

Actor, Writer, Director and Ukulele Player William H. Macy Joins Dr. Kipper

Peter: [00:00:00] Hello, everybody, and welcome to Bedside Matters, the podcast that addresses the medical issues that impact all of us every single day. We're hopefully going to give you the answers you're looking for so you can be more informed and healthier. I'm Peter Tilden. I'm joined by Anna Vocino and Dr. David Kipper. You're all good?

Anna: [00:00:16] Great. Thank you for asking.

Dr. Kipper: [00:00:17] All good.

Peter: [00:00:19] And we're joined by another person, a very special guest who is an actor, a writer, a director of film, stage and television. Now, I can do the, you may know him from Boogie Nights, Shameless, Fargo, and about 70,000 other credits and I think everything that David Mamet has ever done: Mr. William H. Macy. How are you, sir?

William H. Macy: [00:00:40] I'm swell, Peter. Thanks for having me on.

Peter: [00:00:42] We're thrilled you came on. And I know you have a long relationship with David. How far do you guys go back?

William H. Macy: [00:00:48] David, how long have we been doing this?

Dr. Kipper: [00:00:51] It's been a while.

William H. Macy: [00:00:51] I think we first hooked up when the kids were born. So that's 20 years ago.

Dr. Kipper: [00:00:55] Yeah.

Peter: [00:00:55] Let's start off with brain chemistry to find out what your brain chemistry is. Because we talked to Felicity, who's fascinating. Fell in love with her. She's unbelievable. But she said she overthinks things. She goes down rabbit holes. She's not a great decision maker. And David determined what her brain chemistry was. And then she said, but wait until you meet Bill.

And just looking a bit and prepping for this, there's a lot of solitude there. But then you said, when you're teaching, be prepared, be overly prepared, know your lines backwards and forwards. So there seems to be also a certainty to what you do. So, David, is that accurate, first of all? And then David will tell you what your brain chemistry is.

William H. Macy: [00:01:35] I think that's pretty accurate. Yes.

Dr. Kipper: [00:01:37] Yes. And I think you guys are on opposite sides of the neurotransmitter brain. We all have some imbalance in one of these neurotransmitters, serotonin or dopamine. We inherit this. We don't choose, but it does direct certain behaviors.

And some of these behaviors can be incredibly annoying in a relationship and to ourselves, things that we do that we're not so happy about. But when we interviewed Felicity, she was more on the serotonin imbalance side. And those behaviors tend to be

people that are more internalized. They are less impulsive, less risk taking. They can get into the weeds on subjects.

And the dopamine side, the other side of the equation, which is how she decided your chemistry was directed, are people that are a little more engaging. They're outgoing. They're not socially shy. They are risk takers. They might have impulse issues. When they get mad, you know it. And these are all things that define which neurochemical in our brain is imbalanced.

And this has great reference into not only how we behave, but also how we can modulate those behaviors by trying to address or mitigate those different neurotransmitters. So having said that, here are some examples of dopamine-imbalanced brain chemistry. So let us let us know if Felicity was right.

William H. Macy: [00:03:17] Hold on. If you've got a dopamine imbalance that means you got too much or too little?

Dr. Kipper: [00:03:22] Too little.

William H. Macy: [00:03:23] Too little. Okay, if there is a serotonin imbalance, the just too little serotonin?

Dr. Kipper: [00:03:27] Yes. Now we're all hybrids. We all have some behaviors of both, but we predominantly have one over the other. So someone that has a dopamine insufficiency they tend to have focus issues. These are the kids in school that had ADD. Sound familiar to you?

William H. Macy: [00:03:47] What was the first part?

[laughter]

Dr. Kipper: [00:03:54] Okay, moving on to the next one. Impulse control. When you're angry, Bill, do people know it or do you hold it in and not let it out until you're ready to explode?

William H. Macy: [00:04:05] I think I'm a holder-inner, but I know I've changed through my life, and it's less so. But, yeah, when I was a kid, I would bottle it up and it would come out in very inappropriate ways.

Dr. Kipper: [00:04:18] And risk taking. You ride? I know you ride a motorcycle.

William H. Macy: [00:04:22] I take risks, yeah, I'm bold.

Dr. Kipper: [00:04:24] Okay. You're presented with a problem to solve, are you going to solve it in the big picture, or are you going to get into the weeds about all the different things that can go wrong, and how you have to solve it?

William H. Macy: [00:04:38] Big picture.

Dr. Kipper: [00:04:39] Yeah. Again, these are all behaviors that are suggestive of a dopamine imbalance. So Felicity got it right on the button.

William H. Macy: [00:04:51] Yep.

Peter: [00:04:52] With the focus problem, I'm curious. Like with a Mamet play, I'm terrified of memorizing. I can get up in front of 50-some people and not care if I bullet point and am just B.S.-ing and get off. But if you give me three lines to memorize, I'm panicked. So how do you, somebody who's in these rich theater pieces and stuff, how do you...

Anna: [00:05:09] How do you memorize a zillion Mamet lines?

William H. Macy: [00:05:12] It's, you create the habit of it. You say it out loud a whole lot. Felicity actually taught me how to learn lines efficiently. Boy, you know, I sort of failed upwards into acting. Everything else doing, I wasn't good at. The only thing I ever had any success at was acting.

So I don't know if I'm cut... No, I do, I do. I'm cut out to be an actor. I can learn the lines, although it pisses me off when I have to, but I can learn the lines. And I like concentrating on one little thing at a time and moving forward, which is the definition of an actor, just do one thing at a time.

Peter: [00:05:54] But you also direct and you said you're unorganized, really unorganized. So that forces you to be organized.

William H. Macy: [00:05:59] Yeah, I said I direct, I didn't say I was a good director.

[laughter]

William H. Macy: [00:06:04] And, in fact, I failed miserably a couple of times, which hurt my feelings and shocked me. I thought I would have all the answers, but I didn't. You hit it on the nose, boy, that takes a skill set that perhaps I could learn, but I don't have it.

Anna: [00:06:20] How do you process failure?

William H. Macy: [00:06:23] Well, I grew up in western Maryland, and I'm Lutheran, so we just don't, we don't think about that.

Dr. Kipper: [00:06:29] Bill, speaking of this, to Anna's point, if you wouldn't mind sharing your experience with playing the ukulele, speaking of humility, and how that evolved.

William H. Macy: [00:06:41] Well, my brother told me to play, how to play a guitar. And, about 20 some-odd years ago, I picked up a ukulele, which is the crack cocaine of stringed instruments. I mean, one strum and you're hooked. And, it's the sweetest little thing. It's only got four strings, but you can play anything ever written on it, and you can put it in your suitcase, and you take it out of the case, and people smile so they don't expect anything from you. You're happy.

And I started writing birthday songs, and it turns out I'm pretty good at it. I write passable tunes and I like writing lyrics. I really, really like writing lyrics. And I'm an old-time lyrics guy, like '20s and '30s, you know, clever rhymes. I never repeat a rhyme. I never repeat a lyric. And I try to tell a story.

So then I started, I hooked up with Woody Creek Distillers because I live in, you guessed it, Woody Creek. And, this distillery, in order to, I'm the spokesperson. And when the

pandemic hit, I wrote a song and Felicity videotaped it. We made a little video out of it, and, I thought, that's what I'm going to do. So to make a long story short, I don't do birthday songs anymore, I only write about alcohol.

[laughter]

Peter: [00:08:04] You specialize. I respect that.

William H. Macy: [00:08:07] Yeah.

Dr. Kipper: [00:08:08] But you started, Bill, you started performing in these venues and initially it wasn't going well.

William H. Macy: [00:08:17] Oh my God, it was awful. It's a brand-new thing for me. I've been in front of the public my entire life. I've been on stage my entire life, but it's a different kettle of fish to play an instrument and sing songs, especially when they're songs that you wrote.

And so I didn't know what I was selling and I didn't know how to perform it, And so I said yes to a lot of things that were just disastrous. I did the Jazz Aspen Film Festival there, 17,000 people. Yeah, they're there to see these rock bands that are legendary. And here comes this dumb-ass actor with a soprano ukulele and did a little ballad.

And I could literally hear them saying, "What would be a good time to go get beer? Kids, are you hungry?" And I thought, what have I done here?

Peter: [00:09:02] And, by the way, what I noticed about both of you as a couple is you're both honest and forthcoming, which leads us to our next medical topic, a topic that's somewhat embarrassing, a lot of people don't talk about. And you are willing to talk about it, which I think is also very brave.

And a member of my family recently dealt with this same thing that you're dealing with. So this will help countless people by just you mentioning it. And that would be hemorrhoids.

Anna: [00:09:30] Hemorrhoids.

William H. Macy: [00:09:31] The gift that keeps on giving. Boy, it just happens when you get older. You just start leaking out of all the holes in your body.

Anna: [00:09:39] Well, with women, it happens when we're younger. So I'm sorry that you guys have to skip it.

William H. Macy: [00:09:44] I know in childbirth, right? That's a rough one.

Anna: [00:09:47] All the things.

William H. Macy: [00:09:48] With me, I bet it was running. I was a big, big runner. And, sooner or later, your intestines just say, well, we're leaving with it.

Anna: [00:09:57] Now, David, would that happen? Is that true? Can gravity make your intestines fall out like chitlins'? Like, what's going on?

Dr. Kipper: [00:10:04] Well, I don't know, I guess it depends on the person. I was a runner forever. My meniscus fell out. But I was pretty good above the waist.

William H. Macy: [00:10:13] My daughter said, how did we get into this? At any rate, I said, I just had my hemorrhoid fixed. After suffering with it for five-plus, about ten years. David sent me to this guy to, tell me the doctor's name. Who did I get to?

Dr. Kipper: [00:10:32] Magner, David Magner.

William H. Macy: [00:10:34] That's right. Very competent guy.

Dr. Kipper: [00:10:39] He wasn't really a doctor, but I didn't tell you that part.

[laughter]

Peter: [00:10:44] But you asked price first. That's what happens, Bill, you ask price first, this is what you get.

William H. Macy: [00:10:48] Putting two and two together, that's where those roses came from. At any rate, she said, how do you do it? And I said, well, you get a shot. They shoot this basically acid right into the hemorrhoid. And she was fascinated and she said, did it hurt? And I said, no, it really doesn't.

I said, first they stick a speculum in there. And I did a great impersonation with my hemorrhoid poking out. As I told you, I named it Bill Roid. We put a character in a script that I wrote one tenth of, Bill Roid. Anyway, but cutting to the chase, for all you folks out there to see if this would work for you. Because I suffered with it for ten years, and it went away in two sessions.

Peter: [00:11:34] Bill, let me ask you, when you hear a shot, you know what I mean? You recoil immediately and you go, I think I'll suffer a little bit longer.

William H. Macy: [00:11:43] I assumed, and this is why you should go to your doctor all the time, because things always change. I assumed that it would be surgery, that they would open me up and cut the thing out and suture it. And I'd have to live on water until I could poop again.

So I was scared to death. And David said, no, go see this guy. And, he is a very cool doctor. He's a guy's guy. And, really matter of fact about it. And, I was in and out and in minutes and, jeez, I wish I'd done it ten years ago.

Anna: [00:12:21] That's good news. So, David, is a hemorrhoid, is there anything that's, like, medically urgent about it? Is it just like a discomfort thing?

Dr. Kipper: [00:12:31] A hemorrhoid is a vein that lines the rectum, and you have three of them that come up, and generally they don't come out unless they're, engorged. And they tend to be hereditary.

Women get these with childbirth. They will bleed. But when they get to a point from Bill's story, when you've just had enough of the discomfort, that's when people come in and admit to it.

And now the treatment is much easier. Bill, you're right. It used to be awful. Those treatments used to be awful, but someone figured out how and where to give these injections and it changed the whole landscape.

William H. Macy: [00:13:12] Dr. Magner described it. It's sort of passive, it just sort of kills that vein. And, I guess the intestine is able to do a go-around, like your brain does, but, it was completely painless and, not even embarrassing.

[music]

Peter: [00:13:48] Bill, you had mentioned in an interview that you did LSD in college and today because of microdosing and macrodosing, they're trying to find how to use this correctly for depression. Right, David?

Dr. Kipper: Yes.

Peter: So, I'm curious your experience with that and what David's take is on it.

William H. Macy: [00:14:02] I did it in college, I loved it, I loved it, I think it altered me too. And I think it's a very powerful drug. I haven't done it in 25 years. I don't know if I would do it again. One time, though, I was doing this illegal production of Jesus Christ Superstar, and the, we got the actors got a piece of the gate.

So it was 1971 or something like that, and I was making 400 bucks a week in this play and free all day. And, we bought some acid from this guy, and my buddy and I took it and we thought, holy crap, we've got to find this guy. And we spent all night chasing him down. We finally found him. I said, how much of this do you have? He had 100 hits. I bought it all.

Anna: [00:14:50] Well, you had that \$400 burning a hole in your pocket.

William H. Macy: [00:14:52] That's right. So my friend Michael, he took half of them and I had the other half. And we did them all in one summer. And that was my LSD summer, which it was stunning. I'm really glad I did it. I don't want to do it again.

Peter: [00:15:07] Wow. So, David, what about acid? The fact that he had all those experiences through it and it was positive, mainly positive. They shut down Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert at Harvard because they had started doing stuff that wasn't in the curriculum.

However, here we are, how many years later where they're going wait a minute, this could actually benefit, be beneficial? And at least anecdotally, it's working on some people who have depression that other stuff has not been able to address.

William H. Macy: [00:15:32] And addictions.

Peter: [00:15:34] And addictions, yes.

Dr. Kipper: [00:15:35] And addictions. So John Hopkins and UC San Francisco are sort of leading the way in this research, but it has great value in depression. It has great value in PTSD. And we're going to just be seeing more and more of this.

A problem that we're seeing now is how to dose it. So we talk about microdosing and there are a lot of people that just sell this on the street. So you're not really sure what you're getting. If you're ever thinking of using it medicinally, you should contact your doctor or one of these centers and find out where in your area they would recommend.

But we're not really there yet. We, all the human studies, have validated this, so it's not coming, it's here, and I think it will be integrated into the community, medical community very soon.

Peter: [00:16:30] The other thing I'm curious, Bill, because you played an alcoholic for so many years in Shameless and you're such a good actor and I know you didn't want to be clichéd, everyone wants to avoid the clichéd alcoholic thing. You must have studied and been around and observed to capture what that is.

William H. Macy: [00:16:49] Yeah, the show's been over three years. I'm still doing research.

[laughter]

Anna: [00:16:53] Yeah, that's dedication to the craft.

William H. Macy: [00:16:55] Yeah. You know, doing a good drunk is a party trick, really. And, I got better at it as we went on. And Frank, my character, Frank, was, a functioning alcoholic. And what was great about it was that, it allowed me to be a little bit bigger, a little more bold, a little more expansive, and pretty much everything that I acted, every scene I did, because I think it was part of the character, that he was a little high always.

Peter: [00:17:27] Right. And it also for me, and I think every family has somebody that has addiction issues. Some have more addiction issues. Watching that show, I think one of the reasons it was so successful, aside from the great acting and the great troupe that you had, was it wasn't just about the alcoholic, it was about the impact of that on everybody.

How you dance around it, how you bury it. And it was heartbreaking all the time because you wanted him to invest in his family. And even though we hung with his family for so many years because it was that hope or that vision of the kid that you identified with whatever character living through that, did you feel it? I mean, you must have thought it the characters acting off of you.

William H. Macy: [00:18:07] Everybody. I mean, it has a lot of fans and a lot of them would say, boy, the Frank in my family is Aunt Gladys, or this cousin. I was really proud of the way it was dealt with. There was some talk at the very beginning of the thing, are we glorifying alcoholism and addiction? But, after, really after the first season, certainly after the second season, the things that happened to poor Frank because of his addiction, if that's glorifying it, I, you know, I mean, he woke up in Canada, for Christ's sake.

He didn't know how he got there. He woke up in Mexico. He would wake up in jail. He would wake up with all these people. Now it was, it was dealt with bluntly and, that and the sex, I was really proud of the way it was dealt with on the show. There was a lot of it, but it was honest, straightforward, unvarnished. And, I think we need more of that.

Peter: [00:19:12] Oh, yeah. Everything was warts and all. David, anything else anybody wants to talk about with Bill before we go? And thank you for coming in.

Anna: [00:19:18] I would just love to know early career stuff in the sense of you're a theater guy, the amazing theater resume. As an actor, where did you feel more traction in Los Angeles or in New York? Was it the theater that got you there, or was it... I just would love to hear your take on it now.

William H. Macy: [00:19:35] At the end of the day, acting is acting is acting. The theater is a different life, certainly. And, the certain skills that you need. I always felt more comfortable on stage. I thought I was better on stage. But I guess if I had to choose, that would be sad because they're both really amazing ways to make a living.

Theater is a man's game. It's really a lot of work. You work really from 8 to 9:30 or 10:00 at night, and you would think that's an easy job. But, boy, if you've got a big role, that's all you do that day. It's exhausting. And, a normal film set day is 12 hours. It's overtime after 12 hours. So it's a lot of work.

But, boy, glorious people. Great way to make a living. I love imaginary circumstances. I think I've lasted so long is because when everybody gets quiet and it's my turn to talk, and nobody gets to go home until I do it right, I like that pressure. I've always liked it, I like doing one simple thing at a time.

I'm in Colorado, and, we're expecting snow and the mountains are all open, but I've always likened acting to skiing. It makes no sense to throw your body down the hill. You want to hug the mountain, but if you had the mountain, you fall down. And it makes no sense to go out and expose yourself in front of a bunch of people. But it's, the only way to do it is to throw caution to the wind and throw yourself down that mountain, too. And there's a rush in it that I'm addicted to. I just love it.

Dr. Kipper: [00:21:16] So, Bill, to that point, you've created some very iconic characters, and, in that, do you have a favorite character that you developed?

William H. Macy: [00:21:27] You know, the writer really creates the characters. Well, that's not, that's not true in different hands. I guess it would be a different thing. I love Frank Gallagher. How could I not? I spent a decade with the guy.

I did a Mamet play called State and Main. I've played a director. I loved that. I did a thing called Door to Door, where, I played a guy with cerebral palsy, and he was such a magnificent spirit. I just loved doing that one. I guess Jerry Lundegaard in Fargo certainly changed my life. So, I mean, what a loser.

Peter: [00:22:01] You know, that character made me so nervous, even watching that movie, even when I watch it now. And it's one of those movies, like Boogie Nights, when you change the channel, if it's on, you go, I got to stop and watch. No, you know, every time. And I'm always, you're in the car dealership, you're about to be found out. And I'm so nervous.

So nervous because I don't know, you don't portray what you're going to do. Kill somebody, run away, collapse, kill yourself. But we know it's not going to be good, whatever it is.

William H. Macy: [00:22:26] I know.

Peter: [00:22:27] You've internalized it so much that it's coming. You could feel the build in you, and it makes me crazy watching it.

William H. Macy: [00:22:32] I know, what a schmuck.

[laughter]

Anna: [00:22:35] You know what, Bill? I have to ask you this because there's always that idea of the big break out there. Although everybody who works in entertainment knows it. Your whole career, it feels like, oh, this might be it or this might be it, but Fargo really was like a tent-pole moment for you, right? Where things changed for you?

William H. Macy: [00:22:52] Yes. My advice to all young actors out there is get an Academy Award nomination. I wish I'd done it earlier.

[laughter]

Peter: [00:23:02] Yeah, what were you waiting for? Can I bring up the cerebral palsy thing? I know that you were heavily involved in the Cerebral Palsy Foundation. What was it about that and acting where you portrayed somebody with cerebral palsy that really resonated?

William H. Macy: [00:23:20] I met the guy. His name was Bill Porter and, he was, one of those indomitable spirits that just makes me proud to be a human being. This guy was magnificent. And, it was a great, I tell you what, I wrote that thing with my partner, Steven Schachter. Steven directed it, and he and I wrote it.

And, the immediate problem was, how do you portray a guy who was still alive? He was still selling Watkins Products door to door. And I went to him, you know, when we were struggling, I went up there twice to meet him. And I told him straight out, I'm going to imitate you, so forgive me in advance.

But I said, Bill, you got no third act. And we came up with such a clever solution for that. As writers, I was always really proud of that. And it worked. They show that film a lot, for example, not taking no for an answer. Never give up.

Peter: [00:24:24] So when you say brave, he didn't let anything get in his way. I mean, this guy just kept plowing through at purpose, purpose and mission.

William H. Macy: [00:24:31] Yep. An extraordinary guy. We put in the thing when it aired. We put the credits ran in, the last one was for tough cleaning problems, contact Bill Porter and we put it on. You know, it was about a week before when I went, oh my golly, that's his website.

So I called in and said someone should warn Bill. When this thing airs, and they said, no, it'll be fine. Well, his site collapsed in three minutes. And after, they always had this big thing at the Watkins company who's the salesman of the year. And after that, they abandoned it because Bill became the Uber salesman for the rest of time.

Peter: [00:25:11] A lot in your bio, I don't know if people get it, but I don't usually laugh at Wikipedia, but you say stuff. The thing I loved was in your twenties you do stuff that's

about the human condition. In your forties, you do stuff and ask, will I get paid, and now. I say, will I have to get wet?

[laughter]

William H. Macy: [00:25:29] It's a bit of a joke, but I got to say, it can be a deal breaker. You know, there's a rain scene. Yeah, we'll shoot it over a week.

Anna: [00:25:38] We don't need you catching a consumption just to entertain us.

William H. Macy: [00:25:42] No, it's it can be really, really miserable. There was some film that came out I got, it was called The Flood. I was like, yeah – no.

Peter: [00:25:52] Well. Thank you. I love that you draw the line and you demarcated your life so well.

Anna: [00:25:56] Hollywood, you're on notice.

Peter: [00:25:58] I just don't want to get wet. So, thank you for being on. We didn't make you wet, so that's a good thing. David, thank you.

William H. Macy: [00:26:04] Thank you, David.

Dr. Kipper: [00:26:05] Thank you, Bill, so much. This was really fun. Thank you.

William H. Macy: Fun.

Dr. Kipper: I just want to say in closing, as much as I love Bill as an actor, I respect him the most as one of the best fathers that I've ever met. A little known fact probably.

Anna: That's awesome.

William H. Macy: [00:26:24] Oh, thank you, David.

Anna: [00:26:26] So nice to meet you. Thank you for being here.

William H. Macy: [00:26:28] What great fun.

[music]

Anna: [00:26:31] Thank you so much to Bill Macy for being on our show today. That was incredible.

Peter: [00:26:35] What an open man.

Anna: [00:26:36] He opened himself for us.

Peter: [00:26:39] Of course, thank you for listening to Bedside Matters. If you're sick and tired of being sick and tired, we're here to help. We offer new episodes every Monday, so follow us, like us, have a great week and you may get your next most important piece of medical information right here from Dr. David Kipper. Or you never know who.

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