



Stress Management for Rural Communities

Working in agriculture is accompanied by managing a variety of stresses on a regular basis. Learning to control events, attitudes and responses day-in and day-out will help you manage those hectic, stressful times.



WSU | AGRICULTURAL
SUICIDE PREVENTION
PILOT PROGRAM

NDSU | EXTENSION

Adapted from Stress Management for Farmers/Ranchers
North Dakota State University
Sean Brotherson, Family Science Specialist
<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/publications/kids-family/farm-stress-fact-sheets-stress-management-for-farmers-ranchers/fs284.pdf>

Perhaps you have noticed that some farmers, ranchers, dairy farmers, or farm workers struggle under the pressures of events that you find easy to handle. Or perhaps you have wondered how other agriculture workers can go on in spite of the stress load they carry.

Why is it that some agriculture workers can handle lots of stress and others very little? Researchers who have examined differences between successful and unsuccessful stress managers have identified three key factors. First, individuals vary in their capacity to tolerate stress. For example, prolonged exertion and fatigue that would be only mildly stressful to a young agriculture worker may prove very difficult for an older agriculture worker or someone with a heart defect.

Emergencies on the farm, delays and other problems that a confident agriculture worker takes in stride may be a stumbling block for one who feels inadequate. While part of an individual's stress tolerance is inborn, a crucial part depends on the quality of coping skills practiced. Learning to cope

successfully with a stressor once makes it easier the next time.

A second factor is feeling in control. Successful stress managers know how to accept those stressors out of their control – the weather, their height, stock market fluctuations – and how to effectively manage those stresses within their control – such as neck tension, temper flare-ups or record keeping.

Finally, the attitudes, perceptions, and meanings that people assign to events determine a large part of their stress levels. A person has to perceive a situation as stressful or threatening in order to experience stress. If you think your dog is barking in the middle of the night because of a vandal, you will experience more stress than if you suspect a skunk has wandered into your yard.

Stress can be defined as energy in a blocked or chaotic state. Individuals should seek to develop calm, free-flowing energy that promotes harmony and balance in a person's body, psyche and soul. To relax and manage stresses well

during peak farm/ranch stress seasons – planting and harvesting – takes discipline and daily practice at controlling events, attitudes and responses. Following are some techniques individuals may adopt to gain control.

Control events

To reduce the pile-up of too many stressful events at one time, farmers and agriculture workers may be able to control some situations.

- Plan ahead. Don't procrastinate. Replace worn machinery parts during the off season.
- Before the harvest discuss who can be available to run for parts, care for livestock, etc.
- Set priorities about what has to be done today and what can wait until tomorrow. Plan your time.
- Say no to extra commitments that you do not have time to do.
- Simplify your life. If possible, reduce your financial dependence on others.
- Schedule stressful events within your control, such as elective surgery.

Control attitudes

How family members of agriculture workers view situations is a key factor in creating or eliminating unwanted stress.

- See the big picture: "I'm glad that tire blew out here rather than on that next hill."

- List all the stresses you now have. Identify those you can change; accept the ones you cannot change.
- Shift your focus from worrying to problem solving.
- Think about how to turn your challenges into opportunity.
- Notice what you have accomplished rather than what you failed to do.
- Set realistic goals and expectations daily. Give up trying to be perfect.

Control responses

- Focus on relaxing your body and mind. Whether you are walking, driving or phoning, do it slowly and relax. Keep only that muscle tension necessary to accomplish the task.
- Tune in to your body. Notice any early signs of stress and let them go.
- Take care of your body. Exercise regularly and eat well-balanced meals. Limit your intake of stimulants such as coffee, sodas and tea.
- Avoid smoking cigarettes, using alcohol or other drugs, or using tranquilizers or sleeping pills.
- If your health allows, tense and then relax each part of your body from toes to head, one part at a time.
- Shake away tension as you work by vigorously shaking each of your limbs.
- Take a break. Climb down from

your tractor and do a favorite exercise.

- Take three deep breaths – slowly, easily. Let go of unnecessary stress.
- Stop to reflect or daydream for 10 minutes. Close your eyes and take a short mental vacation to a place you really enjoy. See the sights; hear the sounds; smell the smells. Enjoy. Then go back to work feeling refreshed.
- Think positive thoughts: "I can and will succeed."
- Look for the humor in things that you do.
- Balance your work and your play. Do both well.
- Find someone with whom you can talk about your worries and frustrations.
- Seek help when you need it. There are times when all of us can benefit from professional help or support.
- Unwind before bedtime. Do stretching exercises, listen to soothing music, practice rewinding deeply, and be thankful for any blessings received today. Then sleep well.

Family members of agriculture workers can manage their stress well – even during planting and harvesting. The key is to be flexible and to maintain a balanced lifestyle. Make time daily to take care of yourself, for this work is vital to all of us.

For more information on this and other topics, see www.extension.wsu.edu/skagit/suicide-prevention