



Under Pressure? Here's Help!

The pandemic has thrown many executives into emotional distress, which can lead to psychological issues. Experts offer five ways to ease the tension. *By Colleen Marble*

2 **020 has been** one of the most challenging years in our lifetime, and executives across every industry are facing an enormous amount of psychological pressure.

They are responsible for navigating these uncharted waters with no guarantee that their business—or even their industry—will survive. They are facing difficult decisions, such as workforce reduction and facility closures, that will have repercussions for years to come.

It is no wonder, then, that researchers who study mental health are reporting increased emotional distress, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and substance abuse. These negative emotions and unhealthy behaviors can make it difficult for anyone, but especially leaders, to stay focused and objective at a time when both are essential.

Depression and Anxiety Are on the Rise

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that symptoms of emotional distress and mental illness increased considerably from April to June 2020, compared to the same period in 2019. In particular, the prevalence of anxiety



disorder was three times higher, and the prevalence of depressive disorder was four times higher. In addition, twice as many respondents reported suicidal ideation compared to a study done in 2018.

Not surprisingly, the CDC study noted that essential workers and unpaid caregivers, such as those caring for their elderly parents, are at even greater risk of emotional distress, as are people of color.

These findings are in line with those reported by other researchers:

- National Health Council member **Mental Health America** is monitoring the mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It reported a **370% increase in daily anxiety screenings** in May compared to January 2020.
- In May, the American Psychological Association's **Stress in America™ 2020** survey saw the **first significant increase in average stress levels** since the annual survey began in 2007. In particular, **people of color are more likely to report pandemic-related stress**. A July 2020 update also showed **rising feelings of frustration, fear and anger**, with civil unrest, racial injustice and discrimination contributing to the unease.
- In September, the **Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)** published a study



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that found a **threefold increase in all depression symptoms** (with a seven-and-a-half-fold increase in severe depression) since the pandemic began. It also showed a **positive correlation between civil unrest and mental illness**. Researchers noted that this increase “is higher than recorded after previous mass traumatic events, likely reflecting the far more pervasive influence of COVID-19 and its social and economic consequences.”

The data is sobering, especially for business leaders who fall into several high-risk categories. Consider a typical C-suite executive: They are caring for their at-risk elderly parents while helping their children with their online education—all while navigating critical business issues related to decreased revenue, upended workflows, civil unrest and more.

Meanwhile, these executives’ emotional support network has been disrupted due to lockdowns, social distancing and other COVID-19 mitigation measures. “The old ways of dealing with stress, such as hanging out with friends, going out to eat or going to an event, don’t exist right now—at least not in the same way they once did—and that’s definitely leading to more depression, anxiety and substance abuse,” says Dr. Erin Berman,

clinical psychologist at the National Institute of Mental Health.

This puts executives at greater risk for emotional distress, and the fallout could be costly, both personally and professionally.

Why Are “Pedestal Professionals” Vulnerable?

Dr. Michael Groat is chief clinical officer at Silver Hill Hospital, a psychiatric hospital located in New Canaan, Connecticut. He specializes in treating business leaders, or what he calls “pedestal professionals,” who are experiencing emotional distress.

“Executives are looked up to for their leadership in the workplace, and they hold themselves to high standards,” he says. “They tend to be more conscientious and driven, and you often see a degree of perfectionism. They see themselves as problem solvers, and they often set aside their personal difficulties to get the job done.”

The same qualities that make someone a good leader can also make them more susceptible to emotional distress during times of crisis. “Depression is an outcome of stress pileup,” says Dr. Groat. “That can be the result of issues in one’s personal life, of course, but it also is due to internal stress that stems from the drive and inner critic that most >>>

ABOVE, STOCKSY; RIGHT, COURTESY FAUST RUGGIERO



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executives have, making them more vulnerable, particularly now due to the challenges of leading through a pandemic.”

In addition to internal pressure to attain a high level of performance, corporate culture often does not accept mental illness. Faust Ruggiero, author of *The Fix Yourself Handbook*, has spent more than 40 years counseling executives and working with businesses to address mental health issues in the workplace.

“Executives tend to be secretive about their issues. They don’t want anyone to know they’re having a problem because they’re afraid it will be a sign of weakness or someone may take advantage of it,” says Mr. Ruggiero. “It can be so competitive at the top of the corporate ladder that people will burn themselves out, never take a vacation and never admit to needing any kind of help because they’re afraid someone will retaliate.”

Corporate culture that rewards such behavior eventually causes people to either crash and burn or leave the company to find a healthier work-life balance. But companies that remove the stigma from mental health issues and provide appropriate support have happier, healthier employees who are better able to lead the business through good times and bad.

Five Ways to Address Emotional Distress

Effective business leaders are objective, controlled and focused, which allows them to make sound decisions and provide clear leadership. A business leader who is in crisis will struggle unless they take steps to improve their mental health. As the saying goes, you must put on your own oxygen mask before you can help anyone else.

Unlike other short-term crises, we cannot wait out the pandemic; true recovery may take years. Harvard Business Review’s “Leading into the Post-COVID Recovery” noted the scope of the work ahead:

“It’s dawning on leaders and teams that the lockdown phase was in fact just the acute part of the crisis. ... The recovery marks the onset of a broader challenge, not the end of the crisis.”

How can business leaders recover and maintain the emotional equilibrium they need to face in the coming months and years? Consider these five strategies for managing emotional distress:

1 Make health and taking breaks a priority.

It is OK to admit that you are struggling with emotional distress and need some time to practice self-care, whether that means taking a break, taking a vacation, cutting the overtime or logging out on the weekends. “Leaders need to demonstrate that some things can wait, and the business is not going to fall apart if you take time off,” says Dr. Groat. “Setting boundaries helps shift the entire corporate culture so people can see it’s OK to take the same healthy steps for themselves.”

2 Hit pause until you get the facts.

When things cannot wait, such as during a crisis, you can still hit pause long enough to develop an appropriate response. “Going with your gut can backfire, particularly if you’re in emotional distress,” says Mr. Ruggiero. “Take time, even if it’s just a few minutes, to gather the facts. That can save a lot of trouble later on.”

3 Use feelings and logic.

Whether you are dealing with a work issue or an employee concern, “know the difference between responding and reacting,” says Dr. Groat. “It’s about distinguishing between emotionally driven behavior, such as anger or fear, and behavior that’s rooted in what we call ‘wise mind,’ where you take into account feelings and logic to come up with a response that balances the two.”

4

Find a passion outside of work.

It is easy to become consumed by the crisis at hand, but your mind and body will benefit from taking a break to do something that brings you joy. “Find an activity that will take your mind off of work, and do that as often as possible,” says Mr. Ruggiero. “It can be anything that you can look forward to doing, as long as it’s a healthy choice. Schedule time every day to cleanse your emotional palate.”

5

Know when to seek professional help.

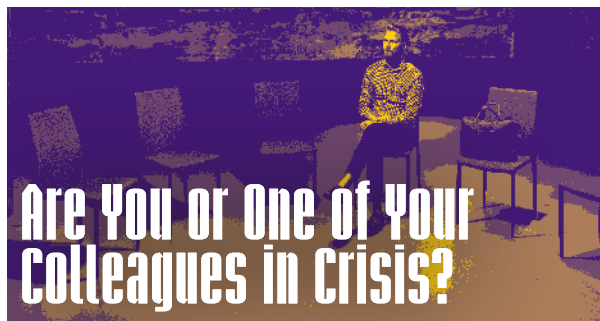
“Speaking with a therapist or counselor can be really helpful,” says Dr. Berman. “You can also talk with your primary care physician, who may recommend that you follow up with a specialist, such as a psychiatrist.” Read “Are You or One of Your Colleagues in Crisis?” on this page to learn more.

Keep Calm and Carry On

It is normal to be concerned about feeling anxious or depressed, especially for people who are used to being in control of their emotions. But given the circumstances, it would be strange if people were not experiencing some level of emotional distress.

In its September 2 publication, JAMA classified the COVID-19 pandemic as a traumatic event: “As an event that can cause physical, emotional and psychological harm, the COVID-19 pandemic can itself be considered a traumatic event. ... Mental health is sensitive to traumatic events and their social and economic consequences.”

As executives navigate the challenges ahead, Dr. Berman offers this advice: “Be very kind to yourself and manage your expectations—of yourself and others. The less frustrated you are, the more productive you can be. Stay flexible, adjust as needed and keep the lines of communication open.” **IQ**



DO NOT WAIT TO ADDRESS EMOTIONAL DISTRESS. WATCH FOR THESE COMMON SIGNS.

Sometimes distress can be difficult to recognize, especially during the early stages when it is easy to chalk up symptoms to normal job stress. When it starts to interfere with the ability to get work done, there may be something more going on.

It is just as important to treat mental distress as it is to treat a physical ailment like a broken bone or a heart condition. To do that, learn to recognize the common signs of distress, including:

EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

- Increased frustration, irritability
- Racing thoughts
- Overwhelming anxiety, sadness
- Memory/concentration problems
- Excessive worry, fear
- Relational issues (professional and personal)
- Lack of interest in enjoyable activities
- Extreme mood swings
- Suicidal thoughts
- Inability to carry out daily activities

PHYSICAL DISTRESS

- Appetite changes
- Sleep disturbances, fatigue
- Substance abuse
- Inability to relax
- Cardiovascular symptoms (e.g., pounding heart, high blood pressure, chest pain or tightness)
- Increased illness (e.g., headaches, stomachaches, malaise)
- Decreased libido

“If someone starts to see three or four of these signs in either category, then something is getting to them—it could be a combination of job stress and personal stress,” says Faust Ruggiero, author of *The Fix Yourself Handbook* and a professional therapist who works with corporations to provide mental health training and support.

Dr. Erin Berman, clinical psychologist at the **National Institute of Mental Health**, agrees. “When these symptoms start to interfere with your work and make it difficult to meet your basic needs, it’s time to do something about it.”

Many companies offer wellness programs that provide mental health services, such as stress management classes, counseling and referrals. Dr. Berman also recommends the **Disaster Distress Helpline (800-985-5990 or text “TalkWithUs” to 66746)** or the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800-273-8255)** for 24/7 crisis counseling.