



# Bereavement and comedy: an interview with Robyn Perkins



Robyn Perkins is an up-and-coming stand up comedian who has been on the circuit since late 2011. In 2013 she and her friend Dave Chawner put together a show *Over It: Death, Anorexia and Other Funny Things*, talking about their experiences – Dave’s of anorexia, and Robyn’s of losing her boyfriend, who passed away suddenly in 2010. Robyn and Dave took their show to the Edinburgh Fringe in summer 2013 and received positive reviews, and continue to perform and develop their material. In this article, Kate Mitchell asks Robyn about the challenges of using bereavement as material for stand-up comedy.

## **What made you decide to use your experience of loss in your stand up comedy?**

My boyfriend died before I started stand-up comedy, but there were a few moments and conversations shortly after his death that were unexpected and a bit ridiculous. They were moments I remember thinking, ‘if I wasn’t suffering so badly, this would be almost comical’. And I remember thinking, ‘someone should make a black comedy out of this’. I guess there is something about the extreme emotion that is so charged with energy, it makes any commentary more real and vibrant, and potentially funny.

One of the wonderful things about stand-up is that due to its unlimited material and boundaries, it has the potential to connect with people on any level, connecting to every emotion, but in a really unique way. There is an incredible speech that stand-up comedian Louis CK gave at George Carlin’s memorial about developing deep comedy material. He says that once you work through the jokes on dogs and drinking, through the jokes about your job and your family, through everything else, the only thing you are left with is the deepest darkest thoughts, and that is the source of the most powerful material. It was this speech that inspired me to write about the hardest experience of my life.

## **For those who haven’t seen the show, what kind of stories/material do you cover?**

The show is performed in two halves, with Dave Chawner discussing his experiences with anorexia. The show looks at the idea that you are your experiences, yet, this is no bad thing. The show is called ‘Over It’, as we are never really ‘Over’ our experiences, yet they make us who we are. Throughout the show, we both come to terms with this realisation.

Specifically in my half, I first talk about fathoming it, and how I approached grieving. Being a scientific person (who does not believe in God), I was very constructive in my approach. To do this, I create my own five stages of grief, using personal experiences to walk through each one.

As the stages connect stories of my bereavement, there is an underlying theme about my relationship with my partner. While there are countless books, websites and bits of advice, few people discuss how to deal with sexuality and grieving. This aspect of the show takes some people by surprise, as it is one element of bereavement which is rarely talked about. Though it may be very open, it is important to me to keep it in; sexuality is an aspect which is very real in bereavement, and most people don’t talk about it.

## **Comedians often share personal and embarrassing stories – did you find sharing details of bereavement different to sharing other details of your personal life?**

There are embarrassing stories in this show as well!

In all seriousness, this show is obviously particularly close to me. One of the ways I grieved, however, was to talk to everyone and anyone about it. From that point, it was not as unnatural as you may think. I found it most difficult to share the show with people that knew him. While I understood what I was doing, I wanted to make sure those who were closest, understood what I was trying to do.

The other thing that took me by surprise was that when Fringe started, I underestimated the emotional toll it would have on me. As a comedian, you try to separate yourself from your material to critique it. If you were too emotionally attached, you wouldn't be able to cut bits that aren't working, or take away from the show. While the show never became clinical, during the few months before Edinburgh, I spent more time analysing wording, phrasing, etc. Further, the people I was working with were doing the same. But when I got to the Fringe and started performing, the audience's emotion, and connection, along with my own emotions of re-telling the story daily, really hit me hard. I was lucky to be doing the show with Dave who has been a great friend and support throughout.

**How do you ensure that the audience are comfortable with the subject matter – in particular to feel that they have 'permission' to laugh?**

Every crowd is different, and often react to their peers. In comedy, you do need to make people feel comfortable to laugh, whether it is a nob joke, or a joke about a pencil. You don't want them looking around and thinking they can't laugh as other people aren't. In this situation, the need to put the audience at ease was even more challenging.

We start the show by telling the audience that it is a show about death and anorexia, and that we are comfortable enough to talk about these topics, so we want them to feel comfortable laughing. There are a couple of moments in the show as well, where I remind them they can laugh. For the most part, this works, but every crowd is different. The audiences are coming to a show with death and anorexia in the title, so I think they are expecting something different.

**On the whole, how have audiences reacted?**

**Have there been any particularly strong reactions, either positive or negative?**

It has been mostly positive, or if anyone didn't like it, they haven't told us. While most of the reviews were very positive, I was once critiqued for being too open, especially on the sexual side of things. Since that review, the show has changed, but not as a reflection of the review, more as I delved deeper into other aspects of the process.

**How have friends and family, and those who knew your partner reacted?**

Everyone who has seen the show has responded quite well. However, when I first started telling people about it, the reactions were mixed. Some of my friends saw it as a step back in the grieving process, to keep re-living the situation. There were also concerns whether it would seem tactless or trite. However, this is more of a function of not knowing what the show is. The show is less about what happened, and the story, but more about bereavement and my process of grieving.

Throughout the Fringe run, the best moments have been when people who either knew him, or went through similar experiences in their own lives, have come up after and empathise, and relate. A lot of people can sympathise in situations, but when grieving, I just wanted to feel I was not alone. This was applicable both for my half of the show about bereavement, but also with Dave's part about anorexia.

**Have you been conscious of 'rewriting' your experience at all? Or changing the material or even the facts, over time, to react to the audiences' reception?**

I have been very true to what happened, adamantly so. The show isn't set over a specific timeline, so if anything isn't accurate, it is the order of what happened. However, despite comedic advice, it is important to me for it to be honest and truthful.

**Has sharing your experiences through comedy changed your experience of bereavement?**

It has clarified it. As I wrote, I was analysing my feelings, and why I acted in certain ways, which inherently made me understand my grief more. The structure reflects this understanding. The conclusion, especially, was hammered home throughout the past year, and I love it more and more every time I perform it. It recognises that I am OK. I am living my life, and this experience will always be a part of who I am. I will never be 'Over It', and I don't want to be. But now I am OK.

See [www.overitcomedy.com](http://www.overitcomedy.com) for upcoming dates. ■

*Louis CK Honours George Carlin. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R37zkizucPU> [accessed 19 February 2014]*

