

# Beaver County Times

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 13, 2014

## Help Available for People Suffering with Depression, Addiction

By Kristen Doerschner | [kdoerschner@timesonline.com](mailto:kdoerschner@timesonline.com)

In the wake of the news of Robin Williams' suicide Monday, people turned to social media to mourn and to help. They not only express their sorrow, but also to urge people to get help for their own mental health problems. Many people tweeted phone numbers for suicide prevention hotlines and the need for more awareness and dialogue. Others were critical of such tweets, saying they put the burden of getting help on those who are suffering. Some were critical of those they perceived as acting as though they know what it's like to suffer from mental illness.

**Barb Conniff, chief executive officer of Milestone Centers** in Pittsburgh, said when something happens on a national level, such as Williams' suicide, it does make people realize such a thing could happen to anybody, and people will step up if there's someone they've already been worried about.

**Greg Jena, director of communications for Milestone**, said the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates 10 percent of the U.S. population suffers from some sort of depression. "It's a shame it takes such a tragic event to bring it to the forefront," he said.

**Conniff** said if one has a family member or friend exhibiting signs that they may be suicidal -- such as talking about death or feelings of hopelessness -- they should go to that person and express their concerns. "You really need to have the courage to say, 'I'm worried about you. I see that you're feeling really down, or I see that you're feeling hopeless. I'm going to hang in there with you and let's try to get help,'" **Conniff** said. "The best way to help someone is to listen to what they're saying about how they feel. ... Let them know that you care about them."

The next step is to help the person get treatment.

**Conniff** said to call a doctor, a mental health clinic or psychologist, so the person can get assessed and get the treatment that he or she needs.

"Treatment works. That's really an important message for people to hear," **Conniff** said.

"The best thing a family or friend can do is encourage them to hang in there until they get help. Stay with them until they get help. Encourage them that if they get professional help, they can feel better. They can eventually solve their problems," she said.



A photo of the late actor Robin Williams playing Mork from Ork hangs with flowers and notes left by people paying their respects, at a makeshift memorial in Boulder, Colo., Tuesday, outside the home where the 80s TV series Mork & Mindy, starring Williams, was set.

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Dr. Neil Capretto, medical director at Gateway Rehabilitation Center in Center Township, said people who are suffering from addiction and depression together have a 20- to 100-times-greater sense of hopelessness and honestly believe their family and the world would be better off without them.

“That may not be accurate. That’s just how they interpret their reality. That’s how they perceive the world at that moment,” Capretto said.

“They’re not rational. Their brain is literally hijacked,” he said.

Capretto said suicide is devastating for families for generations and can increase the risk of suicide for other family members.

### LOCAL INITIATIVE

In Beaver County, there is a co-occurring disorder initiative that brings together health care providers from various health and social service agencies to raise awareness and create what Capretto calls a “no wrong door” system.

Capretto said, conservatively, 50 percent of people with alcohol or drug problems have some type of mental health disorder, and people with mental health problems have higher rates of addiction. For example, 60 percent to 80 percent of people with bipolar disorder will have a diagnosable alcohol or drug use problem at some point, he said.

Historically, patients have been, in essence, shuffled from one provider to the other for mental health and addiction problems, which leads to people falling through the cracks.

What the initiative hopes to combat is a situation in which someone goes to a particular facility for help and is told, “You’re in the wrong place,” Capretto said. “We don’t blame the patient for who they are. We want to create a welcoming attitude. ... We may not be the best place, but we will help facilitate for you.”

Capretto said sorting out whether a person has a mental health disorder, an addiction, or both, can be a challenge.

Some people can have symptoms of a mental health disorder, but really those symptoms stem from substance abuse, and some people who have a mental health disorder turn to substance abuse as an “emotional anesthetic.”

Capretto said he wants to see health care providers and treatment centers try to be more welcoming and open. He said because of the stigma attached to mental health problems, a lot of people and families are reluctant to reach out for help.

Capretto said that during a Pirates game Friday, there was a “Stand Up to Cancer” event, where people held up signs with the names of people they knew who had cancer. “I said, wouldn’t it be wonderful if I live long enough to see the day we have a ‘Stand Up for Mental Health, Stand Up for Addiction’ event ... and they would get applause for that. Maybe some day, maybe some day, we’ll see that.”