

Disability, Long Term Care & Employee Benefit Advisory

Robin Williams, Parkinson's and Us

In thinking about a topic for a new "health related" article for NCHPAD, an old friend passed away. Well not exactly a "friend" but I felt like I had gotten to know Robin Williams. Although better known as a comedian, his acting in films like Dead Poets Society, Good Will Hunting and The World According to Garp were among my favorites.

As you're probably well aware, a very depressed Robin Williams recently took his own life. Depression certainly is a major health issue in today's society. Come to think of it, is there any other health issue that impacts all segments of the population more today?

Years ago I remember someone asking "can there be a lesson in this tragedy?" Since Robin Williams chose to take his own life. I'm confident there's much for us all to understand. First and foremost, we are all faced with choices and *living* is one of them. In my opinion, when anyone's suffering becomes too much to bear, it is their right to end the suffering. In listening to Robin's "rapid fire" approach, different dialogues within the very same paragraph, I asked myself how could one man's brain handle the multitude of thoughts all at the same time? If medication and therapy and self-awareness haven't helped, then none of us can truly understand what it feels like to "walk in his shoes".

My exposure to Parkinson's disease and my interest in accessible travel started with an invitation to speak to a local support group. As I had created a handbook on accessible travel opportunities, a young woman who ran a Parkinson's support group had discovered my publication and bio on-line. She asked if I would be willing to speak on accessible travel to a group of 40 to 50 people that consisted of Parkinson patients and their caregivers. Hearing that Robin Williams had recently been diagnosed with Parkinson's reminded me of that speaking invitation.

What I learned next is probably the most valuable lesson I can offer anyone with any form of impairment or disability that *used to travel but has stopped completely*. My epiphany occurred when I simply asked if the members of the support group were having any difficulties with their travels. What I heard next was a resounding "yes", as it seemed that everyone in the group had basically stopped traveling completely!

Since my work life involved helping people file disability claims, I had learned there were a multitude of variations in the severity of Parkinson's. There were folks with minor symptoms that initially lead to a specific (Parkinson's) diagnosis all the way to those who were seriously impaired. It seems that based on the initial diagnosis, that might have been a primary factor in stopping their travel.

Possibly an assumption was made that continuing to travel would be too much to deal with. Another possibility might have been the fear of the unknown and not knowing how they would get medical care in a foreign country. Yet another possibility could be having a new physician who specializes in the treatment of Parkinson's and not wanting to be less accessible to that doctor.

As an aside, I recall being moderately disabled for brief periods of time. While recovering from a stress fracture, I was on crutches for two weeks. Another time I was unable to exercise for several weeks recovering from a rotator cuff repair. Being accustomed to functioning at 100 percent and exercising almost every day, I recall my attitude changing when I was temporarily disabled. I wonder if Robin Williams had just learned he had Parkinson's and couldn't envision functioning at less than 100 percent.

Robin was known to say, I can be funny when I'm on stage bringing happiness to so many people; yet not be happy myself. Regrettably, we know that his audiences adored him so much more than he could adore himself. A close friend commented on seeing Robin pouring his whole heart and soul into a comedy routine and walking off stage to collapse in a chair looking like a prize fighter after a 15 round championship fight. His unique style of comedy could not (and maybe never will not) be matched by other modern day comedians.

Whether donating or raising money for the homeless or bringing his unique brand of humor to our soldiers in foreign countries, he gave more of himself selflessly as he was motivated by his deep rooted need to please his audience that resulted in one man giving of himself to millions of people around the planet.

The Parkinson's Disease Foundation issued a press release 'Understanding Suicide and Parkinson's Disease'. The Parkinson's Disease Foundation was responding to questions relating to the impact of medications used to treat Parkinson's disease on the risk of suicide.

Interestingly enough, suicide rates for people with Parkinson's disease are reported to be the same, or lower than the general population. My personal hope is that patients already impacted by Parkinson's don't add the fear of suicide to any burden they are already facing.

Lastly, let's have Robin Williams recent passing cause us all to look within ourselves. Think about your own worst day. Don't we all have them? Think about a time when a tragic occurrence stopped you in your tracks and you asked yourself, 'how will I get through this?' Let's have Robin Williams' legacy be about his generosity with himself and his incomparable talent be one of our favorite memories. My guess is that there's literally millions of men and women reading this article whose lives are just a little better today because of having seen or heard Robin Williams just one time. Thank you Robin.

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Allan Checkoway, RHU most recently authored "***I'm Disabled . . . Now What?***", created for people whose lives have been impacted by changes in their overall health. Fortunately, our decades of experiences in working with people who have become disabled, sometimes ending up in long term care situations has given us a unique perspective that can benefit our readers. We've taken what we believe to be all the best up to date accessABLE resources from a multitude of resources, putting them all together in one place in "***I'm Disabled . . . Now What?***" and on our new website www.DisabilityandSeniorResources.com. **We are dedicated to helping restore active lifestyles.** Allan is presently the Principal of Disability Services Group, an Employee Benefit Advisory firm. Allan's address is 661 Highland Ave. Suite 103, Needham, MA 02494, tel: 781.400.5055; email: allan@disabilityservices.com