

WHARTON LEADERSHIP DIGEST

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DISCOURAGEMENT: Even Leaders Get the Blues



By John Baldoni

His secretary covered for him, rescheduling morning meetings to later in the day. The unrevealed reason: he had trouble getting out of bed. No, he wasn't a heavy drinker recuperating from too much alcohol the night before. He was a CEO suffering from depression: Tom Johnson, former publisher of the *Los Angeles Times* and later chief executive of CNN. Capable, driven, and successful, Johnson is one of many corporate leaders secretly suffering from chronic depression.

Depression is a significant illness that strikes people from every walk of life, including the very successful. Long-time CBS reporter, Mike Wallace, revealed that he had been chronically depressed, as have economist John Kenneth Galbraith, cartoonist Jules Feiffer, and Congressman Patrick Kennedy.

New studies are showing that chronic depression can be provoked by work conditions, including high stress, long hours, recurrent deadlines, and family absence. But it can be hard to detect. "Depression still tends to be the 'under' disease," warned John Greden of the University of Michigan's Depression Center. "It's under diagnosed, it's under discussed, and it's under treated." Warning signs include malaise, apathy, and failure to experience a full range of emotions.

Seeing warning signs in others or even themselves, managers can take several steps to mitigate at least some of the sources of depression. Managers may resist receiving assistance if they perceive its acceptance a sign of personal weakness, and high-achievers can resist most keenly. “Executives are taught to be strong and not show weakness,” said Robert Pasick, a clinical psychologist and adjunct faculty member at the University of Michigan business school. But intervention may still be warranted if their depression is resulting in poor decisions or other shortcomings in the workplace.

Limit work hours “Stress emerges from demands on your time,” said Pasick, and increasingly “managers are expected to do much more with less.” He found that his patients often reported that they were now working two or three jobs. “Due to cutbacks,” Pasick observed, “managers no longer have administrative help and must answer all their own email and phone calls. Essentially they work 24/7.”

More time with family. Company leaders often face a continuous flow of vexing problems from contentious parties. Family time can provide just the opposite, a more predictable environment built upon secure relations.

Time to reflect. Carving out time for personal reflection can reduce the underlying stress if it helps set priorities and generate creative solutions.

Note: [John Baldoni](#) is a communications consultant and author whose most recent book is *Great Motivation Secrets of Great Leaders* (2005); he can be reached at john@johnbaldoni.com.