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EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

Turning blind eye toward mental illness

The chances are pretty good someone in your company has at some point suffered from a mental illness. The receptionist, maybe. The powerhouse salesperson. The demanding boss. Perhaps the same can be said about the person with whom you are looking to close that next big deal. And then again, it could be someone closer who's just waiting for you to come home from a long day at the office.

In 2012, an estimated 43.7 million people aged 18 or older in the United States – 18.6 percent of all adults – had any mental illness (AMI) in the previous year, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In that same group, 9.6 million (4.1 percent) had serious mental illness (SMI).

Mental illness is in our midst everyday, though it's something we rarely think about. It often takes a catalytic event or worse, a tragedy, even to provoke such thoughts. That was the case when we learned Aug. 11 the entertainer Robin Williams had taken his own life.

Exhibit A of just how little we know – or care to know – about the minefield that is mental illness was on display shortly after word of Williams' suicide reached the masses. Fox News anchor Shepard Smith, he of the fraternity of cable news pundits who feel compelled to opine about pretty much anything



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irrespective of what they actually know, declared Williams a "coward" for choosing not to go on with his life.

"Something inside you is so horrible or you're such a coward or whatever the reason that you decide that you have to end it. Robin Williams, at 63, did that today," Smith said as he was breaking the news to his audience.

Smith later apologized for his comment, though a cynic would believe it was done more out of self preservation than sensitivity. Whatever his motive, we alternately are outraged over, and thankful for, Smith's brazen naivety – thankful because it enables us to grab hold of a subject that all too often is relegated to the small print when human-engineered tragedies dominate the headlines.

We know Williams was an alcoholic,

a former drug addict, had suffered from cardiovascular disease, was in two failed marriages and lost a sizable portion of his personal fortune. We haven't a clue about his genetics or how they may have factored in. This was no coward, but rather a tortured soul.

The links between depression and physical health are unmistakable. People with depression have twice the rate of cardiovascular disease later in life, partialling out all other risk factors such as family history, smoking and cholesterol, we were told via email by Dr. Leo Bastiaens, a staff psychiatrist with Milestone Centers, which offers programs and services in 20 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and mental/behavioral health diagnoses. Depression after a heart attack, he said, increases early mortality rates (within a year) three to four times the norm.

In Williams' case, living with depression had not an iota to do with bravery; the man's threshold for pain had peaked. That he devoted his life to entertaining people is what reinforces the irony of how Williams died. And while he no doubt made an indelible impression in life, it is in death we are reminded of what's most important: Depression knows no bounds – for the comedian, the businessman, or anyone else.

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