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### Only: The Four-Letter Word in Suicide

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# Only: The Four-Letter Word in Suicide

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Office of University Communications

August 29, 2014

By: Dr. James P. Morgan

Actor Robin Williams' apparent suicidal death came as a shock to us all. Williams touched many lives through his life and career, and even his death. Local publications have done an excellent job of covering this tragedy, and have emphasized the need for more education about suicide. If one life can be saved as a result of increased awareness and understanding about suicide, then Williams's death, while tragic, will have helped another.

As I have reflected on Williams' death, I have been reminded of a former 16-year-old client who was referred to me by her psychiatrist at the conclusion of her psychiatric hospitalization for a suicide attempt. About two months into her outpatient therapy, she started her session by saying, "My life is going so well now. If I had succeeded at killing myself back then, I would not be here to enjoy the good times I am experiencing now. In the future, I want to remember that the bad times are always temporary. They eventually pass." This young client had learned one of the most important lessons about suicide: The state of mind that results in suicide is temporary and can change with helpful intervention. Sadly, those like Williams who succeed at suicide are so caught up in their hopeless thinking that they really cannot see any other way out. This reality about suicide led Edwin Shneidman, a leading scholar on the subject, to conclude that the four-letter word in suicide is "only." When in a suicidal state, the person sees suicide as their only option.

Because suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary state of mind, we need to always take it seriously if we—or someone else—is suicidal. The pain of a bleeding accident victim is visible to us, and we are quick to summon help. However, the pain of a suicidal person may be hidden from us, and even if we suspect suicidal risk, we may not act as quickly. Since suicide is deadly, we need to have compassion for people who are suicidal and we take immediate action to help them. The International Association for Suicide Prevention is an excellent source for additional information.

*Dr. James Morgan is a professor of psychology in the Gardner-Webb University School of Psychology and Counseling.*

Click below to hear an interview reflecting on the life of Robin Williams: