

HOW TO COPE WITH A SUDDEN DEATH IN THE FAMILY BUSINESS

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The tragic death of Olivier Dassault in a helicopter accident brings into focus how life can change—and end—in an instant, leaving families in shock and facing the difficult challenges of traumatic bereavement.

Sudden and unexpected death, including accidents, homicide, suicide, drug overdose and I would now add Covid-19, are different than “normal” deaths. By normal, I mean a death that the family knows is a possibility and has time to prepare for the passing. The family gathers with their loved ones, they can say goodbye and hopefully forgive and heal emotional wounds that have occurred through the years. Plans can be made in

advance for the funeral as well as the transition of power and roles. As sad as these deaths are, they are made more bearable by the time to prepare.

However, in a sudden or violent death, there is no time for goodbyes. The loved one is taken in the flash of a moment and we are left with shock, disbelief, unanswered questions and unfinished business, both emotionally and practically.

First reactions

There are two parallel processes which occur when the death is sudden. The first is the grief itself. The first reaction will be shock and in many cases it will be severe. In fact, statistics show that up to 25% of people will experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can be intrusive and recurring thoughts, heightened reactivity, insomnia to name a few. The predictable emotions of grief, sadness, guilt, anger, fear, anxiety will all be heightened into what is called complex traumatic grief. This constellation of symptoms untreated, can last for a very long time, with unintended consequences on health and well-being of the family survivors.



“It is vitally important that families understand the traumatic grief process and how to cope”

Media will have to be managed, particularly in high-profile families, and in the cases of murder, suicide, drug-overdose, where the media can be brutal and relentless.

The family will be upended, roles will change dramatically, any pre-existing difficulties will be exacerbated and create problems with wide reaching and prolonged effects.

It is vitally important that families understand the traumatic grief process and how to cope. For example, understand that shock is a huge part of the early months, as are extreme emotions. Allow space for these emotions in yourself and other family members.

Recognise that each family member will handle grief differently and know that the first year will be full of dates up to and including the anniversary that retrigger traumatic grief.



Anger over the death, the unfairness and horror over how it happened is natural and must be dealt with constructively. Marriages will be strained and forever changed, particularly in the death of a child which is a wholly separate category of grief and loss.

The family structure changes and families are challenged to build something new out of the devastation of loss. As one client, who witnessed a terrible accident claiming the life of her loved one said, “We are missing one of the great pieces of our family puzzle and we don’t know how we work together without him.”

In my work with families experiencing these crises, I have witnessed the unfolding of grief and how destructive it can be, but also how resilient families are and how the puzzle grows together again around the space left by loved ones, never forgetting but

honouring their memory and resolving to go on and not only survive, but thrive.

Aftermath

The second process will be the succession plan or lack of it. In a recent Campden Wealth research [study](#), only 54% of families had a succession plan in place. This number is up from earlier years, but indicates that almost half of families, for one reason or another, do not have plans in place. Therefore, when a tragedy strikes, they are left with not only the complex emotional issues of grief, but the reality of how the family business will continue to operate without the principal or next-gen.



This can further complicate grief because decisions made while in shock and grief are not always the best for the family. It would be wise to consider a succession plan while you have the luxury of life, rather than trying to plan in the shadow of death and grief.



No one likes to talk about these things. We always think (and hope) that it will not happen to us or our family. This may be the case, but if the passing of M Dassault and so many others have shown us, it can and does happen. Succession plans ensure the continuation of the family business and give family members the peace of mind knowing that among all the issues of grief, succession will not be one of them.

These sudden deaths, including Covid, make us realise we are not immortal. There are many things beyond our control, yet we can be strong and resilient. Our families can face these awful deaths, and not only survive but allow our grief to

teach us the best values of our humanity.

I am reminded of a quote from Hemingway: “The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.” It is important to remember that whatever happens, we may break, but we can also become strong again in the broken places.

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