

# Robin Williams' suicide puts spotlight nationwide problem

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The apparent suicide of actor Robin Williams started the world talking about depression and suicide-prevention. But talk might not be enough in Dothan, where suicide-prevention resources are limited, a local expert said Thursday.

Rose Blakey-Phillips, a licensed professional counselor and founder of Wiregrass Suicide Prevention Services, said the region needs more resources to combat the problem, including a 24-hour suicide hotline, more prevention services in the community and schools and services that help people after they've made an attempt to kill themselves.

Blakey-Phillips said she sees the suffering in her practice, but in other, more subtle ways, as well.

Take the suicide prevention and suicide survivor pamphlets she leaves at Troy University's Dothan campus.

"They go so fast out there," she said. "That means either somebody's in pain, or they know somebody who is. There are reasons why you would pick up a pamphlet on suicide prevention."

In 2012, 11 people killed themselves in Houston County, along with 11 more in Coffee County, according to data from the Alabama Department of Public Health. Statewide, 721 people committed suicide that year -- a figure that was up by more than 200 since 2001.

Dr. Ann B. McDowell, a psychiatrist and sleep medicine specialist with Dothan Psychiatry and Sleep Disorders Medicine, said she's seeing more people suffering from depression than she has at any other time in her career.

Nationally, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that 39,518 people killed themselves in 2011 -- 28,103 of whom were white men.

"I think the incidents of depression are higher than ever," McDowell said. "I see a lot of people who have simply given up. They've given up on their government and their community. I think society is under more pressure than I've seen in my lifetime, and I'm 65. It's like (these generations are) beginning to lose hope."

McDowell said the thing that stood out to her about some of the coverage of Robin Williams' death was that people saw the actor as insusceptible to depression and suicide because he was wealthy and talented.

"That speaks so well to the fact that the American public doesn't see depression as a disease," she said. "It's a disease just like diabetes is a disease. This illness is a biochemical illness."

Still, depression is curable, she said.

“The good news is that this is a really treatable illness,” she said. “The success rate for treatment is really, really high. The biggest problem is the stigma. Depression is the most treatable illness there is. We have so many things that can fight it.”

There are other ways to fight depression and suicide, as well, and many of those ways are programs that Dothan lacks, said Blakey-Phillips.

“The first thing we need is a local hotline,” she said. “We need prevention services. We need trained people to be in every school in every county around, really talking about what to do to help someone that you might feel is suicidal.

“We need connections with hospitals for intervention, because studies have shown that when someone is discharged from the emergency room after a suicide attempt – or even admission to a behavioral program – they rarely (attend) the first counseling session follow up.”

But these things will take time, money, energy and a willing community.

“I have huge hope for the change that we can bring about,” she said. “But it’s going to take all of us talking about it. We’re going to have to address stuff, such as the stigma of mental illness. We’ll tell you we have cancer...We’ll talk about everything. But we won’t tell you we have been down and depressed for the last three months and that we’re giving up hope.”