

Life Happens: How To Keep Your Business Up And Running In The Midst Of A Personal Crisis

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Dr. Teresa Taylor Williams' life was turned upside down in 2009. She discovered she had breast cancer and underwent a double mastectomy. During that same period, her husband of 30 years died at age 55 and, upon his death, she found out he was living a double life in Atlanta with another woman with whom he had a baby. His death also revealed he had left her in financial straits.

In the midst of all of this, Williams who is founder and publisher of [New York Trend](#) newspaper, which recently celebrated its 25th year, still had her business to run. So how did she keep things going? "I continued to work on my business because my business was another responsibility that I owed my time and focus," Williams said.

"At times it seemed my illness and grief were constantly swirling around me, creating a tornado-like reaction, as if I was being pulled into the eye of a storm each day. At a time when I did not know what was going on around me all of the time with events uncovering each day, I knew I had control over my company," added Williams, who now writes a bi-monthly column about her experiences called "The Good Girl Chronicles."

There comes a point in everyone's life where they face a personal crisis, but for entrepreneurs, personal tragedies can completely derail their professional business. One of the ways to prevent that from happening is to "Take time," said executive coach Frederica A. Peterson, CEO and Founder of [Unique Insights Coaching](#). "You need to give yourself time to assess the situation and process what is happening. When you do that, you don't have the distraction of trying to keep it off of your mind or panicking about how to handle it in addition to everything else you are responsible for. Determine how much time you will need to dedicate to the issue so that you can put together a plan of action you can live with and will honor what you need to do for you."

Operating your business to be somewhat disaster-proof can also help when times get hard. "Be organized on a daily basis so that life events don't cause unnecessary chaos for your work team," advised organizational coach Darla DeMorrow of [HeartWork Organizing](#) and author of *The Pregnant Entrepreneur*. "Always have a backup plan, whether that is someone to run a conference call for you in a pinch or having an editor for important reports. Reach out to colleagues for their help when needed during a challenging time, but stay completely focused on the task during work sessions such as a meeting or client appointment."

Ideally, we'd all be able to remain professionally composed when experiencing personal duress, but it's quite possible your employees and even some of your clients might recognize that you are under stress. Deciding whether to disclose your personal struggles is tricky, Peterson said. "If

you have taken the steps to understand what you need for yourself and have set those boundaries, it is time to start having some conversations. Who you tell and what you say will vary depending on how the situation will impact the expectations of your employees and clients. For instance, you may need to let them know your availability may be changing for a period of time,” she explained.

Going into details about your personal crisis, however, isn’t necessary. “Not everyone should be privy to your personal life so be mindful and thoughtful about how much you share and whom you are sharing it with. The level of detail needs to be appropriate based on the relationship you have with your employees and how this may impact them. The same would apply for your clients,” Peterson said.

“I never shared my personal situation with my clients,” Williams recalled. “The same way I handled my personal crisis was how I handled my business during this crisis—keep fighting, maintaining a strong facade, and focusing on what needed to be accomplished.”

At times, doing so was easier said than done, Williams admitted. “I did come to a point where I felt I was incapable of handling my business without the lifelong partner that was my support and advisor. I questioned if I could continue after the death of my husband. I also had days that I could not deal with myself so how could I deal with the duties of running a business?”

In those moments, a certain level of transparency is key to keeping your business on track, Peterson said. “The bottom line is that as long as you communicate that there may be a change in your availability for a defined period of time and have a clear plan of what that change will look like, your employees and clients will feel secure. When you just try to handle things and not communicate you are leaving the interpretation up to the person impacted and there is a greater likelihood that could do more damage than necessary. The name of the game here is to control the ‘controllables.’ It is one less stress on your plate.”

As hard as it may be to face, sometimes your business is what needs to come off of your plate, DeMorrow said. “Give yourself a break. Life happens. The mistake many people make is that they put the needs of their business over their own needs. It is noble in theory, but in the long run you are not doing your business any favors.

“Dealing with a personal crisis can be draining, and as much as you may want to believe you are all in, you’re not. We panic as if taking the time we need to handle our personal crisis is going to cause us to lose clients, but it’s quite the contrary. What can damage your reputation is trying to juggle it all because something will eventually get dropped, then it will be your competence that will come into question and we don’t want that.”

When branding and public relations expert [Karen Taylor Bass](#) was battling postpartum depression, she realized she simply could not continue her business.

“Postpartum took over my life. I felt disconnected from everything, including my passion for public relations,” Taylor Bass said. “My daughter was born on June 15, 2007; my life was literally gray for more than three years. I did not work, barely left the house. As I battled and

tried to pivot from postpartum, I did not have the energy to do anything but breastfeed my baby. Work was a task and I did not have the strength to pitch, create campaigns, or, more importantly, leave the house. I took a good two-three years off.”

Of course, this affected her business financially and in many other ways. “I am a person that saves and lives on a budget; therefore, all was okay the first couple of years, but the economic fallout of 2008 did not help,” revealed Taylor Bass.

In instances like this, DeMorrow advises entrepreneurs “Create a plan to re-engage in your business after an absence caused by life transition.” That’s exactly what Taylor Bass had to do.

“My business was basically on life support. I had to reinvent my brand, learn and understand social media as a tool, and renew working relationships,” she said. “The latter was the most challenging. In the business of public relations, you are only as good as your client. I no longer had any household names for clients and everyone that I once knew in a power position had been laid off, fired, or retired. It has taken me five years to carve out a niche for my brand as the leading PR Expert for small business, women and entrepreneurs. I had to relearn and get to know the new KTB. As I reflect, although postpartum was painful, I came out stronger. Karen Taylor Bass has been rebooted.”

Even as an employee going through a personal crisis, your work will likely be affected. In this case, too, communication is key. “I definitely think you should have a conversation with your boss,” Peterson advised. “As for co-workers, I think that depends on the personal relationship and how it may impact your ability to collaborate on work assignments. Like I said, you do not have to share the specifics.”

As the saying goes, “That which does not kill us, makes us stronger,” and both Taylor Bass and Williams discovered things about themselves during their personal crises that have helped them in business and in life.

“I learned that I gave too much of self to others and when I needed some of that energy from colleagues, friends, and family, many people were busy. I learned to create a better tribe, one that would sustain me regardless of my status in life. I learned to put self first for preservation and value wellness,” Taylor Bass explained. “It doesn’t matter how successful you are if your mental health isn’t right. I no longer desire to work with entertainers or projects with tons of glitz and glamour. My passion for public relations has always been about telling a compelling narrative—entrepreneurs, women, authors, small biz owners are so hungry to succeed. They work hard and rarely have an attitude. That is the lane I drive now, the lane marked low-maintenance, success, and wellness.”

For Williams, it’s her personal strength that shown through after all of her struggles. “I learned that even in the absence of my closest confidante and cheerleader, I could make it alone.”