



good HUMOR

*Laughter is indeed the best medicine for **Chelsea Handler**. During the worst and best of times, the comedian, best-selling author, and late-night talk-show host laughs at herself—and the world*

BY LAUREN PAIGE KENNEDY
PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF LIPSKY/CPI

Have you no shame, CHELSEA HANDLER?

*The brutally honest comedian answers
this question with an emphatic, "No!"*

Handler famously dishes it out with a take-no-prisoners style on her late-night E! talk show, *Chelsea Lately*. She gladly takes it, too. Whether she's mining her own love life, mocking her reputation as a boozy party girl, or serving up coming-of-age anecdotes, the new Queen of All Media doesn't shy away from her foibles, missteps, and altogether humanness.

Apropos to her other life as an author—she's had four best-sellers, and her fifth book, *Uganda Be Kidding Me*, a collection of travel-inspired essays, hits shelves this March—Handler's life is an open book.

"I don't take myself too seriously," says the star. "I think that's emotionally healthy. If you make a fool out of yourself, I don't think there's any point in feeling stupid about it. It's better to share it and laugh. Everything makes for a good story, in my opinion, after about 20 minutes. Even if it's horrendously embarrassing or humiliating, it's always funny."

As she chronicles in her second book, *Are You There, Vodka? It's Me, Chelsea*, she first knew she could be a comedian

at age 21 after being charged with driving under the influence. When she was asked to tell a court-mandated class about her DUI experience—which entailed spending the night in prison with female murderers—she left her fellow offenders overflowing with laughter. The rest is comedy history. So is getting behind the wheel loaded, for that matter. "I got a DUI once," she told a panel of reporters. "I haven't gotten one since."

What sets Handler apart, then, is her total self-acceptance, warts and all. "I embrace my shortcomings," she says. "I don't have too many regrets. You have to embrace the things you don't like about yourself or the things you find embarrassing. You can't be like: *I don't want people to know I did this!* Who cares?"

Truth Be Told

She feels the same way about her love life, which she's not at all uncomfortable discussing. The comedian never married but has been in several long-term, publicly charted partnerships—she dated Comcast CEO Ted Harbert for four years, followed by an on-and-off flame, hotelier André Balazs, with whom she split for good in October—and is the first to tell you she's enjoyed her fair share of romances.

So the double standard women often face when it comes to their sexuality doesn't sit well with her. "I feel like it's our duty as women to go out and get what we want," Handler says. "There's nothing wrong with thinking, *That's a really hot guy!* And going up to a man in a bar—which I actually did this weekend in New York City—and giving him your phone number. It doesn't matter whether he calls or not. It matters that you put yourself out there and you don't really care about the outcome. I don't have any shame in that at all."

She's equally unguarded about her unplanned pregnancy at age 16, which she chose to terminate after pained reflection. While she doesn't joke about that memory, she doesn't hide from it either. Brokering in honesty, it seems, is Handler's business.

Reviewed by **Michael W. Smith, MD**
WebMD Chief Medical Editor



The World ACCORDING TO CHELSEA

Real friends are there for you.

"I think it's important to show up. Period. Physically, emotionally, any way, over and over. Not once, and not just when people are in crisis. You know, actually be there on a consistent basis. That's what a friend is."

Sarcasm can be good.

Handler grew up in a family where the kids ran wild and sarcasm was the spoken language. "We all have a dry sense of humor. We get along pretty well. We bonded together because of our [inattentive] parents. We were basically six orphans in an orphanage."

Travel as much as possible.

"I love going on great vacations with my friends," says the star, who's been known to make jaunts to Mexico with her pal, actor Jennifer Aniston. "My book *Uganda Be Kidding Me* is about the safari in Africa I took two summers ago with five of my friends, my sister, and my cousins. We went to South Africa and Botswana. Every story is embarrassing. It's why everyone thinks Americans are idiots, basically."

Go with your gut.

"I don't have a lot of people advising me," says Handler, who calls all the shots on her show. "I find it empowering to say: *This is how we're going to do it.* I don't like to negotiate over things I have a gut feeling about. If you want to be in business and work with me, this is the way it's going to be. Now, if you want to take advice from people you have respect for, that's one thing. But when you know what you're doing and you have a lot of confidence in it, you should trust your gut."

“I never wanted to be a stand-up comedian. I just wanted people to know who I was.”



Sharing her experiences publicly and through a comedic lens is therapeutic, says Mary Lamia, PhD, professor at the Wright Institute in Berkeley, Calif., and a clinical psychologist with a practice in nearby Kentfield.

“We all make mistakes and feel shame,” Lamia says. “But experiencing unrelenting shame is a dangerous emotion. It separates us from others and is the No. 1 cause of suicide. The antidote to shame is human connection. When we embrace the things that happen to us, we connect with other people. Acceptance from others is a form of healing.”

That Handler deconstructs her history for laughs before a live audience is not lost on Lamia. “There are four clinical responses to shame,” she says. “You can hide or withdraw. You can avoid, which is what drives substance abuse. You can attack others. Or you can attack yourself. When a comedian makes us laugh using shame, what she does is take those four responses and turn them around. Telling stories and using comedy to create pleasure in others is restorative. It’s exactly what people do in self-help meetings or with their friends.”

Anyone who follows Handler’s writing knows she’s dabbled with the avoidance response. And she certainly serves up with self-deprecating humor. What about the third response?

“People can say that I’m a bully. That’s hardly how I look at it,” she answers. “I think it’s better to call people out on ridiculous behavior than to not say anything. I like people who have opinions. When I agreed to do my show, I said I’m not going to be a talk-show host who doesn’t make fun of people who are making fools of themselves. It’s not the most

popular way of going about things. But it’s certainly entertaining.”

Tears of a Clown

The theory that many brilliant comics draw their humor from a well of sadness might be true in Handler’s case. At age 10, she lost her oldest brother, Chet, when he fell off a cliff while hiking. His sudden death devastated her family and continues to reverberate among its members, decades later. “I’m 40 now, and when people leave, I think, ‘Are they going to die?’” she says.

When the star’s mother went through the final stages of breast cancer in 2006, Handler felt that loss acutely, too. But, unlike when her brother passed away, she had time to process her grief.

“When my mom died, we had six months to a year to emotionally prepare for it,” she explains. “It was so sad, but not as hard. I think the things you don’t recover from are the things you have no warning for.”

“Sudden loss is unfinished business,” agrees Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, professor of gerontology at the graduate school of The College of New Rochelle and senior consultant to the Hospice Foundation of America. “But one isn’t easier than the other. The loss of a younger person leaves unanswered questions. Was it preventable? There may be guilt, anger, and plenty of ‘if only’s.’”

Handler left little room for “if only’s” with her mother. When the cancer took a turn for the worse, the comedian remained at her mom’s bedside. She recalls how her father, who is still living, refused to accept the inevitable.

“My mom said, ‘You have to explain to your dad that I’m actually dying, because he doesn’t believe it.’ And my dad is sitting right there, reading the used-car section, or whatever. I yelled, ‘Do you hear what Mom is saying? She says she’s going to die! You need to say goodbye to her.’ And he said, ‘I won’t say goodbye. We’ll just keep her alive no matter what we have to do.’ And I said, ‘No. You don’t keep someone alive for

good GRIEF

Comedian Chelsea Handler grappled with grief when two family members died—one suddenly, the other after a prolonged illness.

Is there a healthy way to deal with so much loss? “Grief is a personal process, and everyone goes through it in an individual way without set responses,” says grief expert Kenneth J. Doka, PhD.

However, he adds, “there are five tasks involved with grief: accepting reality, dealing with emotions about the death, relocating the person in relation to your life, readjusting without that person, and grappling with any lingering philosophical or religious issues that may arise.”

Many people struggle with mourning, Doka says. But unhealthy patterns reveal themselves when a mourner “becomes self-destructive or can’t function, or can’t ever envision life without the person who has passed.”

If this occurs, Doka says, consider your available resources. “First, look inside at your strengths and what has helped you with loss before. How did you cope?

Next, look for external strengths. Who are the people you can count on? Are there organizations you belong to? Does your faith offer support? Finally, there are many support groups with counselors trained in grief to help you recognize you’re not alone.”

you. You let them die for *them*.’ That was the only time in my life I really had to be the adult.”

Sorrow resonates in her voice as she relives the moment. A beat passes, then the comic in her can’t resist: “Yeah, that lasted three weeks.”

Healthy Act

Handler first moved to Los Angeles from New Jersey at age 19 with the intent of pursuing an acting career. While she has appeared in the occasional feature film over the years, stand-up comedy was a better fit.

“I would go on these auditions, and I’d be surrounded by these actresses who were half the size of me. Fact is, everyone is *still* half the size of me!” she jokes. “Everybody [in Hollywood] has a little bit of body dysmorphia. I’m guilty of that. You’re surrounded by people who look perfect.”

But after years of living a comic’s lifestyle—late nights, alcohol-fueled tours, cigarettes, and maybe a few other substances—Handler is committed to cleaning up her act. “I’ve gotten rid of a lot of bad habits this year,” says the trailblazer, who is only the second woman after Joan Rivers to host her own late-night talk show.

“I don’t smoke anymore,” she adds. “I work out regularly now, play tennis, do Pilates. When I was in my 20s I would party whenever I wanted to, however I wanted to. That gets boring. I actually feel healthier now than I’ve been in a long time. Anything in my life that was causing me stress I’ve removed.”

So what inspired the overhaul? “I finished my [latest] book,” she says. “That was a good turning point. I broke up with a boyfriend, and that was a good turning point. I just wanted to make that statement, to be healthy inside and out. My brain was there, but my body wasn’t.”

She’s also prepping for a different kind of book and comedy tour. “I’m taking downtime now to physically prepare,” she says. “I want it to be a healthy tour. When you go on the road, usually everyone’s partying. I don’t want to do that. I want to have sets that I remember and be there for the people who’ve paid for tickets to see

me. I’m preparing myself, mentally and physically.”

With five books under her belt, all based on her own life, does she ever worry she might deplete the fodder? “I’ll never run out of material,” she says. “Who would ever have thought I’d have more than *one* book? Not me. I never wanted to be a stand-up comedian, or a talk-show host either. I just wanted people to know who I was.”

And then, the punch line: “I’ll probably wind up being a senator. Because that’s not something I’m planning on either.”

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‡Restrictions apply.