Robin Williams’ Suicide Triggers Survivors and Calls to Crisis Line

By Robert Stohr

Robin Williams’ sudden tragic death this summer shocked the world and caused many people to ask how a man with so much talent, popularity and money could take his own life. But those of us who have lost a loved one to suicide know intimately that no amount of wealth or fame can beat back the monster of clinical depression.

Mental illness, often combined with substance use disorder, is present in 90 percent of Americans who die by suicide. And it can strike anyone regardless of socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender or sexual preference.

If your reaction to his suicide was deeper and more painful than you expected, you weren’t alone. Many of our survivors reported that Robin Williams’ suicide triggered painful feelings of helplessness and sadness stemming from their own losses, as well as empathy and compassion for the private mourning suffered by the icon’s closest family members and friends.

The suicide of a public figure tends to heighten awareness around mental health issues and suicide – and Robin Williams’ death was no exception. In fact, an unprecedented number of callers reached out to our Crisis Line for help in the days and months since he died.

In the first two days following Robin Williams’ suicide on Aug. 11, more than 550 Crisis Line calls poured in, more than doubling our usual volume. Our crisis counselors worked overtime, took extra shifts, and sacrificed meals and sleep to meet this call to action. By the end of the month, they had handled 6,120 calls, a 77% increase in calls over those in August 2013. While call volume has dropped significantly since then, it remains above previous levels.

Our Suicide Prevention Center has risen to the challenge of meeting the new normal. Our crisis counselors continue to de-escalate crisis calls, rescue those in need, and share resources with hundreds of concerned families.

As survivors know all too well, suicide is not always preventable. But we can make significant inroads in ending this particular cause of death by spreading the word that help is available.

As we continue to support people in need during the holidays, we want to remind our family of loss survivors that we are always here for you. Please join us on December 6th for our holiday potluck, where we come together to remember and to heal. As a fellow survivor, I wish you health, hope and peace.

Robert Stohr is the Director of Didi Hirsch’s Suicide Prevention Center.
We are rapidly approaching the Deepening Gloom—a time of year many of us dread. I’m talking about the holidays, especially the first one since a loved one has died. Where are the light and glory, the joy and cheer? The season feels especially cruel without our loved one. It doesn’t seem possible to include ourselves in the festivities when our inner world is steeped in darkness.

Our loss can create barriers to hope and healing, not allowing us to be in the moment and causing us to withdraw from family and friends. The deep sadness can prevent us from remembering holidays shared as if all connection with our loved one has been severed. Their physical presence may be gone but their essences live within us and those who also knew them.

Grief may diminish the flame of happiness but it doesn’t have to take up permanent residence in our minds. Happiness and hope can provide flickering moments of meaning and, with a little encouragement, become a warming hearth of comfort.

If this is your first holiday without your loved one or your tenth, you may find comfort in knowing that you can create moments of meaning for yourself during the holiday season.

Light a memory candle near a photo of your loved one at each holiday. Seek the comfort and glory of your religious affiliation. Sit on the beach and count the number of waves that reach the shore in twenty minutes. Seek spirituality or enlightenment. For joy and cheer, Talenti Sea Salt and Caramel gelato works for me. Whatever you do, remember this is for you. Be selfish and loving to yourself because you deserve it.

Peace and Love,

Rick

Rick Mogil has been program director of Didi Hirsch’s Suicide Prevention and Bereavement Services since 2007.
Survivors Leave Thumbprints of Hope

By Sandra Yi, MFTI

At the end of each Survivor Support Services group in Orange County, we pass out ceramic hearts during a closing ceremony to give survivors a token reminder of their journey with us. The tradition, started by the Survivors After Suicide groups in Los Angeles, provides survivors with something tangible with which they can remember us.

We also want a memento of our survivor groups. We are honored every time a survivor walks through our doors and want our survivors to know they have made a difference with their presence. We want to recognize their bravery in facing their grief and acknowledging their loss. We also want to share the hope they spread that laughter and life are possible after loss.

That’s why we created a collaborative artwork where survivors who have completed any of our support services can leave a thumbprint along with a small personal message. Fittingly, each thumbprint on the canvas serves as a balloon that holds Hope aloft. Survivors have responded well to this closing activity, which allows them to leave their mark at our office in a way that inspires new survivors who are just beginning their journeys toward healing.
With the help of our survivors, the Suicide Prevention Center’s 16th annual Alive & Running Walk/Run had a record year – raising more than $274,000 for suicide prevention.

The Sept. 28 event – which drew about 2,000 runners, walkers and volunteers – provided survivors with several poignant but life-affirming opportunities to remember and celebrate loved ones lost to suicide.

A memorial banner and several quilts with the names and faces of people who died by suicide decorated the Expo grounds, which also included a large message board for survivors who wanted to express themselves. Many runners wore memorial bibs with the names of loved ones on their backs. And volunteers passed out hundreds of white carnations, a symbol of hope, to runners and walkers as they crossed the finish line.

The family-friendly event featured live music and an appearance by Tom Kenny, the voice of SpongeBob SquarePants, who emceed the Kiddie-K. After several moving presentations by suicide survivors, the following teams and participants won awards: the Suicide Prevention Center received the Top Fundraising Team Award; Team Limelight, headed by survivor Kristine Barry-Olsen, won the Outstanding Team Award; and the Chikara Daiko drummers, who perform at the event each year in memory of survivor Marilyn Nobori’s daughter, Aiko, won the Inspiration Award.
Volunteers passed out white carnations, a symbol of hope, at the finish line.

Team Limelight Captain Kristine Barry-Olsen accepts Outstanding Team award.

Didi Hirsh Medical Director Curley Bonds, MD in clown suit delighted children at the Kiddie-K.

The early morning race began under a balloon arch at La Tijera Parkway near LAX.

Survivors wrote on a memorial board to remember loved ones lost to suicide.

The Chikara Daiko drummers, who set the pace of the race each year, won the Inspiration Award.

Singer/songwriter Randy Coleman performed “Here Comes the Sun” before the Kiddie-K.

Runners wrote the names of people they wanted to remember and honor on memorial bibs they wore on their backs during the race.
IN MEMORY OF

Jed Abrams
Santos Aguilar, Jr.
Jay Akerstein
Larry Ames
Carole Anne
Christopher P. Argerich
Don Barry
Rob Beach
Ryan Benavides
"Mohawk Matt" Berman
Harold D. Blankenship
Marc Block
Sammy Bloom
Barbara Blum
Aaron J. Brookhart
Robbie Broom
Erik Brown
Mason Bryant
Anne Burns
Trevor Buth
Misty Butler
Charlie Cantoni
Henri Cao
Sgt. Jason Crawford
Terry Curtis
Brian Dalton
Matthew Dawson
Donnie Dearringer
Roberto Di Carlo
Trevor Dodes
Alan Dunn
Natalie Ann Dunn
Sean Eddington
Robert Edmonds
Andrew Estrada
Jordan Mark Farkas
Juan Carlos Flores
Gregory Louis Garzon
David Gonzalez
Hailey Nicole Gonzalez
Michael A. Gutierrez
Jeffrey Allen Gutin
Ernie Haro
Vanessa Haros
Marty Trent Harris
Clara Hassler
Rolando Hernandez
Sergio Hernandez, Jr.
Beth Hess
Clare "Mumzie" Holcombe
Galen Hundley
Brandon Jabbari
Mr. Aaron Jacob Ferreira
Sean Jacques
Jodi Jawitz
Sonja Anne Johnson

David Kamerschen
Jeremy King
Tim Kleingartner
Elliott Kolesnik
Elliott Kolesnik
Joel Lamb
Noah Langholz
William Leavitt
Jacqueline LeBlanc
Seung Cheol Lee
Stanley Lelewer
Jennifer Lenihan
Alexander Lewis
Dr. Lee Liebman
Jeffrey S. Lind
George L. Little
Dr. Joel David Locketz
Carlos Lopez
Patrick Wayne Lynch
Bill MacArthur
Daniel Mardahl
Dana Markusen
Miguel Angel Martinez
Rick McClung
Jay McCreary
Jaime Medina
Joyce Jane Medlin
Tim Miller
Ruth Mishler
David Modjallal
Kenny Mowry
Michelle Ng
Aiko Nobon
Craig Nockels
Jacob Nockels
Sam Noorbakhsh
Aimee Oki
Carlos Neftali Ontiveros
Samuel Pastrello
Nick Pathi
Floyd Patterson
Lauren Rose Pearson
Jane Powers
Ceasar Quintero
Hallie Rabin
Danny Ramirez
Douglas Ravenscroft
Emmett Richardson
Martin Robinson
Tyler Robinson
Leon Mark Rofe
David Rubinson
Betty Celeste Ruiz
Bryan Rutledge
Gregory Keith Ryon
Jose Sandoval

Lynn Schibik
Derek Schraeder
Becky Schrag
Ken Seals
Eustuardo Serrano B.
Mark Shindo
Chris Shutter
Dan Slocum
Luis Soto
Emil Stefanov
Cathy Stevens
Kyle Sullivan
Robert Swafford
Evan Reeve Szollosi
Brandon Toh
Marcello Trejo
Elaine Uy
Barbara Valk
Cathy Vallejos
Andrew Varnes
Eddie Villaneda
Ron Wasserman
Justin Weirauch
James White
Carol Wichman
Gabe Williams
Robin Williams
Paul Woodrow
Qing Xu

IN HONOR OF

Kita Curry
Roberto Di Carlo
Charlotte and Jeremy Fletcher
Richard and Sally Greenberg
Dr. Vera Jashni
Kim Kowsky
Pamela Kluft
Dr. Lee Liebman
Janine and Henry Lichstein
Stanley Lelewer
Alice Mui
Laura Ornest
Andrew Rubin
Jesse Sanderson
Lisa Schumacher
Emanuel and Lorraine Stolaroff
Douglas H. Vought
Laurie Woodrow

Didi Hirsch to Host AFSP's 2014 International Survivors of Suicide Loss Day on November 22

This year’s Miss California, Brandy Fisher, who was orphaned at age 11 when her father murdered her mother and then killed himself, will speak about her experience as a suicide survivor at International Survivors of Suicide Loss Day at Didi Hirsch’s Sepulveda Center on November 22.

Didi Hirsch, which is hosting the event for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention’s Los Angeles chapter for the first time, will also screen AFSP’s The Journey, a documentary that tells how a diverse group of suicide loss survivors found their way back to a life rich in meaning and joy.

Described as a day that “can change your life,” Survivors of Suicide Loss Day gives people affected by suicide loss a chance to gather in their local communities to find comfort and gain understanding as they share stories of healing and hope. The annual event began in 1999, when U.S. Senator Harry Reid, whose father died by suicide in 1972, introduced the resolution that designated the Saturday before Thanksgiving “National Survivors of Suicide Day.”

There is no charge to attend the event, which also includes food and refreshments, presentations by mental health professionals and local suicide loss survivors such as actress Mariette Hartley, and small group discussions for people who have experienced similar types of loss.

To register, email Traute Winters, head of the AFSP’s Los Angeles chapter, at twinters@afsp.org. Those who cannot attend in person can join “Survivor Day Live,” a virtual event at Google Hangout that will include an online screening of The Journey and a Q & A with fellow survivors and experts on coping with a suicide loss. To access the online event, go to www.survivorday.org/survivor-day-live/.

WHAT: 2014 International Survivors of Suicide Loss Day
WHEN: Saturday, November 22, 2014
       1 pm – 5 pm
WHERE: Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services – Sepulveda
       4760 S. Sepulveda Blvd.
       Culver City, CA  90230
RSVP: Traute Winters, twinters@afsp.org, (424) 327-7101

The Program:
1 pm Welcome with food and refreshments
2 pm Screening of The Journey
3 pm Presentations by local suicide loss survivors and mental health professionals
4 pm Small group discussions
SAS Group Meetings

Everyone who has completed an eight-week Survivors After Suicide Support Group is invited to attend scheduled monthly meetings at any of the locations listed below. There is no charge.

**Drop-In Groups**

**San Gabriel Valley**
Meets the 4th Wednesday of each month, 7:30 – 9:00 p.m.

**San Fernando Valley**
Meets the 2nd Saturday of each month, 11:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

**Santa Ana**
Meets the 1st Wednesday of each month, 6:30 – 8:00 p.m.

**South Bay**
Meets the 2nd Sunday of each month, 11:00 am – 12:30 p.m.

**West Los Angeles**
Meets every Tuesday night, 7:30 - 9:00 p.m.

**Eight-Week Groups**
Our eight-week support groups for those who have lost loved ones to suicide take place on the following schedule:

Group 1: Late February  Group 2: Late May  Group 3: Mid August  Group 4: Mid October

Groups meet once a week for an hour and a half for eight consecutive weeks, with locations in Sherman Oaks, Culver City, Redondo Beach, San Marino and Santa Ana.

Please call to be placed in a group. Los Angeles: (310) 895-2326 or Orange County: (714) 547-0885