

State of Mind – February 2009

Given the upheaval in the economy and the wide-ranging negative impact that is being felt at all socioeconomic levels, it would be foolhardy to avoid this as a topic for this column. As posted on *USA Today* (02/01/09), “requests for therapists have soared, Americans say they’re stressed out, and domestic-violence and suicide hotlines are reporting increased calls.” Many psychologists have indicated that the emotional fallout is worse than that seen after 9/11. Thus, the question arises: What can we do to get through this...to survive...to hold our lives together?

For one thing, it is not a time for platitudes or psychobabble. Now is the time for straight talk. I will admit, as one who is accustomed to trying to help others find solutions to life’s problems, I find this situation in its entirety to be overwhelming. Trying to grasp, emotionally and intellectually, the enormity of the impact of the crises in financial markets seems like trying to catch a cloud...or eat an elephant. It is so nebulous and yet so enormous. Thus, I revert to a common problem-solving strategy that I utilize to help myself and serve as a resource for others: make it real and break it down into doable pieces.

It is essential to understand that there is no universal way that you and others will respond. The reactions to today’s gargantuan changes cover the full range of human emotions...from anger, fear, bewilderment and desperation to complacency and denial to hope and determination. What you feel today may change by the day or even the hour. Some people may seem to be handling things well, while others are predicting the apocalypse. Because this is the first time many of us born after the Great Depression have had to confront such threats to our comfortable and mostly predictable way of life, we are challenged to develop new perspectives, almost creating solutions as we go along.

For many there is a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. This is especially true in communities going through job loss with no new opportunities on the horizon. In these cases, family stress is increasing as parents try to find ways to deal with their children. In some situations there is the need to impose restrictions on children raised in affluence who are not used to restraint. Parents in these circumstances are reluctant to let their kids see their true concerns; so they wind up delivering mixed messages. Parents’ efforts at trying to maintain normalcy suggest to the kids that the gloom and doom is not real. The kids end up wondering if there really is a need to lower expectations or demands. Similarly, those who have lived with less financial resources need to cutback further to assure that basic needs are met ... while not causing panic. Regardless of the historical scenario, the children will react—sometimes not in positive ways. They may even act out their parents’ distress.

One of the somewhat disconcerting aspects of trying to adjust is that traditional coping skills, which have been successful in the past, may not work. So much of what is going on is out of our control and new to us. There are demands that we have never had to face and do not want to face today. *Maybe the whole thing will blow over. Maybe it is just a*

bad dream, and the world will wake up tomorrow. This is not the case. So we must adjust. It is time for strategic planning.

In the business world a simple model is to look at Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. This is the SWOT approach with the first two categories addressing internal issues and the latter outside forces. It demands self-analysis of your past and present to help prepare for the future. You should seek as much input as possible. The act of reaching out to others is healthy but not something executives are used to doing. Along such lines, it may be wise to include immediate family members in the analysis. You might be surprised at the wisdom shown by a teenager who is made a real member of the team, rather than being left alone to try to figure out what is really going on. This should be approached with reality-based optimism. Honest assessment of your personal, social, financial resources (Strengths) and deficiencies (Weaknesses) is critical. Openness to developing new outlets (Opportunities) and candid appraisal of possible perils (Threats), such as job loss, will help clarify what resources you may need to protect you and those who matter to you. In most cases, you will begin by establishing concrete goals and breaking them down into measurable steps. Then, you will put your plan into action. Creating positive momentum through progress—a series of small accomplishments—will begin to reestablish a sense of control and lessen the adverse impact of the changing world around you. Gradually, the anger may lessen and your hope will be revived.

As a final reminder, surviving through these hard times demands you take some steps to care for your mind, body and spirit while you are shouldering burdens like those discussed. Plan the time to care for your physical well being through exercise, even if that simply means a 30-minute daily walk. If you want to remain buoyant you also need to be cognizant of the negative impact of catastrophizing media input. Knowing that it may adversely affect your mood and confidence level might help you realize the need to limit your media exposure ... or to even turn it off. Mobilize the energy from negative emotions and work on what you can influence, rather than erupt over what you cannot. Make it a priority to hold onto and develop relationships. Now is the time to reach out to others for help—and to offer help. If you are not already familiar with the Serenity Prayer, look it up. We probably can do more with less, but it will take time and effort. We will certainly have to overcome our reluctance. Here is the key, and it's well worth remembering: plan and execute...one day at a time. (Write this on a note and tack it up where you'll see it every day.)

Maybe by planning for the worst and hoping for the best you can be an active player in your own life. Your future may not be the way you had anticipated, but it may be better than you feared.