Tips for Comedy and Life: Living Creatively with Gary Gulman



There might be no better way to describe Gary Gulman than with his own words: “A Gryffindor body with a Hufflepuff soul.” As a comedian and sensitive commentator on life, Gary is the best demonstration of the ways that the two roles are a natural fit in one person. This week on 18Forty, David Bashevkin is in conversation with Gary Gulman, available for listening here. This week’s Weekend Reader brings you a curated selection of Gary’s tips for the comedic life.

What does it take, and mean, to live the comedic life? How is the comedic life different from the life lived by non-comedian plebeians, and what might thinking about it offer us? In 2019, Gary wrote 366 comedy tips, one a day for a year. Read them—these tips aren’t just tips for comedy, but they are tips for life, and they offer a window into how living life like a comedian may make us more deep, thoughtful, and engaged. At the very least, it may just raise the standard of your Twitter takes and “kiddush!” jokes. Do us all a favor, and learn from the best.

Lesson 1: Use your skills to help others

Given the life experiences you have, the successes and failures, wisdom learned and forgotten and learned again, how may you use your platform to help someone else succeed?

> **Tip No. 300:** Pass your knowledge of comedy and comedy business on to newer/younger comedians. Explaining your craft, process, and philosophy will reinforce your personal understanding and remind you to practice it now. Also it will strengthen comedy overall.

For Gary, the motivation to help was what first drove him to first share these tips:

> I don't know exactly why I decided to do this. I think, subconsciously, that since my career took off, I had survivor's guilt in that there are plenty of people funnier than me, more talented than me, and harder-working than me who haven't built an audience like I've been fortunate enough to. Having my special, *The Great Depresh*, coming out was part of it, too. I was so grateful for the opportunity that I'd been given by Judd Apatow, who has consistently given back in a way that a lot of comedians fail to, that I wanted to give back, too. I don't have enough juice to give young comedians a career or enough money to quit their day jobs, and I couldn't commit to doing a lecture series like I wanted, so this small way was the best I could do.

At its best, sharing wisdom is always bidirectional in some way, and all grow from the collaboration. If you can laugh with someone, what else might you be able to do with them? How else might you grow from joining together?

> **Tip No. 174:** I have never collaborated so extensively as I have with director Michael Bonfiglio on my current special: *The Great Depresh*. It has been a revelation how much better two minds have made it. Collaborate! One rule: you have to make each other laugh, hard.
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> **Tip No. 308:** Be there for your comedy friends. We have a bizarre lifestyle even the greatest therapist cannot grasp. Opening up about fears and frustrations as well as your hopes and victories with a simpatico colleague is invaluable, especially while on the road.

Who knows how becoming a more creative person may change the rest of your life?

Most poignantly, Gary doesn't just teach tips to help others, but thinks about his comedy as a tool for the betterment of his listeners. In his interview with 18Forty's David Bashevkin, Gary speaks about the prayer he quietly offers before each show:

> I would pray to God before every show, “Please let me make the people forget about their problems while I’m on the stage” … I speak in English, and I say, before every show I talk about the miracle of even having this outlet, that stand-up comedy exists, that I’ve been given the talent to succeed in it, and that I’ve gotten to the point that I’ve gotten, that I haven’t been passed over like so many great talents have, that I’ve been fortunate enough to get to this point…

As Gary changed, his prayer changed with him. As his struggles with mental health became more pronounced in his life, and subsequently in his comedy, his prayer grew to reflect his new hopes:

> “Please help them forget about their problems” became, “Make them feel better about their problems, or feel less alone with their problems,” as I started to speak more about my struggles with mental health, and I don’t know what the next step is. The thing that I’m really obsessed with these days is our values with regards to the poor, and our ideas of strength and masculinity. My next special will be either about those two things, or one of those things. I couldn’t have done it 10 years ago, I didn’t have the skill, but I gave myself a lot of confidence by being able to finally talk about mental illness with humor and make that funny.

Lesson 2: Respect your creativity

To live and think as a comedian is to think creatively, and to push the boundaries of your own creativity, to treat your creativity with respect. The creative instinct is at play in all learning and life, and religious life can be deeper and richer with a more active creative instinct.

> **Tip No. 62:** Look for inspiration *everywhere*. Paintings, music, poetry, rap, novels, nonfiction, short stories, theater, philosophy, etc. can all provide a spark for creativity. Cross-pollinate your work with broad influences and watch your creativity grow.
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> **Tip No. 283:** There are things you love but haven’t done in years. Do one of them this week. The enthusiasm and fresh perspective may inspire some interesting writing. Even if it doesn’t, you reunited with a loved one. Enjoy!
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> **Tip No. 41:** You know those quirky little things you do and think? Collect them in a file or on paper. Even if you’re a storyteller, you can use these as details to add depth and distinction to your jokes.

The work to deepen your comedic and creative instincts, are in many ways the same work that expands the life you lead. Live life more expansively, more richly, and invest in your own creative instincts.

> **Tip No. 30:** Today, remove your earbuds for an hour+. Take time to ruminate in your head and toss around ideas. If you can think out jokes while listening to music, I envy you. For a lot of us, near silence is best. If you need the distraction for anxiety, I get it.
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> **Tip No. 55:** This one will meet with resistance. Many of us lean toward sloth, but exercise, even just a long walk, fuels creativity. Try your best not to listen to music or podcasts. If you're ruminating on your act it counts as writing.

Take the time. Do the work. Who knows how becoming a more creative person may change the rest of your life?

> **Tip No. 170:** Summer goals: "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." — Maya Angelou. This summer, write that story. You don't have to perform it or make it funny. It will inform your writing. It may open you up on and offstage.

Closing words: Does comedy matter?

Gary's HBO special, *The Great Depresh*, is its own answer to this complicated question, as it provides a window into depression through the lens of comedy. But in his own way, Gary's 21st tip also provides the subtle closing words to this question, for now:

> **Tip No. 21:** I could never prove it, but I believe that young Jews started walking a bit taller in 1995. I did. That was the year Adam Sandler released "The Chanukah Song." Comedy is influential. Comedians are powerful. "Just jokes"???

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