. If I don't do this, something bad's going to happen.

And people think all sorts of crazy stuff, which is my favorite part of OCD and what makes it so fascinating. Like, there was this woman who had intrusive thoughts about golf balls and how if she hit a golf ball it was like hitting god's testicles or something. Anyways, just these weird things that our brains do.

Another common one involves postpartum depression. Women will be afraid that they're going to hurt their baby, or that they're going to murder them or something like that, which is of course, the exact opposite of what they want to do or are capable of doing. But at certain points in OCD you just avoid all contact with things that trigger those thoughts, which can include taking care of your child. It becomes impossible to do anything. So I think that's what I mean when I talk about intrusive thoughts. Does that make sense? I think everybody has that weird thing occasionally where your brain thinks of something weird or you flash on the least appropriate thing at a weird moment, but if you have OCD in a serious way it actually stops you from enjoying your life. It makes it hard to function. It's funny, but the reason I chose to do stand-up was about the avoidance of human contact. I would not have to be around people that much except in this very controlled environment.

That's so wild. Because for so many people, avoiding people and avoiding scary human contact would not involve getting up in front of a room full of strangers.

Well, they're dumdums. [laughs]

Essential Maria Bamford:

Lady Dynamite: Comedian Maria Bamford stars in a series inspired by her own life. It's the sometimes surreal story of a woman who loses - and then finds - her shit.

Maria Bamford: Weakness is the Brand: Maria Bamford is back and subjectively better than ever! Weakness is her brand, so get ready to feel much better about yourself. This Lady Dynamite explodes onstage (after 2 (two) naps with her husband Scott and 2 old, pillowy dogs). Let her be the poor example from which your greatness can be determined.

Maria Bamford: What's your Ailment?: Join host and comedian Maria Bamford as she talks candidly with fellow comedians and artists about their experience with mental health, past or present.

Maria Bamford: Ask My Mom (Webseries): "Hi, I'm Maria Bamford! My Mom is Marilyn Bamford, a 70-year-old retired family therapist and a Netflix connoisseur. She has years of wisdom to tackle any query, question or fact of life. But, she's also one of the busiest senior citizens on the planet! We can only get her to answer questions while she's getting something done, but it's priceless hard-hitting advice - whether she's microwaving baked potatoes, doing yard work or jumping on a mini-trampoline.

Maria Bamford: The First Time Someone Loved Me for Who I Really Am. (NYTimes): While hospitalized in a psychiatric ward, the comedian learned the truth about enduring relationships: They're not reserved for a select few.

Name

Maria Bamford

Vocation

actor, comedian

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