

Hey Everyone!

As most of us have heard of the untimely and tragic death of actor/comedian Robin Williams, I have to confess that while I am saddened I am not surprised. Although Mr. Williams struggles with mental illness and addiction have been well documented I found many of his on-screen appearances to be more revealing than any tabloid rumor.

It seemed that as soon as the cameras were rolling that a switch went on in Mr. Williams head telling him to be "on". Watching his guest appearances on shows like The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson were regular laugh riots in which the audience could hardly catch their breath before the next joke would come out of his mouth. Robin Williams could create a punch line much the same way Mozart could put music down on paper. It came naturally to him.

Yet over the past 3 plus decades of watching him make a multitude of guest appearances I noticed almost no change in his persona. It was almost as if he could not relax and just be himself. I'm sure that the people who were closest to him were able to get to know much more deeply, but over time it started to seem as if these laugh-arousing guest appearances were attempts to keep his demons at bay.

As those of us who have struggled with our own mood disorder we can certainly relate to such attempts. However, as tragic as this is I believe this is one of those teachable moments. I believe that it is imperative that we do not hide, shield, keep at bay, or run away from our mental illness, but rather embrace it. That is basically what I did when I joined DBSA a little over a year ago. Whether I liked it or not I came to the realization that my mood disorder was as much a part of me as my arms or legs. In short, I learned how to respect it. And in a way that only someone with a mood disorder can truly understand, my illness reciprocated that respect. I'm learning every day how to live successfully with mental illness.

That is not to say that I don't have a bad day or a couple of bad days. It's just that I know where it's originating from. I've learned what works and what doesn't work. I have learned that putting on a false front doesn't work. Mental illness does not discriminate. It matters not if you're a famous actor, comedian, musician, politician, or just an average working stiff like myself. You can run from a mood disorder but you can't hide. Which is why I consider the people who come to group, who are open and honest about being mentally ill, to be among the biggest heroes worthy of the psychiatric version of the congressional medal of honor. It takes a

courageous person to even make the attempt to get to know themselves. Yet even more so for the people who risk being ostracized, ridiculed and even being discriminated against for dealing with circumstances that they themselves would rather not have to.

Yet by making such attempts we've learned that we are not alone. We have learned through experience how not only to survive but also to thrive. We are the ones who have obtained the knowledge and experience in order to navigate through life's ups and downs. Sometimes just the act of getting out of bed can be excruciatingly painful. But by forcing ourselves to work through each day little by little we gain the wisdom and confidence to conquer the day. And the next day, and the next. Practicing these every day skills has helped me to augment my ability to mentor others who are experiencing similar issues.

As with most major tragic events the news stations will call upon and interview as many of the so-called "experts" as fast as they can book them. The media doesn't really mind if the particular person they have on their respective show actually has their facts straight or not. American media is so predominately corporate that the only thing that matters is viewership numbers.

The point here is that the only true experts on the subject of mental illness is us. We are the ones who the media should be reaching out to for true answers. Not the talking heads that will be interviewed over the next several weeks to try to figure out what was Mr. Williams was enduring right up to the point where he felt he had no choice but to take his own life. Only we know the true "hell on earth" it is to be clinically depressed. We are what I call the "grizzled veterans" in this battle.

As tragic as the death of Robin Williams is I believe we are duty bound to take this event and use it as an opportunity to educate people about mood disorders. Whether a person is struggling with mental illness or is acquainted with someone who is we are obligated to come out from behind the fortresses that we have built in order to protect ourselves and become comfortable living with this particular disease. Because when it comes down to it, if we want to live a full and satisfying life, we really don't have a choice.