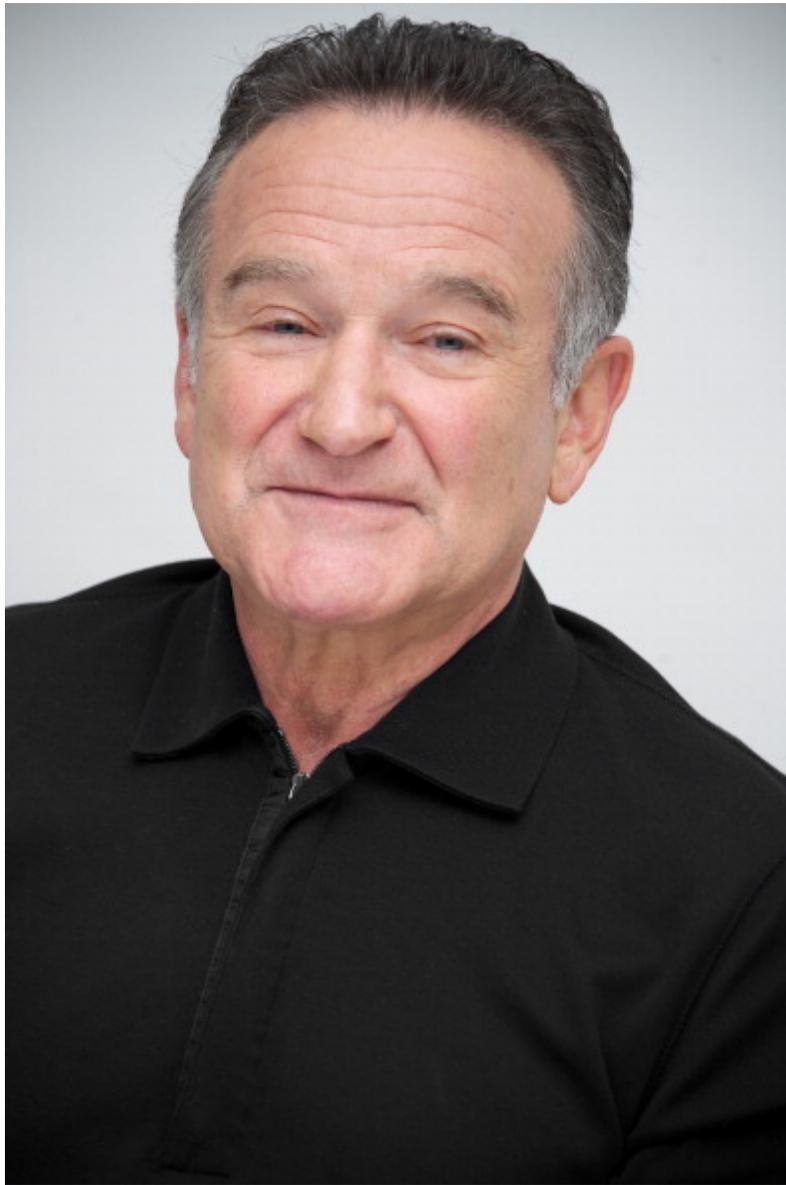


# The heartbreak of being humorous

By [Erika Staron](#) August 12, 2014

Hearing the news of a celebrity's death is always unfortunate, but something about the story of **Robin Williams'** passing feels uncomfortably personal. It could be that *Aladdin* and Mrs. Doubtfire carried us through childhood or that *The Birdcage* taught us that we could be gay and still be ok. Maybe it's because he served as a universal father-figure, that somewhere between our earliest memories of sitting on the couch watching *Good Morning, Vietnam* and our dad's goofy Mork impressions, Robin Williams started bearing a resemblance to our own fathers, or to the father we had always hoped for. Either way, judging from the nation's reaction, losing Robin Williams feels hugely heartbreaking.



By now, we've all heard the news that Robin Williams committed suicide. It's a tragedy of epic proportions, seeing someone so widely loved end his own life. Truth is, if I had to read one more update saying, "I'd never

have guessed he was depressed," I'd have lost it. Truth is, I did lose it, and here we are. Here is that dialogue we're all so quick to promise before going right back to Instagramming our breakfast.

Like Robin, I am an only child who has struggled with depression and anxiety most of my life, suicidal thoughts being par for the course. I realized at an early age that humor served as the best way to deal with those insecurities, making the joke before others could and laughing at myself louder than any of my inner voices could. I can't even count the number of times I've been told that people like my one side better than the other or shrug off my anxieties with a, "You're so funny." Or how often I've felt guilty for being pessimistic, sad, or self-deprecating. Along with his being a universal father figure, making this loss feel so personal is that his struggle is relatable. Being funny can often come from a very dark and isolating place, and Robin was able to bridge the gap between that anguish and the outside world with his comedy.

As we grow older, we watch our childhood heroes age. There's a sadness in that, a reminder of our loved ones and our own mortality. Life is too short, yet again, and in the case of Robin, it serves as a reminder that someone who brought so much joy to our lives, someone who could light up any room, could also suffer so much anguish and pain. It proves that sometimes the most relatable and genuine humor comes from a very dark place. It reminds us that depression is indiscriminate.



Some of my best stand-up work has been done within the four walls of my therapist's office, nearly every one of them telling me at some point during our sessions that I am hilarious. Hilarious and anxiety-ridden, what a mind-blowing combination. Except that it isn't. It's a common marriage within the comedy community, a fascinating and enigmatic darkness that we as comedy consumers are drawn to. That's not to say that all comedians are deeply troubled, but most of the good ones at very least understand struggle. I don't know

Robin's situation, and I don't need to. I can look to **Maria Bamford's** comedy, **Paul Gilmartin's** podcast, *Mental Illness Happy Hour*, or Marty DeRosa's *Wrestling with Depression*, all exemplary of where despair and funny meet.

As someone who once eased feelings of loneliness by drinking myself into a regular blacked-out oblivion, it felt like a kick in the gut to read that one of Robin's friends noted that he had recently withdrawn from his comedy community and friends. People knew, and yet he still felt alone. Feeling alone in a crowded room is an accurate description of depression and is a feeling that is most obvious within the comedy community. While surrounded by laughter in writing rooms, clubs, and arenas, we can still feel alone.

Both of my parents have struggled with depression, several of my friends have battled some form of anxiety, and a year ago, my girlfriend attempted suicide. It's not as rare as Twitter would have you believe. If I had to guess, I would bet that nearly 100% of writers, comedians, and artists have struggled with some form of mental illness. No one can prepare you for how demanding and scary that place is or how difficult that sort of love can be.

What we now have is this tragedy. It's a wake-up call to try harder to reach out to our loved ones. It's the wonder and awe surrounding suicide that is part of the problem. It's a disease just like any other. I have often found myself looking to Robin Williams and his career as inspiration for what it truly means to be unabashedly authentic, and I will continue to do so. In this situation, I am so heartbroken over the loss of someone who felt like a constant influence throughout my entire life, but I am grateful for the lifetime of laughter and tears. All we can do now is hope this tragedy is the switch that finally flips the collective stigma on its head.

*"I was an only child. I did have kind of a like a lonely existence. The idea of being a character who is kind of isolated, I can relate to that." – Robin Williams*

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