

A Serious Talk about a Serious Topic: What You Need to Know about Late-Life Suicide

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September was National Suicide Prevention Month but it did not shed as much light on suicide as the recent death of legend Robin Williams. His death left many people asking how a man who could bring joy to so many and appear to have so much take his own life. The sad truth is as a middle- to older-aged white male Robin Williams was in the group who is at the greatest risk of suicide worldwide. In the United States adults, particularly men, ages 45 and over, hold the highest rates of completed suicide, disproportionate to their percentage in the population. In 2010, Census and CDC reports showed that adults ages 45-85+ made up 39.4% of the population and 55% of the total suicides. We expect these percentages to continue to rise with the steady increase in the number of adults age 45 and over.

Why then do we not hear more about late-life suicide when middle- to older-age adults are more likely than any other age-group to die by suicide? One reason may be that, as Dr. Daniel Segal a Professor at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs (UCCS) found, many adults, younger and older, are not particularly knowledgeable about late-life suicide. This is understandable. Suicide is a taboo topic, wrought with stigma and difficult to discuss. However with numbers like these it is clear we can no longer afford to ignore late-life suicide.

Recognizing the Warning Signs

While no two suicides can be understood the same there are some consistent risk factors for middle- to older-age adults. For example, as previously mentioned when age, race, ethnicity, and gender are combined, 45-85+ year old white men are found to be particularly at risk. That is not to say all men in that demographic will even attempt suicide but rather in the presence of other factors such as depression, illness, cognitive impairment, hopelessness, substance abuse, social isolation, family history of suicide or violence and previous suicide attempts, their risk of suicide greatly increases. While these are not the only warning signs an easy-to-remember mnemonic is offered by the American Association of Suicidology:

IS PATH WARM?

- I Ideation
- S Substance Abuse

- P Purposelessness
- A Anxiety
- T Trapped
- H Hopelessness

- W Withdrawal
- A Anger
- R Recklessness
- M Mood Changes

If you observe or experience any warning signs seek help as soon as possible. Contact a mental health professional, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255) for a referral or

the Friendship Line for the Elderly: 800-971-0016, an accredited national hotline that focuses on older adults.

Fostering Protective Factors

You can take actions to reduce the risk of suicide for you and your loved ones which will serve as protective factors. The following suggestions are based on information from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Explore the nearest agencies providing effective clinical treatment for mental, physical, and substance abuse. Increase your access to, and conversations about, clinical agencies and interventions and encourage your family members to seek help whenever needed. Try to restrict access to firearms, poison or pills. Just making it difficult to reach these items may provide someone enough time to reconsider. Reach out to loved ones or make new friends. Strong familial connections and community social activity can provide important support for everyone particularly older adults. For more information, read the American Psychological Association's Depression and Suicide in Older Adults Resource Guide (toll-free: 1-800-374-2721) and the National Institute on Aging's Age Page on Depression (toll-free: 1-800-222-2225) both which can be accessed online or by calling their toll-free numbers.

The UCCS Aging Center offers low-cost mental health services to adults over 55 years of age. Please call (719) 255-8002 if you are noticing the symptoms listed above or would like more information.

Kadija is a second year clinical doctoral student at UCCS studying late-life suicide with Dr. Daniel L. Segal. Her research focuses on the social pattern of late-life suicide among older adults including implications for prevention. For more information about this article email kwilliam@uccs.edu or call 719.255.8028.