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Robin Williams' death puts spotlight on mental illness

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By [Helena Oliviero](#) - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

As tributes to Robin Williams continue to pour in, the apparent suicide of the comedy icon again puts a spotlight on depression and other mental health disorders.

The beloved actor had been suffering from severe depression, according to his spokeswoman. On numerous occasions, Williams discussed his struggles and his rocky road of substance abuse.

One in 10 people suffer from some sort of depression, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Anna Ruth Williams, a board member of the Atlanta chapter of the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention (no relation to Robin Williams) said the death of the legendary comedian illustrates how depression can affect anyone – and everyone.

“It makes me sad that we have stigmatized mental illness (and that when someone commits suicide) that we think that person must have been crazy, on drugs, nothing going for them,” said Williams, 30, who lives in Atlanta. “It’s absolutely not true. Suicide is the result of mental illness and it’s a physiological disease like breast cancer.”

She lost her father, the Rev. Mike Williams, a Baptist minister, to suicide. And, like her father, Robin Williams was between the ages of 45 and 64, the most common age demographic for suicide.

Williams was one of many comics battling depression, along with the likes of Richard Pryor and Rodney Dangerfield. The “Dead Poets Society” actor and “Mork & Mindy” star also is believed to have had bipolar disorder.

“Many make the mistake of believing that a person with money and status, or someone who seems to be the life of the party, could not possibly be afflicted with depression,” said Shatavia Alexander Thomas, a local marriage and family therapist. “Their jovial attitude can sometimes be a facade and they can be crying behind the closed doors. Their life can seem bright but in reality can be very lonely.”

Experts say symptoms of depression include people talking about wanting to hurt themselves, dying and feeling hopeless. Other signs are less obvious, such as withdrawing from family and friends, an increased use of alcohol, and sleeping too much – or not all.

J. Kip Matthews, an Athens psychologist, also stressed that some people who commit suicide don’t do it when they are very depressed, but rather when they begin to come out of the depression. That is the highly vulnerable time, he said.

Matthews said that, unfortunately, people who are depressed often don’t pick up on it themselves, and instead chalk up the low feelings to things like fatigue or job-related stress. And those who realize they are depressed often trick themselves into thinking they can manage it themselves without getting the professional help they need, he said.

Experts hope Williams’ death reminds people to reach out to those suffering and not ignore symptoms of depression.

“If you see someone you love with warning signs, the most important thing is to reach out from a place of compassion and love to encourage them to get help,” Anna Ruth Williams said.

Advocates for people with mental illness also hope Williams’ death will prompt more people to get help for depression, and for suicide to be treated as a public health crisis. Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death.

With a third of those with chronic medical conditions having a mental illness, Matthews said it’s imperative to stop separating physical and mental health.

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a 24-hour hotline that can help those in crisis. If you or someone you know needs help, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

Most of the time, people who kill themselves show one or more of these warning signs before they take action:

- Talking about wanting to kill themselves, or saying they wish they were dead.
- Looking for a way to kill themselves, such as hoarding medicine or buying a gun.
- Talking about a specific suicide plan.
- Feeling hopeless or like they have no reason to live.
- Feeling trapped, desperate or needing to escape from an intolerable situation.
- Having the feeling of being a burden to others.
- Feeling humiliated.
- Having intense anxiety and/or panic attacks.
- Losing interest in things, or losing the ability to experience pleasure.
- Insomnia.
- Becoming socially isolated and withdrawn from friends, family and others.
- Acting irritable or agitated.
- Showing rage, or talking about seeking revenge for being victimized or rejected, whether or not the situations the person describes seem real.

Source: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

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