

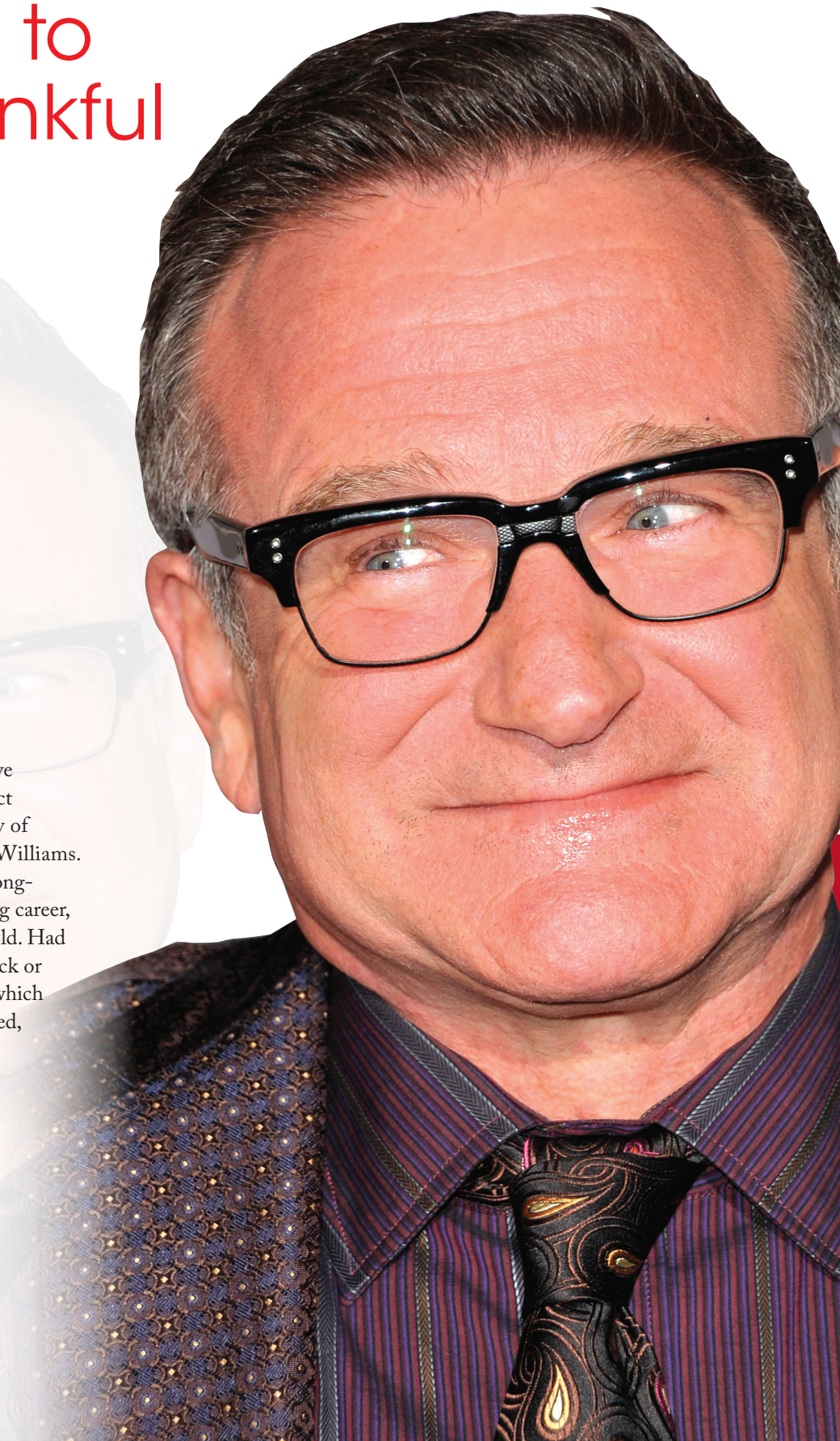
# ROBIN WILLIAMS

## One more reason to be thankful to him

What Robin Williams can teach us about mental health and depression

By Susan Neuhalfen

We all have a distinct memory of Robin Williams. In his long-spanning career, he touched lives, young and old. Had he died of cancer, a heart attack or the Parkinson's disease with which he had recently been diagnosed, it would still have been tragic. However, he died in a personal and more painful way. We're not used to talking about this disease. This disease doesn't manifest itself in the usual way. His hair wasn't falling out. He hadn't lost weight. There were no signs – as far as the general public was concerned. Or, were there?



Robin Williams had spoken very openly about his issues. We knew he suffered from severe depression as well as drug and alcohol addiction. He joked about it, but we didn't see the seriousness. All we got was a glimpse of the zany person who kept us entertained.

When someone commits suicide, it is natural to feel some form of responsibility. Even though most of us didn't know Mr. Williams personally, he was part of our lives. So why didn't we see it? Why did he do it?

His daughter Zelda was recently interviewed and asked this same question. Her response was, it's not important to ask why. Until we find out exactly how this disease works, she explained, there's no point in questioning it or placing blame. She went on to say, the most responsible thing we can do is take the time to talk about mental health.

Until recently, mental health was viewed as a stigma. If a family member committed suicide, it wasn't discussed in polite company. If someone you knew was in a mental health facility, it was whispered, not discussed. It was assumed a person with mental illness had a personality flaw or suffered some self-induced instability. We now know that mental health is both behavioral and biological. It's not just personal experience that can cause depression. There are also physical conditions that control our mental health. Scientifically speaking, we have learned a great deal in the last decade, but we still have a long way to go to understand the causes and effects of mental health.

If there's one thing we've learned from Robin Williams'

death, it's that depression does not pick and choose its victims. While it is more prominent in women and among the poor, according to the Centers for Disease Control, one in 20 Americans over the age of 12 suffer some form of depression each year.

We've also learned that communication is key. Whether you are the one suffering from depression or you recognize it in someone else, the most important thing to do is to talk about it. Robin Williams did this through his comedy. He joked about his addiction problems, his divorce and the pain he felt. It appears, however, that he suffered in silence off-stage. Picture depression as a war raging inside of a person. The best way to quell this feeling is to communicate the pain and not keep it bottled up inside. For those who are dealing with someone who has depression – whether close up or from a distance – the best thing to do is be supportive and non-judgmental. In the words of author Vashti Quiroz-Vega: "Be kind to people and don't judge, for you do not know what demons they carry and what battles they are fighting."

We should be very thankful to Robin Williams. He has given us so much more than wonderful, funny memories. He's given us the courage to talk about this disease. ■

"Be kind to people and don't judge, for you do not know what demons they carry and what battles they are fighting."  
– Vashti Quiroz-Vega

While it is more prominent in women and among the poor, according to the Centers for Disease Control, one in 20 Americans over the age of 12 suffer some form of depression each year.

**Although depression may occur only one time during your life, usually people have multiple episodes of depression. During these episodes, symptoms occur most of the day, nearly every day and may include:**

- Feelings of sadness, emptiness or unhappiness
- Angry outbursts, irritability or frustration, even over small matters
- Loss of interest or pleasure in normal activities, such as sex
- Sleep disturbances, including insomnia or sleeping too much
- Tiredness and lack of energy, so that even small tasks take extra effort
- Changes in appetite — often reduced appetite and weight loss, but increased cravings for food and weight gain in some people
- Anxiety, agitation or restlessness — for example, excessive worrying, pacing, hand-wringing or an inability to sit still
- Slowed thinking, speaking or body movements
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt, fixating on past failures or blaming yourself for things that are not your responsibility
- Trouble thinking, concentrating, making decisions and remembering things
- Frequent thoughts of death, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts or suicide
- Unexplained physical problems, such as back pain or headaches
- For some people, depression symptoms are so severe that it's obvious something isn't right. Other people feel generally miserable or unhappy without really knowing why. SOURCE: MAYO CLINIC

To read more about help for depression visit [www.thepsychclinic.com](http://www.thepsychclinic.com) or call 281-837-MIND to schedule a consultation.

