

# Family Firms Must Address Mental Health Challenges

Andrew Keyt (Generation6 Family Enterprise Advisors)

**KEYWORDS:** Family Business Consulting, family business advice, Help with a family business.

Anxiety, depression, and other conditions disrupt business operations and strain relationships. Ignoring them won't make them go away.

In the world of family businesses, success often comes with a veneer of strength, competence, and unity. But behind this façade, successful families may grapple with mental health challenges that can not only disrupt business operations but also strain relationships. In this article, I hope to share some lessons from the newly released book *'From Stigma to Strength'* (<https://www.generation6.com/from-stigma-to-strength>). The book explores the intersection between family business and mental health and emphasizes the need to bring these issues to light productively.

One key argument is that a family business can only thrive when the family itself is healthy. But mental health issues—whether it's anxiety, depression, substance abuse, or narcissism—don't just affect the individual. These issues also ripple through the family, creating dysfunction, miscommunication, and emotional distress. Left unaddressed, they can undermine the very relationships that are essential for a family business to succeed. Given that one in five adults in the U.S. is living with some form of mental illness, it is clear that families who address mental health proactively are more resilient and better equipped to manage both personal and business challenges.

## The High Cost of Silence

At first glance, it might seem that family businesses are primarily concerned with strategy, profits, and succession planning. Yet, beneath these surface-level concerns lies a deeper, more personal issue: the mental health of individual family members and how it impacts both the family and the business.

All too often, family businesses willingly ignore mental health issues. Families often choose silence, driven by the desire to protect the family's image, avoid difficult conversations, or adhere to societal stigmas that frame mental health struggles as personal failings. But this silence comes at a cost—not just to individuals, but also to the health and continuity of the family business as a whole, as this example from the book shows:

*Jack, a next-generation leader in his family's packaging business, is outwardly successful. But when he loses the company's biggest client, his father's harsh response sends him into a downward spiral. Jack's hidden struggle with anxiety and depression escalates, leaving him feeling like a failure both at work and at home. The family's inability to address these mental health challenges threatens to unravel both their business and their personal relationships.*

Mental health challenges in a family business are not just individual problems—they are systemic. The interdependence of the individual, family, and business means that changes in one family member's mental health affect the entire system. Peter's tragic story in the book illustrates how a family's failure to address mental health issues can have devastating consequences. Peter's struggles with bipolar disorder were ignored for years, leading to his isolation and eventual suicide.

## Dealing With Mental Health Productively

Family businesses operate at the intersection of personal and professional life. The pressure to perform, live up to family expectations, and maintain the family legacy can create intense mental health challenges. The time has come for family businesses to stop ignoring these issues and start embracing the strength that comes from open, honest conversations around mental health. By addressing mental health proactively, families can not only preserve their emotional well-being but also ensure the long-term success of their business.

The book highlights several approaches families can take to foster healthier dynamics and support mental health in their businesses:

- 1. Acknowledge the issue:** The first step toward addressing mental health in the family business is recognizing that there is an issue. Highly functional families seek to understand – and abstain from judging – behaviors that may signal deeper struggles, such as missed deadlines, erratic moods, or unexplained anger. Ignoring or dismissing these signs only perpetuates the stigma and leaves the affected individual feeling more isolated.
- 2. Understand and assess:** Mental health challenges are complex and there are many contributing factors that impact the severity of the problem and the effectiveness of the response. There are no simple solutions -- only a commitment to developing an understanding of the issues our family member is facing. With understanding, we can start the conversations that will help us access the resources we need to manage the issues.
- 3. Work together and build a support system:** Many families shy away from openly addressing mental health struggles. In our view, the most functional families create an atmosphere where family members are able to express their struggles – and able to ask for help. Lastly, families need to build a system of support that empowers individuals to seek help and fosters open dialogue about mental health. This could include bringing in external advisors, establishing clear communication channels, and creating a culture where vulnerability is not seen as a weakness.

Mental health challenges don't just affect the individual—they also affect the entire family system. When one member is struggling, it impacts family dynamics, decision-making, and communication. Ignoring a family member's struggles does not make them go away – rather, it does the opposite.