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DOCTORS, BURNOUT AND THEIR OWN MENTAL HEALTH



Wednesday, 3 April 2013. This was the day I turned 37. This was also the day that I was admitted into Life Poortview with burnout, and major depression. The admission had come after my GP Dr Marlin McKay had come to my house on a Sunday to assess my situation. I was weeping uncontrollably. I had called him to let him know that I think I had had a mental breakdown and I needed professional help. The months leading up to my breakdown had been harrowing. I had been on auto pilot I wasn't myself I could not meet tasks at work. I couldn't make simple decisions like deciding what to wear to work and I felt like dying. I had reached out to a few friends around me and none of them understood what I was going through. The problem is, when you are always happy and chirpy like I was, when you do need help, people do not see it. Depression is a debilitating disease which can be sorted out with professional help. The problem is, as a medical doctor, who do you turn to when you have a mental illness? Who do you trust with your mental illness? Who

do you trust enough to make the diagnosis for you and to help you? I was fortunate to find help and love when I needed it the most. I remember the voices that would go round and round and round in my head. Telling me that I was a useless doctor, I was a useless mother, I was a useless wife, I was a useless manager and that the

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only option would be for me to die. Those voices were relentless. I would hear them the most at night after midnight when everything was quiet. During the day, it is easy to cope with depression because you are busy. You are on autopilot. You are a hamster in a wheel. You do not stop, you keep working and working. You drown yourself in task after task to avoid facing the reality of the emptiness

that is gnawing away inside you. I spoke out about my depression after the death of Robin Williams. I grew up in Harare Zimbabwe and there is a programme called "Mock and Mindy" that I loved so much. That was my introduction to Robin Williams and I went on to watch a few more of his movies. He was always the funny man. Always the cheerful one. Always making people laugh. The life of the party. Aren't many of us just that? Always helping our patients. Never taking timeout for ourselves. Always making sure that everyone else around us is fine except ourselves. Robin Williams's death





was a shock to the world because we had no idea that the funny man was actually broken and hurting inside. My mother had sworn me to secrecy after my diagnosis. She had come to see me in the hospital and I remember the shame on her face. She listed all the things that she felt I had achieved in life: "you are a medical doctor, you are married, you have two beautiful kids, why are you in this place with these people? I had asked my psychiatrist to talk to her. We went in for a family session. My husband, myself and my mom. My mom listened and did not utter the word "depression". She did not even say the word depression once. That is how ashamed she was of the situation I was in. I remember looking at her and saying to her "Mama, I need to be here. I need help". Seven weeks after my admission, my beloved mom passed away. My life was plunged into darkness as grief overwhelmed me. The only thing that kept me sane was my therapy sessions with my clinical psychologist and of course my medication. The medication had kicked in and at least I was able to work through the fog of a funeral and everything else that comes with grief. I remember sitting with my psychiatrist and just looking at her with tears in my eyes. I knew that I had no option but to continue because I had two kids and a

husband to live for. The medication is another aspect of mental illness that most people do not want to deal with. I remember when I went into the hospital. I told myself that I was a patient. I left my medical degree at the door and said that whatever I was told to do I would do. We went for art lessons. We did art and knitting, we had group therapy sessions, we had individual therapy sessions. I enjoyed eating in the dinning hall with everybody else. I enjoyed standing in a queue with all the other patients for my medication. For the first time I was just Sindi, a patient that needed

help. I did not have the burden of being a mom, or a wife or a medical doctor or a manager. I was a broken human being that needed help. And the reason why I broke my secrecy around my depression after Robin Williams's death was because I realised that many people needed help and if I could tell my story and help just one person then I would have achieved a lot. My mom had sworn me to secrecy but I had to break that to help people. And this is why I continue to tell my story about burnout and depression. We need to look around and help each other. We know the signs and symptoms of burn out and depression. We are medical doctors and we have been trained. We need to rally around each other and help each other through depression. It is a life long journey because I do not believe that one is ever fully cured from depression. But the therapy sessions and the medication are always there to help you navigate the world in a better way. Here I am today, living a full healthy life and I look back at what I survived and I marvel at everything that I have come through. I thank God for my psychiatrist and my clinical psychologist and my husband who stood by me through thick and thin, even when things were very dark. I really hope that you can look at your life and if you need help, get the help that you need. It is worth it. **MHM**

