



FARMING AND MENTAL HEALTH

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, farm owners in the United States ranked in the top ten most stressful occupations. Farmers had the highest rate of deaths due to conditions like hypertension, ulcers, heart and artery disease and nervous disorders. Situations like working as fast as possible to bale hay before a storm, or the responsibility of keeping the family farm afloat cause increased stress putting them at greater risk of injury.

Why is farming such a stressful occupation?

- A. Fluctuating market conditions**
- B. Unpredictable weather (*Ranging from sub zero temps to hot and humid summers! Too much rain to not enough rain.*)**
- C. Large debt load**
- D. Long hours**
- E. Crop yield uncertainty**
- F. Fear of failure. (*There is a lot of pressure to maintain a long-standing farming tradition.*)**
- G. Increased risk of injury**
 - High-tech machinery
 - Machinery breakdowns
 - Livestock issues
 - Toxic chemicals

People respond differently to stress and everyone has different levels where stress begins to take its toll. When issues begin to pile up it produces a domino effect. Your blood pressure raises, heart rate increases, breathing accelerates which leads to your body breaking down. This kind of stress impacts your health, which in turn impacts your decision-making ability. Often, poor judgment leads to physical or emotional injury. Therefore, it is important to recognize symptoms of stress.

Physical, Emotional and Behavioral Symptoms of Stress

- A. Physical**
 - Stomach aches
 - Increased blood pressure
 - Headaches
 - Clenched teeth
 - Rapidly beating heart
 - Weight loss



B. Emotional

Impatience
Depression
Low self-esteem
Easily frustrated
Tearful
Withdrawn
Moody

C. Behavioral

Increased smoking and/or drinking
Difficulty adapting to changing situations
Difficulty sleeping
Problems communicating
Verbal and/or physical abuse

Stress Management

A. Control Stress (*as much as possible*)

Recognize the difference between stress and stressors.

- Stressor is something that creates a demand on time and/or resources. Many times an uncontrollable event (*e.g. weather; tractor breakdown*)
- Stress is how you respond to the demand or stressor. How you react to stress is up to you!

Plan ahead and set realistic goals. (*Replace worn parts/machinery during the winter or off-season.*)

Set daily priorities. (*Know what has to be done today and what can possibly wait until tomorrow. With so many things to do, it's easy to develop tunnel vision and have difficulty making decisions.*)

Visualize or meditate

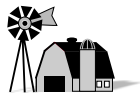
- Find a quiet room or place outside to reflect
- Find a comfortable position
- Close your eyes
- Reflect on a positive thought (*e.g. a place you might enjoy or focus on a single word (calm or serene).*)

Plan breaks to stretch and have a snack

Assign tasks as much as possible (*know who will do what, especially during the busy seasons . . . planting and harvesting.*)

Simplify your life

- Say no to extra commitments
- Decrease financial dependency



B. Other Stress Reducers

Stay positive (*recognize the symptoms of stress and do something about it!*)

Spend time with family

Exercise

- Vigorous exercise gets the heart pumping and lowers stress levels!
- Chemical changes can also contribute to a more positive outlook.
- Helps maintain a good weight
- Do shoulder shrugs while driving a tractor

Eat a balanced diet (*Like machinery, we are subject to breakdown. We need to eat well to function well!*)

- Eat well-balanced, moderate-sized meals
 - ✓ Overeating leads to weight gain which leads to increased potential for other health problems
 - ✓ Skipping meals leads to lack of concentration

Set personal, family and farming goals (*where do I want to be in a year? Three years? Five years?*)

Seek Additional Help.

These people and organizations have access to and information on stress reduction strategies that can help you through tough times.

A. Health care providers (*Have an annual check-up. Talk to your doctor about how you're feeling physically as well as emotionally.*)

B. Churches

C. Local Community College or technical school

D. Social Services

When you are able to identify the stressors in your life and learn your own personal stress comfort zone you are better equipped to cope. The above strategies are just some ways to help you maintain stress within the optimal range. Making changes to reduce stress may take a little time and energy but the payoff is a more emotionally and physically equipped person who is able to make better decisions and have a more productive farm.

Possible Activity

*Have participants list stresses and stressors or you list them and have them identify which is which. Or, have participants spend a few minutes listing things they like best about farming and things they like least. From there, have them list things that may currently be stressful in their lives and discuss how it is affecting them.