

## Suicide and celebrities: An opportunity for an open discussion

By Jo Ciavaglia Staff writer | Posted: Tuesday, August 12, 2014 7:16 pm

Happy people do kill themselves. Funny people kill themselves. Famous people kill themselves.

But when celebrities commit suicide, people pay more attention, which provides an opportunity to talk openly about an issue that many people are reluctant to discuss, mental health advocates said.

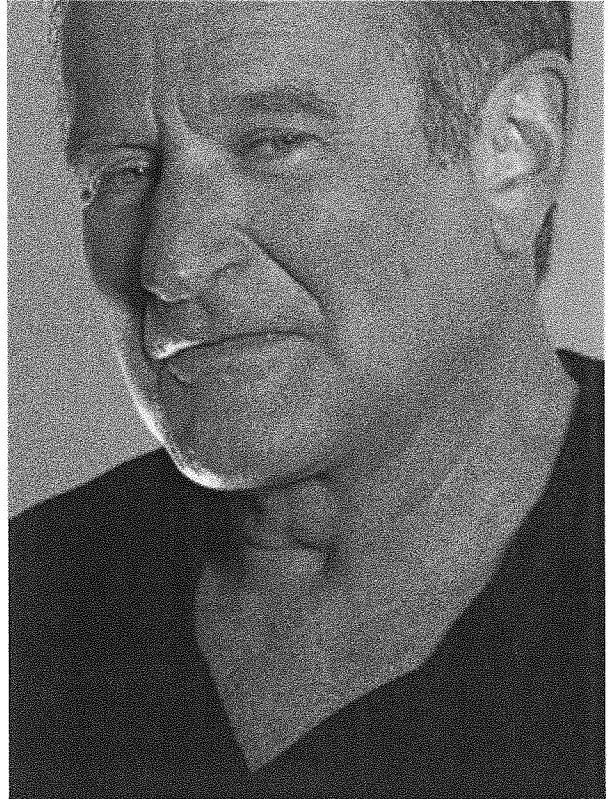
“They’re just as human as everyone else, and mental illness, addiction, suicide don’t discriminate based on how famous you are or how wealthy,” said Sharon Curran, associated executive director of the Lenape Valley Foundation, a Doylestown crisis mental health organization. “No matter what kind of resources you have available to you, it’s still a serious disease.”

Authorities confirmed Tuesday that actor comedian Robin Williams, 63, committed suicide by hanging himself with a belt in his California home. He also had superficial cuts on his wrist and a pocket knife was found.

Also revealed was that Williams had been in treatment for depression and had bipolar disorder. The Oscar winner, who had long battled alcohol and drug addiction, also had reportedly checked back into rehab last month.

Behavior experts say there is no one clear answer as to why people commit suicide, but available research shows that people with poor coping skills, mental illness and drug and alcohol problems are far more susceptible to suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

More unusual are impulsive suicides committed in reaction to a single event, such as a job loss or romantic breakup, but that also doesn’t necessarily mean a lot of planning goes into most suicides, either, according to experts. While most people who commit suicide show warning signs, rarely will an individual take his or her own life in the fit of a psychotic episode.



Celebrity suicides like Williams' can be more baffling, especially when the person appears to be enjoying career and personal success.

“Most of us feel like we know them,” said John McIntosh, a psychology professor at Indiana University, South Bend, who has studied suicide trends. “They have money, power, influence, adoration, all the things that people want to have. I want to be just like that person. Why would they ever kill themselves?”

## LIKE FAMILY

Celebrity suicides generate a lot of attention because people often feel an emotional connection to the person — like a family member — especially someone with a long and varied career like Robin Williams, McIntosh added.

Research suggests that when major celebrities kill themselves, calls to suicide prevention hotlines jump. Also, suicides among people who have the same demographic characteristics as the celebrity may also increase as happened in 1994 after the suicide of Nirvana front-man musician Kurt Cobain.

“(Williams’ death) alone is not going to cause a suicide, but you have people who are already vulnerable, and this could be one thing that makes them feel worse,” McIntosh said.

After more than a decade of declines, suicide rates in the United States started rising again in 2006, after the most recent economic recession hit. The numbers have continued rising every year since, according to national statistics. The increases are across all demographic groups, though white, middle-aged men still have a slightly higher rate, McIntosh said.

An average of one person committed suicide every 13.3 minutes in the United States in 2011, the most recent year that national statistics were available, and someone attempted suicide every 32 seconds.

Last year in Bucks County, 68 people killed themselves. So far this year the number stands at 47, according to the county coroner’s office. In neighboring Montgomery County, 87 suicides were reported last year, and so far this year the number is 68.

At any given time, 7 percent of the population is affected by major depressive disorder, which puts them at a high risk for suicidal thoughts and behavior, said Dr. Shivkumar Hatti, president of the Pennsylvania Psychiatric Society.

While thoughts of suicide are not unusual among people with depressive disorders, acting on those feelings is less common, Hatti added. That is why quick treatment is critical for individuals experiencing major depression. With medications and psychotherapy, more than 85 percent of people rebound.

“People need to understand this is a common disorder and there are multiple treatment options and it’s successful,” Hatti said.

## **CRISIS INTERVENTION**

Amanda Hilzer worries Williams’ death will send the wrong message about recovery. She specializes in working with individuals with both substance abuse issues and mental illness at Livengrin, a Bensalem substance abuse treatment center.

Mental health issues and substance abuse frequently are co-occurring disorders, which makes effective treatment more complicated since the disorders are so intertwined, Hilzer said. Addicts often self-medicate with drugs or alcohol to reduce mental illness symptoms, she added. They also may avoid mental health treatment because of the lingering stigma associated with it.

National estimates are that 50 percent to 75 percent of individuals who abuse drugs or alcohol also have a mental illness, and as many as 90 percent of people who complete suicide had undertreated or untreated mental health and substance abuse issues, Hilzer said.

The linked nature of mental health and substance abuse requires integrated treatment that addresses both problems for long-term recovery success.

“If someone appears in the emergency room with a heart attack and a broken arm, we wouldn’t just treat one or the other,” Hilzer added.

Almost universally, suicide attempts or completions are the result of more than one factor, McIntosh and others said. A person could have good coping abilities most of the time, but gets to the breaking point when they are overwhelmed and unable to function normally.

While research shows most people exhibit signs of suicidal behaviors — which either aren’t taken seriously or go unnoticed — some are particularly good at concealing their feelings, especially if they live alone, McIntosh said.

Among the common misconceptions is that someone who is considering suicide doesn’t plan for the future.

That isn’t always the case, McIntosh said. Suicide is a crisis behavior, meaning a person considering killing themselves today, may not have thought about it three days earlier. It’s another reason why accessible and immediate mental health intervention is critical.

“If you can get a person through the crisis, they may never again think about suicide again.”