

Actors highly vulnerable to mental health problems

July 19 2016, by David Ellis

New research from the University of Adelaide is raising the curtain on the not-so-glamorous aspects of being a professional actor, with psychology experts finding that Australian actors experience a wide range of threats to their mental wellbeing.

Researchers from the University's School of Psychology conducted in-depth interviews with a group of 20 Australian professional [actors](#), after realising that little had been done to understand the psychological experience of the acting profession in this country.

The results are now published online ahead of print in the journal *Australian Psychologist*.

"There are many positives associated with acting, such as feelings of personal growth and a sense of purpose in the actors' work. Many of them see it as a 'calling' and couldn't imagine doing anything else professionally; they feel driven to do it," says lead author Alison Robb, who has been conducting this research as part of her PhD in Psychology at the University of Adelaide.

"However, we also found that actors are highly vulnerable to depression and symptoms of anxiety.

"Their mental wellbeing is threatened in a range of ways, such as: a lack of autonomy in their profession, lack of control over their employment and general working environment, complex interpersonal relationships, a

high level of self-criticism, a high level of criticism by family and friends for their choice of profession, and a heavy drinking culture.

"Actors also report experiencing vicarious trauma through their acting experiences – they are so emotionally, intellectually and physically engaged in their roles that it can be difficult to switch off. Some report having nightmares and intrusive thoughts related to their roles," she says.

Ms Robb – who herself is a former theatre director – says acting has a false reputation of being a glamorous profession.

"Many professional actors find themselves out of work for long periods of time. This creates a high level of instability in their lives, adding to feelings of anxiety," she says.

"They usually have no control over whether or not they get a particular role. If they aren't successful, they can feel demoralised and humiliated. When they do find work, it's often for very little money."

Ms Robb says these findings are relevant to both the acting profession and to psychologists.

"Quite opposite to the Hollywood stereotype of the attention-seeking, neurotic actor who is always in therapy, our research has found that Australian actors are extremely unlikely to seek help for the problems they're experiencing.

"As clinicians, psychologists need to think about how to apply their services to people with particular needs. Actors are such a group, and our recommendation is that psychologists find a way to reach out to them in a meaningful way," she says.

More information: Alison E Robb et al. Exploring Psychological

wellbeing in a Sample of Australian Actors, *Australian Psychologist* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/ap.12221](https://doi.org/10.1111/ap.12221)

Provided by University of Adelaide

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