

12 Natural Ways to Fight Depression

Judy Belmont/www.lifehack.org

The fallout from depression of loved ones and people we admire such as Robin Williams leaves us as stunned survivors, shaken in disbelief. We are struck with shock and left with questions such as, “*How could someone who “had it all” want to take his own life?* and “*If someone with so much talent, intelligence, money, fame, prestige, along with such close friends and family could take his own life, where does that leave the rest of us with so much less?*”

The lesson we can learn from Robin Williams is that severe depression is an equal opportunity mental illness. It cuts through all levels of society, and wealth, intelligence, talent, power and fame cannot inoculate everyone from the effects of severe depression. Although fame and fortune are nice perks, it cannot take away mental illness and distorted perceptions of self and the world. Neither can the reassurance of close family and friends, although they certainly can help. The key lies within the recesses of a person’s mind. Depression defies reason, and perception becomes more important than reality.

As in the case of Robin Williams, despite what he had accomplished, and despite millions of people thinking otherwise, his distorted self-view of himself and his place in the world offered no hope for happiness. Depression robs people of the objectivity that there is hope at the end of the tunnel, leading to crippling depression, and in extreme cases, to suicide.

The death of Robin Williams has triggered a national conversation about depression and sends an important wakeup call about the need for more public awareness and examination of the mental illness of depression. In an article in the San Francisco Examiner, Dr. John Greden, executive director of the University of Michigan Comprehensive Depression Center and founding chairman of the National Network of Depression Centers, wrote that 1 in 6 Americans suffer from depression or bipolar disorder at some time in their lives, and “*an astounding 75 to 80 percent of deaths by suicide can be linked with these mood disorders.*” He urges that more national focus is needed to fund and research how to understand and fight the disease of depression.

What can we learn from the tragedy of Robin Williams – A man who had so much but at the end had so little hope? We are reminded that depression is serious and needs to be treated. There is much we need to learn from this tragic death, so that depression becomes less of a curse that affects so many individuals in all walks of life.

The following are 12 natural ways to fight depression. These 12 tips offer hope to the rest of us that can honor Robin William’s memory by learning from his life and death. In the end, he lacked the mental clarity to keep himself alive, and hopefully we can use this wake-up call to better our own lives and those around us who suffer from the disease of depression.

1. Develop Rational Thinking Skills

Although depression is a mood disorder, underlying troubled feelings are troubling thoughts that are often exaggerated and distorted. Developing skills to identify the irrational thoughts that precipitate irrational feelings is a crucial key to defeating depression. Challenging irrational thoughts is the cornerstone of the most popular and effective type of therapy for depression:

Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT). Learning CBT skills from a variety of self-help books and resources widely available, such as David Burns, *The Feeling Good Handbook*, offers practical tips on how to change thoughts to change – and even save – your life. Of course, individual therapy with a CBT-oriented therapist can provide much needed support and structure to learn *how to* limit cognitive distortions. For example, thoughts such as “*I’m a loser*” are depression-producing, and can be replaced with less black and white self-statements that are more factual such as “*I am disappointed with myself.*” Turning hopeless and extreme self-statements into more mature and healthier self-talk is one of the best methods to avoid living in a depressive funk. It takes practice, however, and for many it does not come easy to think in ways that are not self-defeating.

2. Avoid excessive use of alcohol or non-prescribed drugs.

Although prescribed medication can be essential for some people with biochemical related depression, self-medication with drugs and alcohol makes people worse. Substance abuse and depression is a deadly combination. Robin Williams had a life long battle with substance abuse, despite many years of sobriety and regular attendance at AA groups.

When people become addicted, the effects of depression are multiplied and irrational thoughts increase, leading to unhealthy behavior and bad judgement. When people use drugs and alcohol to relax or feel better about themselves, they are undermining healthy control of their lives and are sabotaging their hope for more than a temporary escape. Rather than deal with their feelings, they try to escape from them. Williams himself admits that he relapsed in 2003 while filming in Alaska, to ward off feelings of loneliness and fear, admitting it only led to more isolation. “*I just thought, hey, maybe drinking will help. Because I felt alone and afraid. It was that thing of working so much, and going fuck, maybe that will help. And it was the worst thing in the world....And then the next thing you know, it’s a problem, and you’re isolated.*”

Williams was right to view alcoholism as a prelude for isolation. Alcoholism also leads to more depression. After all, alcohol is a depressant, and after the temporary numbing of emotions and self-medication, it makes depression worse. It is a very serious combination. Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in this country, and alcoholism is one of the strongest predictors of suicidal attempts. In fact, it has been estimated that those with depression with a substance abuse disorder are six times more likely to commit suicide. The strong link between substance abuse and suicidal behavior is a red flag for suicide.

3. Talk about it!

Those who keep quiet about their depression and keep it in due to fear of the stigma and embarrassment. However, by keeping isolated, idiosyncratic distorted thinking interferes with gaining a healthier, more objective, perspective. Using a supportive network to share one’s darkest thoughts and feelings can help decrease a sense of hopelessness and isolation. As Williams described in the quote above, isolation and depression are a risky combination, and those who find supportive relationships with friends and family in which they are not judged or ridiculed are important in defeating depression.

Making efforts to connect and share thoughts and feelings can help enormously. Connection with others is the antidote to depression. Remember the old Bell Telephone mantra - “*Reach out and*

touch someone!” Furthermore, seeking out positive people is crucial, not those who support your negativity or are overly critical. Keeping up with social activities also helps defeat depression.

4. Do not be too proud to get professional help.

As a Psychotherapist myself, I have been struck by how much just sharing and talking in a non-judgmental, supportive atmosphere has helped my clients overcome depression. Admitting you need help is the first step to helping yourself. Although many depressed individuals feel weak if they ask for help, I urge my clients to view the decision to seek help as a sign of courage and strength, not weakness. Besides, therapists can not only lend support, they can provide clients with the tools they need to develop important life skills to help combat depression. Life skills to help manage stress and anger, improve unhealthy thinking and improve communication are some examples of skills that can be learned. Counseling offers more than a sympathetic ear and common sense – it offers tips and tools from a trained professional to help clients learn the steps to live positively.

5. Stay active.

Even if you need to push yourself, develop some game plan for action throughout the day, breaking large tasks into manageable pieces. Discipline and proactivity is good to help lift moods, and can help depressed individuals gain a sense of mastery and competence. When people are depressed, they often feel overwhelmed and lack the energy to even start. However, this increases depression and guilt, leading to more negative self-talk. Pushing yourself to pick something to do, and schedule time in small chunks, can do wonders for mood. The NIKE slogan, “Just Do it” is a great way to naturally fight depression. Proactivity is related to self-esteem and stress resilience.

6. Develop healthy life style habits.

Good self-care habits such as eating well and regular exercise are incompatible with depression. Exercise itself is a great way to help fight depression, releasing not only endorphins and keeping metabolism active, but also in helping us gain a sense of mastery over our bodies and our lives. We feel better, look better, keep weight controlled, and improve self-esteem when we take care of ourselves. Likewise, many studies have shown a strong link between eating well and feeling well. There are no shortage of studies identifying some common culprits of increasing low mood. Diets that are moderate and balanced with plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables, rich in nutrients and low on sugar and excess fat, help boost our mood.

Too many refined foods and excess sugars have been linked to depression, and it has been suggested that food rich in Omega-3 can be beneficial for mood, which can be found in fatty fish such as salmon and tuna among many others. Depression has also been linked to cigarette smoking, as well as too much caffeine which can also lead to increased anxiety which triggers depression. Furthermore, the low mood-more food connection further can exacerbate depression and cause people to feel worse about themselves for their lack of discipline in overeating. In essence, appreciating the importance of the mind/body connection can help individuals ward off depression.

7. Forgive yourself for not having the foresight to know what you now know in hindsight.

Depressed individuals are often plagued with guilt. Guilt over past mistakes, guilt over failure or not being “good enough” are all examples of the endless array of thoughts that depressed people beat themselves up about. Williams himself stated in an interview that he had issues with guilt over his past behavior and failed marriages. *“You know, I was shameful, and you do stuff that*

causes disgust, and that's hard to recover from. You can say, 'I forgive you' and all that stuff, but it's not the same as recovering from it. It's not coming back."

It had been suggested by a family friend that also he had survivors guilt over not being able to help prevent losing his good friends, Christopher Reeves, John Belushi and Andy Kaufman. Being stuck in past regret is a direct path to depression. Rather, it is crucial to learn from regrets and build on unproductive and crippling regret, making them into stepping stones for future successes and wisdom over lessons learned.

8. Lower expectations that are unrealistically high.

Robin Williams was larger than life – he was a true legend, but that came with a lot of pressure to handle. Even his manic tendencies couldn't keep up with his legendary larger-than-life status. In the media, it had been suggested that facing a setback like a cancelled TV show, on top of having two failed marriages, might have led Williams to not focus on all the good he had done, but rather focus on how he fell short of his high expectations that he had for himself.

Depressed people often focus not on their successes but their failures, and these expectations are impossible to uphold over time. The tragedy of Williams shows that no matter how much success one has reached, people who are depressed still feel like they failed. They feel responsible for bad things that happen and often truly believe that people will be better off without them. So tragic that Robin Williams could not heed advice of his own character in *Good Will Hunting* when he kept repeating to his guilt-plagued and self-blaming therapy client, played by Matt Damon, *"It's not your fault."*

9. Keep hope alive.

The act of suicide is an act of hopelessness. Suicide is a permanent solution to temporary problems, and people who are in depths of despair feel like there is no way out and things will ALWAYS be this way. Helping people to see that there is hope for things to get better is one of the best gifts you can give to a depressed person or to yourself if you struggle with depression. Sometimes it takes the act of actually writing down what is positive or hopeful to get out of the tunnel vision mindset of depression.

10. Remember that even if things don't turn out – you still can.

Faced with Parkinson's disease, a failed TV show and a lifelong struggle with depression, life might have seemed to have spun out of control for Robin Williams. However, it is important to keep in mind – it is not what happens to us – it is our taken what happens to us – which becomes most important. It is true – some things might be unavoidable in life – such as illness and adversity.

However, we have the power to make the best of it – our illness or adversities do not need to define us. Some things do really go horribly wrong in life, but that does not need to define us – rather it can motivate us to rise with the challenge and develop strength and purpose instead of letting it make us lose our purpose. And indeed, there are some things so difficult that we really never really *get over*, but that does not mean we cannot *get through* it. Usually, the support of loved ones can help considerably in getting through life challenges.

11. Deal with past trauma and insecurities.

It is curious that one of the world's funniest men was by many media reports actually a painfully shy, insecure and quiet child who greatly lacked self-confidence and self-esteem. The question is – had he dealt with his early childhood insecurity or was he still defined by it?

All too often, no matter how successful someone becomes, they still define themselves as they did in their early school years, and no matter how successful they are, self-doubt and insecurity still define them. It is like a thin person still feeling like the chubby kid in grade school. When individuals find that old self-doubts remain despite mastery in the world, addressing those early childhood pains is essential. Sure, we cannot change what happened to us, but we can change how we deal with what's happened to us. Otherwise, what you resist, will persist, and old messages will keep recycling that brings distortion and confusion into our present day. Whether Robins Williams had some closure on pain from his past is unknown, but it might be that a youth spent in painful shyness and insecurity might have never really stopped defining him at his core.

12. Keep Laughing

Robin William's gave us the gift of laughter. Perhaps it is not so curious that many comedians struggle with depression – Laughter and a sense of humor is one of the best ways to ward off depression. As William's himself has said when interviewed by Parade magazine, "*Comedy can be a cathartic way to deal with personal trauma.*" For him to say this, it appears that personal trauma was not unknown to him. The great irony is that Williams, who gave this gift of laughter to so many, who helped us learn to laugh at ourselves and the life's imperfections, could no longer use this gift on himself.

The quote below from Robin William's in *The Fisher King* offers us a sobering reminder that attitude, not reality, determines our mental health. Depression is a disease of distorted reality. Although we all admired Robin Williams as a masterful human being who had so much to offer the world with his comedic genius and compassion and goodness as a human being, his view of himself was not what we all saw. He apparently could not see past being a man alone, in pain, with no hope in sight of relief.

“And being a fool, he was simple minded, he didn't see a king. He only saw a man alone and in pain.” – Robin Williams, The Fisher King

Judy Belmont, M.S., LPC