

## **How to emotionally survive the global economic crisis**

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Alarm. Fear. Exhaustion. Pain. Depression. Panic. These are words that describe the anxiety we are all feeling because of the global economic crisis. The recent suicide of Adolf Merckle, the German family entrepreneur and one of the world's wealthiest men, again reminds us that even the most powerful and successful people are also experiencing severe anxiety and self doubt.



While his firm faced restructuring and would likely survive, his loss of control and belief that he had failed his family's business legacy was more than he could live with.

Successful entrepreneurs and business leaders are powerful people with a high need for control and low need for social support. They have a personal vision of the future and a strong belief in their ability to make things happen. They demand outstanding performance from everyone and are often even tougher on themselves, measuring their self-worth based on their business performance.

The consequences of business failure are a collapse of their self-esteem and the inevitable narcissistic injury. These "unexpected" suicides happen because an individual's shame from their perceived failure exceeds their resources for coping with the pain.

There are seldom clear warnings when executives choose to take their own lives but the recent spate of executive suicides – – Steven L Good, CEO of the US real-estate auction house founded by his father also took his own life last week – should alert us to the fragility of the human psyche.

So what can business families and their advisors do? I would recommend strengthening family connections with a goal of providing increased social support before a crisis arises.

Economic uncertainty, financial struggles, or failed strategies all cause psychological stress that can lead to anxiety and despair. Anxiety drains emotional energy but with thoughtful planning the family can become a source of energy enabling family members to recharge their emotional batteries.

Family members cannot be prevented from feeling anxious or depressed about their work or life situation but it is possible to create a safety net that helps everyone maintain a stronger sense of balance and even optimism.

Effective family connections help in two ways: first, by enabling the family to share experiences, energy and enthusiasm across generations; and second, by encouraging communication of new ideas and personal feelings -- creating the potential for new insights and options for more effective behaviour.

Each family needs to build connections in their own unique way; one European family hosts family golf tournaments, a Chinese family feasts with day-long meals and an American family maintains their relationships through the family charitable foundation. The following list should stimulate you and your family to identify possible connections based on shared experiences and values:

- Maintaining family traditions like dinners and summer holidays.
- Organising family sporting events or cultural activities.
- Developing family rituals like inaugurating new owners.
- Encouraging executives and directors to attend professional education.
- Conducting family education programmes and seminars.
- Organising well-planned family and ownership meetings.
- Expanding the involvement of board and advisors with stressed executives.
- Increasing the family emphasis on philanthropy and service to others.
- Renewing spirituality through nature, active service to others or organised religion.

Some may argue that attempts at social support based on family connections are of no value to seriously depressed individuals and they may be correct. I would suggest that consistently failing to engage with a family member who is experiencing stress is a signal for the family to seek medical or psychological help for the individual.

In difficult times, strengthening family connections provides all family members with an opportunity to positively address the crisis and support each other.

Families that purposefully support each other in difficult times also gain the added benefit of generating family trust and long-term family commitment in good times.