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To: Kester, Tonykester@aging.sc.gov
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Robin Williams: Raising Awareness About Depression

By Kathy Greenlee, J.D., Administrator, Administration for Community Living and Pamela S. Hyde, J.D., Administrator, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

It's still hard to believe that Robin Williams – beloved comedian, actor, father, and friend – is no longer with us. To the public and even close friends, he appeared to be happy, upbeat and funny, and he was financially stable -- all of those things that seem worth living for. But behind the public persona that we knew and loved, we now know that he had battled addiction to alcohol and drugs, was struggling with depression, and was in the early stages of Parkinson's disease, a known risk factor for depression.

That is the terrible truth about depression. It is a disease that can rob you of your perspective on life, and it often co-exists with substance misuse or addiction. Depression is not just being sad, and it's not a character weakness or personal failing. It is a disease that can impact all facets of one's life. It can make you think that life is not worth living. Because of public misperceptions of the disease, people with depression often try to conceal their disease until that too becomes too much to bear.

Robin Williams was only age 63. He was in the prime of his life. Yet we know that men age 45-64 have one of the highest suicide rates of any age group – rates that, according to the latest national data, grew by 40% between 1999 through 2011. And much of the suicide prevention and research efforts to date have been focused on other at-risk groups.

What we do know is that most suicides are preventable. There are treatments that work, and individuals can recover from mental health problems. But that takes awareness, support, and treatment. If you know someone who may be depressed, reach out and talk to them. Ask them if they are feeling down or contemplating suicide and give them the opportunity to open up and share their troubles, so you can work together to find solutions.

We don't try to cure cancer on our own, nor should we try to battle depression on our own. To quote one of Robin Williams' movie personas, "You'll have bad times, but it'll always wake you up to the good stuff you weren't paying attention to." Everyone's life has value, and mental illness does not diminish this. If you or someone you know is struggling with feelings of despair, someone at the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255) is available to help 24/7. For more

information about mental health resources and treatment, please visit www.mentalhealth.gov.

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