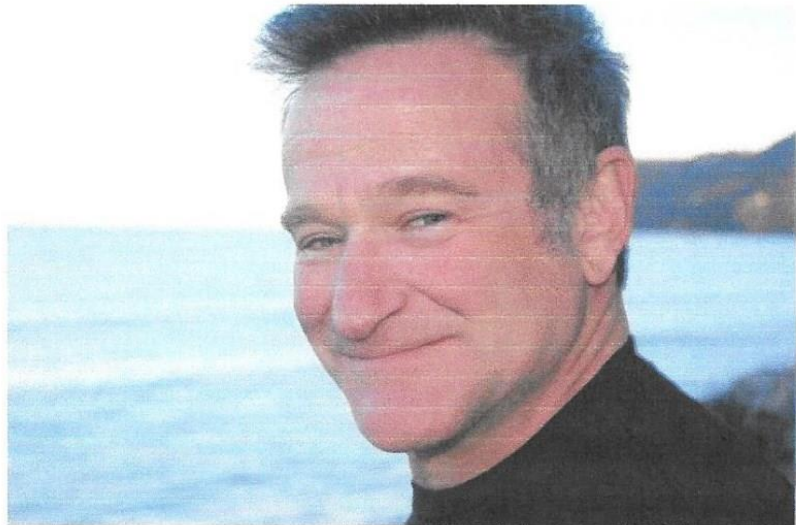

LAUGHTER LAWYER USA ON THE BRAIN

By Debra Norwood

Much has been said recently about the untimely death of actor, comic, and friend to humor, Robin Williams. As the world reels in collective shock, the unspoken question is ‘Why?’ Did Robin not know how much the world needed and loved him?

I was personally shaken to the core. On the very day of his death, I was watching *Patch Adams* while I was preparing to meet the real Patch Adams that very next week. I had seen the movie many times and wanted once again to witness Robin



Williams’ portrayal of that legendary doctor who encouraged humor and laughter as a vehicle for healing. My pain was personal, because Robin Williams’ humor, his joy, and his zaniness had helped me during so many times and in so many ways! But of course, I did not know him personally, so I am not privy to the angst that may have driven that incomparable icon to his death, nor do I wish to speculate on the impetus. The one thing I do know is that Robin Williams was frank with the public about his struggles with addiction, anxiety, and depression. His wife also mentioned that he had also recently been diagnosed as having Parkinson’s disease.

There is a temptation to say: “What does someone who has fame and fortune have to be anxious about?” This comment is easily understandable when the concerns in one’s own life might be centered around bills that need to be paid or meeting life’s basic necessities. But in that question there is an implied answer that anxiety can be cured with material things—or at least that anxiety should be diminished if these coexist.

Laughter Lawyer USA On The Brain (Continued)

After all, this person presumably has no need to worry about the day-to-day struggles that common folk endure, right? Wrong! As an attorney, I used to tell my clients that a person who makes a thousand dollars a month worries about hundred dollar issues, and a person who makes ten thousand dollars a month worries about thousand dollar issues. Worry is worry, no matter how much money you have.

Other commonly noted public ruminations involving the rich and famous and their struggles with addiction or depression often center on the issue of choice. Thinking that everything we do in life is our choice presupposes that all of us were born with the same “normal” brain and background, that we are all vestiges of an idyllic person who has found himself in this place and time as if he or she had walked straight out of the Garden of Eden. The truth is that our genetic make up, including the epigenetic effects of what our ancestors ate and did, as well as our current environment, nutrition, trauma, stress, health, and what other people have chosen to do in our current and childhood interactions, all can affect our own choices. They all blend to make us the individuals that we are. The truth is that unless we have a clear insight into the workings of the brain and an actual image of the brain of the person about whom we are speculating, then that is all we will ever have—speculation.

As Laughter Lawyer USA, I promote myself as a resilience trainer who helps people become more productive, creative, and cheerful so they may become harbingers of peace through the use of positive interventions, mindfulness, therapeutic humor, and laughter. I talk about helping individuals by:

Reframing Thinking
Reforming Bad Habits
Reassessing Public Image

Lately, however, I have made sure to add an important component to my coaching curriculum: health for the brain. I elected this route because more and more as I help individuals and groups who are struggling with change of mindsets, I realize that using the words “choice” or “choosing happy” or choosing to be drug-free or to be anxiety-free can be very demoralizing and sound very accusatory. It is not always as easy as Facebook and other media ads suggest, and carries a judgmental inference that people who fail to be happy are not putting their minds to it. In a simplistic quote, these pretty posts and armchair psychologist statements imply that all one has to do is decide, and bam! Your life changes. True, the brain is the body’s command center, and if you

Laughter Lawyer USA On The Brain (Continued)

change your brain, you can change your life, but choosing to do so requires help.

Some carry the heavy burden of abuse, which affects the health of their body and their brain and, ultimately, even their lifespan. Also, stress kills! Studies are coming forth regarding special molecules of DNA called telomeres, protective caps which stop coils which contain genetic information that keep every cell in your body from fraying. These same studies suggest that children and adults who are victims of poor upbringing and domestic violence have shorter telomeres than those not subject to these kinds of stressful events. Just as an individual's telomeres can be dramatically shortened by faulty genes, chronic stress, and a poor lifestyle—ultimately causing a shorter lifespan—positive changes in these areas can offset that damage. Telomerase is an enzyme that replenishes the DNA which helps these cell caps but, there again, studies suggest those reserves are determined—you guessed it—by adopting a healthy lifestyle to compensate for the telomere decline. Otherwise, one is a destined for premature aging. The expression “frayed nerves” might be best applied to these frayed telomeres!

Stress also affects our immune systems, our hearts, other internal organs; ultimately anything that can hurt our internal organs can hurt our brains. It has been shown that our cognitive skills can be

severely impaired by many external and internal interlopers that literally rob one of the ability to think straight. Yes, stress can even damage our brain irrevocably if not stopped in time. That is why, when my clients ask “What were they thinking?” when someone did something hurtful, irrational, or illogical to

them, my answer is always, “I do not know; maybe they just can't think straight through no fault of their own.” And, after finding out more about these people and their pasts, I am, usually—and unfortunately—right.



Laughter Lawyer USA On The Brain (Continued)

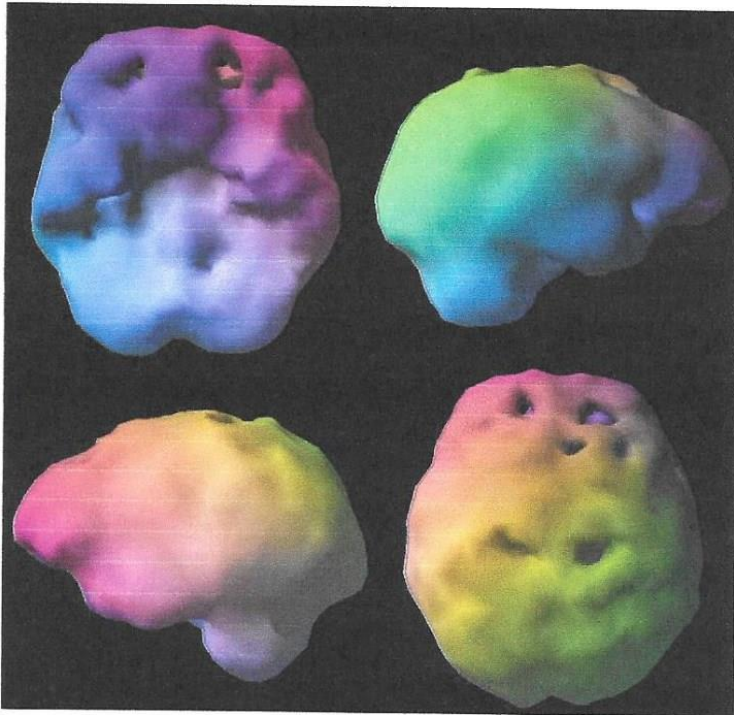
As an attorney, I know that no one knows what shapes another person's emotions until they get to know that person and can objectively look at their life. I was able to represent people whom others in society may have seen as reprehensible: a drug addict, a mother who neglected her child, an abuser, a youth who committed an act of violence. In my representation I tried to avoid judgment and focus instead on healing and restoration. Indeed, the day I chose to withdraw from my last few cases to pursue Laughter Lawyer USA as my primary focus, I had both women and teens hugging me and crying outside the courtroom, thanking me for being their friend. They knew I neither judged nor blamed them for what they had done, even though it hurt me to the core that their behavior had resulted in pain to themselves and to others.

BLAME. This word is the reason that I have chosen not to just dwell on the therapeutic benefits of humor and laughter, but also to include the brain science behind joy and all that eliminates the sense of shame and blame that people with anxiety feel when they fail to see positive results from positive thinking. These people experience frustration because motivational speeches, religious doctrine, twelve-step programs, the trending "Secret," yoga, affirmations, and mindsets may or may not stick, and the sense of failure in not keeping a diet, learning like others do, or stopping bad habits leads to learned hopelessness and the need to just give up.

The truth, however, is simple. To have a positive mind, your brain must be in the condition to receive the mindset! To choose to change you must chemically have the functions to allow for a rational desire to change. If your impulse controls are overriding all logic, and your fear is so overwhelming that a rational thought can't be found, then how can you choose?

HOPE. Fortunately, there is hope for the anxiety-riddled person who is paralyzed by life and cannot make a decision without the wheels churning and churning, "Did I make the right decision? Did I make the right decision?" As Laughter Lawyer USA, I feel blessed to be able to spread this good news! There are people, institutions, and medical professionals who understand that to look into people's emotional wellbeing, one very logical place to begin is looking at the brain of the subjects themselves. One such professional is Dr. Earl Henslin who holds a doctorate in clinical psychology and is a family therapist and Christian counselor. He is also the author of many books, my favorite of which is *This is Your Brain on Joy, A Revolutionary Program for Balancing Mood, Restoring Brain Health, and Nurturing Spiritual Growth*.

Laughter Lawyer USA On The Brain (Continued)



I met Dr. Henslin several years ago in San Diego at a conference hosted by AATH, the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor. There, Dr. Henslin and another expert, Dr. Lee Berk from Loma Linda University, were presenters who shared valuable empirical studies regarding the numerous physical benefits of humor and laughter to enrich and heal people's lives. Afterwards, I was prompted to approach Dr. Henslin and ask him, in a roundabout way, a question that troubled me so much—the same question that we pose here: *Why is there a difference in one person's reaction to life's*

vicissitudes as opposed to another? The two-hour conversation that ensued and the other communications that have followed have been life changing. As a result, I have chosen, after much research and prayer, to incorporate selected portions of the Amen Clinic curriculum "Making a Good Brain Great" in all my therapeutic laughter presentations and workshops.

For those who are riddled with questions of why they can't focus, why they are filled with angst, addiction, or anger and are feeling ashamed at their inability to "work out" their own problems, or for those parents and loved ones who ask themselves "What did I do wrong?" when a child of theirs is impulsive, acts out, or has difficulties with attention deficit disorder, compulsion, anxiety or depression, Dr. Henslin suggests we direct our attention to studies done by Dr. Daniel G. Amen of Amen Clinics. Dr. Amen offers the clear and convincing proposition that the brain is involved in everything that we do, therefore by looking to see if our brain is working correctly, we may unearth previously unseen insight into the problems.

One such way is with brain SPECT imaging. Since certain parts of the brain are tied to certain behaviors, imaging the brain can help to understand and help the brain by targeting the parts of the brain that are not functioning at optimal levels. Since the

Laughter Lawyer USA On The Brain (Continued)

brain has only a certain amount of reserves and is one of the most complex organs in our bodies, learning what things hurt or help the brain can assist in helping change the brain. Did I just say *change the brain*? Yes! The good news is that if we can begin to take care of our brain, it may actually start to heal itself to the best of its ability. That is called the neuroplasticity of the brain.

One way to get to that place of healing is by setting a goal to learn all you can about your own brain and to then heal the brain in every way that is possible. Of course, it is not a one-step panacea. With a healthy diet, exercise for *both* the brain and body, nutritional supplements, and, if needed, prescribed medication, healing can, in some cases, be miraculous. Dr. Henslin's books and website are great resources in finding anecdotes of individuals who found relief for emotional upsets including rage, physical challenges, marital discord, and pornography addictions. Dr. Amen's website, PBS Specials, and many other materials offer so many heartening success stories about the dramatic assistance that people who suffer with attention deficit disorders, brain trauma, psychological trauma, or addictions have received.

**THE NEXT STEP**

One way to start learning about your own brain is to take an online assessment which can be found at <http://www.amenclinics.com/audit/>—and set goals about what you want for yourself in order to get healthy and back on track to pursuing your dreams. Many who have taken the assessment and/or had the brain SPECT imaging and counseling through Amen Clinics have understood that childhood falls, blows to the head, or car accidents that caused concussions may have caused the emotional and physical discomforts they experience. To finally learn that about oneself gives one the

Laughter Lawyer USA On The Brain (Continued)

compassion and courage to then make proper choices towards wellbeing. After that, teaching our brain to be focused helps us to teach it also to be healthier and happier.

MY PARTING THOUGHTS

Sometimes it takes the courage, as my clients who are suffering from addictions know, to “act as if” we are the people we want to be, until we can become that person. In all my presentations I reach a point where, after all the laughter subsides and everyone is relaxed and happy, I can don my yellow bumblebee hat and tell folks that it’s time to “BEE SERIOUS!” After the initial chuckles, we get down to the business of thinking deeply about that which each person wants most out of life and whom they dream of becoming. I invite them to “act like busy bees” in working towards their goals and encourage them to “Bee It Now!” by embracing the present in order to immediately start working on those things which they may have left by the wayside to improve their own happiness. I encourage them to document their newfound commitment with a hashtag of mine which journals whatever they are working on. I encourage you to do the same by posting your intention and affirmation online with **#beeitnow**.

Of course, in my lighthearted presentation I do recognize that nothing is as easy as just setting an intention to become what you *want* to become. But setting specific goals is a beginning. A dream, a wish, a childhood happy wonder: they are all beginnings on a journey to health, happiness, and self-discovery. To achieve those goals, however, there are five essential elements to ensure that your desire will not fail. They are:

1. BE HUMBLE AND DON'T DO THIS ALONE: We all need to avail ourselves of every ethical support group imaginable to assist us in our journey. Human beings are SOCIAL beings, and, if left alone to our own thoughts, those very thoughts might sabotage us. Yes, folks, our thoughts may lie to us! Support mechanisms for reality checks are essential. Be it 12-step programs, faith-based addiction recovery programs, exercise programs, personal coaches, educational programs, and, for brain health, programs like those suggested through Amen Clinics, use anything and anyone that is legitimate, honorable, reputable, and established to help you fulfill your goal. If cost is an issue, search for every community group imaginable that can help.

2. EXPECT THE BEST: Teach yourself to become an incurable optimist! Optimists have the expectation that somehow everything will turn out OK in the end. Pessimists, though, psychologists suggest, actually have a better grip on reality. They are hyper-

Laughter Lawyer USA On The Brain (Continued)

vigilant of all things that can go wrong and can clearly and most realistically see obstacles that can sabotage goals. Lawyers are, by definition, trained pessimists, because we have to foresee everything that can possibly come up to sabotage the success of our cases!

But studies show that a pessimist tends to fail dismally at actually reaching his or her goals, while those optimists find ways to surpass obstacles and do amazing things. To see a wonderful affirmation of what an optimist is, check out the Optimist Creed. It is no wonder that most major religions and faiths of old have been telling us this all along.



3. FIND THE HUMOR IN YOUR CHALLENGES: Life happens. And some of it is not funny. Nevertheless, humorists, comedians, and satirists have been around for centuries, mocking these terrible events and convincing the world that the human spirit is indomitable. Even in disaster, dark humor emerges as a survival instinct. Search for jokes about your personal situation and, chances are, if you are involved in a support group (suggestion #1!), you will be able to laugh with like-minded people facing the same challenges.

The best entertainment you can give yourself on your down time may be watching funny YouTube posts and videos. One such resource on YouTube is a great motivational speaker, a colleague at AATH, Karyn Buxman, at www.karynbuxman.com. She is a nurse and "neurohumorist," whose sidesplitting talks focus on the purpose behind struggles. Your humor is unique to you, so watch what makes you laugh and feel uplifted and positive. This is called cinematherapy, and yes folks, watching the right kind of movie that inspires faith, gratitude, forgiveness, laughter, and humanity is brain healing! Once such movie for me is *It's a Wonderful Life* with Jimmy Stewart. In the movie his

Laughter Lawyer USA On The Brain (Continued)

heartaches become his blessings. As my husband always says: "Every moment is perfect if you make it so." Challenges are learning opportunities.

4. **AVOID NEGATIVE SOCIAL MEDIA:** Keep your mind, heart, and soul pure from thoughts that can sabotage your efforts. You will always be subject to your own A.N.T.s (automatic negative thoughts) which you will have to learn to combat, so don't add others' angst and unhappy thoughts to your own. Delete negative posts and "unfriend" people who can sabotage your brain. If they are family or people you feel you can't "unfriend," be respectful but do not engage. Do not lend credence to the naysayers who always appear, sometimes regrettably, from within your own household. If your support group (suggestion #1, again!) is giving you cautious messages and reality checks, trust them but close your ears to the ranting and raving of others who are not as lucky enough as you are to want to learn more about changing their brain and changing their lives.

5. **PRACTICE NON-JUDGEMENT:** Brain imaging and online tests for ADD, anxiety, and depression may result in a suggestion or diagnosis that indicate that you and your brain are just not operating at an optimum level. You may need a psychologist, a psychiatrist, a life coach, a medical doctor, medication, and/or vitamins. You might be advised to change your eating habits and to include more exercise in your life. Remember those lifespan-indicating telomeres I spoke of earlier? It is no surprise that the same changes in lifestyle that may be suggested to you by qualified professionals will also help combat the shortening of those telomeres and help lengthen your life! Remember, what is good for your body is good for your brain. The knowledge that you are NOT perfect should be comforting, too, since, well, **NOBODY IS!**



Laughter Lawyer USA On The Brain (Continued)

A wonderful way to learn to develop compassion for yourself is by adopting techniques taught by Pragito Dove at www.discovermeditation.com. As a person who relies on faith and contemplation myself, I always joke that prayer and meditation are my primary medication! Laughter, of course, is a marvelous brain lubricant as well, because of its many health benefits and help with socialization. It is, indeed, why I am Laughter Lawyer USA! Click on www.worldlaughtertour.com to see if there is a certified laughter leader or a laughter club in your area.

Additional ways to help your brain are art therapy, aromatherapy, yoga, jogging, biofeedback, individual prayer, faith-based programs, pastoral counsel, marriage counseling, and caring for a pet. At Laughter Lawyer USA, our seminars and presentations introduce these concepts and a number of alternative care and traditional modalities to support you in pursuing the dreams you wish to obtain. For information regarding the use of emotional support animals to help with health conditions and post-traumatic stress, contact Laughter Lawyer USA and find out about our Pets for Peace.

Lastly I say to you: be proud of yourself for who and what you are. And, if you slip, be happy that you are one of the lucky ones who know that you can always get up, dust yourself off, and start again!

For books by Dr. Earl Henslin go to www.DrHenslin.com

For more information on how to learn more about the brain visit www.amenclinics.com

For presentations, motivational speeches, or personal coaching that includes therapeutic humor and laughter as well as brain health, contact Debra Norwood at laughterlawyerusa@yahoo.com. Find her on [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#) or through the Look Good! Feel Good! Coaching program at www.fashionacademy.biz.

Photos Courtesy of Laughter Lawyer USA
