

1-in-4 battle depression, but there's help available

Sara Falligant | Opelika-Auburn News | Twitter | Posted: Saturday, August 16, 2014 7:03 pm

Editor's note: This is the first of multiple stories on mental illness.

Mental illness can happen to anyone.

The Centers for Disease Control report only 17 percent of U.S. adults are considered to be in “optimal” mental health. Depression is the most common form of mental illness, affecting more than a quarter of Americans.

Whether the CEO of a Fortune 500 company or a blue collar laborer, depression doesn't discriminate. Perhaps no example is more tangible, or fresh, than actor Robin Williams' death by suicide Monday.

“I think there are a lot of people who are suffering, and you would never know it,” said Jack Smith, an Auburn resident and a blogger who writes about his own experience with mental illness at onemanswar.blogspot.com. “One-fourth of the population is mentally ill. Think about that when you're walking around the mall. One out of every four people is mentally ill.”

Tracy Witte, Ph.D., an assistant professor at Auburn University's Department of Psychology and a licensed clinical psychologist, said people will sometimes talk about depression when they're feeling sad. But clinical depression is much deeper.

“It's one of the most common mental illnesses,” she said. “It's much more common, I think, than people realize. Odds are you probably know someone who has experienced it.”

Witte explained people who suffer depression experience sleep or appetite disturbance, either sleeping or eating more or less than usual, along with depressed mood and thoughts of suicide.

“We also look for things like anhedonia,” she continued. “Just not being interested or enjoying the things you used to enjoy.”

To receive a diagnosis, those symptoms must persist most of the day for two weeks. Witte said most depressive episodes last six to nine months.

“If you think about how you felt on your worst day,” she said. “Imagine feeling like that for months and months and months.”

Depression is twice as common in women as it is in men, with differences starting to emerge after puberty. Typically, the first onset of a major depressive episode occurs in early adulthood.

“It is possible to experience a depressive episode later in life,” Witte said.

She added a good first step for people who are experiencing symptoms of depression is to talk to their primary care physician.

“Primary care physicians can help refer you to a mental health provider. ...They can also prescribe medication,” Witte said. “If you have health insurance, you should look into if your insurance provider covers mental health care.”

Although there are a number of local resources available to people suffering from depression, many don't take advantage of them.

“One thing is lack of knowledge about what resources are available,” Witte explained. “There's also a lot of stigma about seeking mental health treatment.”

Another issue, Witte said, is cost.

“If you have health insurance, that can defray the cost,” she said.

But, with co-pays and frequent visits, those costs can add up.

Locally, two facilities offer low-cost mental healthcare. East Alabama Mental Health Center in Opelika and the Auburn University Psychological Services Center on Auburn's campus offer affordable mental health care on a sliding-scale based on income.

Another option, Witte said, is the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. People thinking of suicide or concerned friends and family can call 1-800-273-TALK for free, anonymous counseling. The service even offers an online chat feature at www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org.

“It's a wonderful resource,” Witte said. “You don't have to go into a clinic to receive that.”

Research shows talking helps. Witte cited a study conducted roughly 10 years ago that found only a small minority of people who died by suicide had been seen by a mental health provider in the month before their death.

Witte also encouraged friends and family to talk to loved ones they think are having thoughts of suicide.

“Don't be afraid to ask them if they're OK, or if they're having thoughts about suicide,” she said. “It can be quite a relief to them to for them to have that door open to you.”