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Stress on the Farm – An Overview

Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service

North Central Regional Publication

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## Stress on the Farm—An Overview

Stress and Farming—the idea stirs up many images: rushing to town to buy spare parts . . . watching the market drop daily with a full bin of grain . . . seeing a hail storm wipe out a newly emerging crop . . . working long into the night on bone jarring equipment . . . all building up irritation and fatigue that dare not show at an important meeting with the loan officer.

Stress in such situations means pressure, conflict, loss of control, and uncertainty. These feelings can lead to a variety of problems for all members of a family. That's why stress has such an ugly ring.

### Stress Defined

Stress is a term that began in engineering where it means the capacity to withstand strain. Structures have a measurable strength and resistance to strain according to the type and size of material. If overloading occurs, the structure will distort and break.

When applied to farmers, stress becomes more complex. Different farmers have different thresholds to similar stress situations and they cope in different ways. So the effects of stress are not easily measured. Every farmer, though, has a point at which excessive stress takes a toll. The price is impaired health and lowered job performance.

Dr. Hans Selye, a pioneer in stress research, defines stress as a physical or mental reaction to anything that threatens your survival. When threatened, the body creates extra energy to fight off the threat.

Stress is the uncomfortable condition you experience when the body has created excess energy with which to protect itself. This feeling is caused by hormones being released into the body and increased blood pressure, heart rate, breathing, and blood flow. Stress is like a guitar string. If the string is too tight, it snaps; but if it is too slack, it won't make music. Farmers, therefore, need some stress to be alert and productive. If the body adjusts to the stress event, then health and activity are maintained. But if stress is a result of an unwanted event and is prolonged or too much occurs at once, the body's defenses weaken and health may be affected.

For most farmers, stress is not severe enough to impair health seriously. Instead, they display such symptoms as insomnia, habitual smoking, heavy drinking, irritability, and restlessness. These vary in the amount of problems they produce. Some interfere with judgment and work; others make the farmer and those around him or her uncomfortable.

### Farming—A Stressful Job

Farming has undergone rapid change from a largely physical occupation to one that requires more and more mental inputs. Farmers have become managers of large sums of money.

They are continually pressured by rapid technological advances. With the modern, complex machinery, plus uncooperative livestock and toxic chemicals, farming remains a dangerous occupation with a high risk of accidents.

Agriculture's role in the world economy is a real dilemma facing today's farm family. Events occurring in foreign countries have direct effects on individual farmers. And, of course, they must contend with inflation and its effect on production.

A survey of farm families was undertaken to find out (1) the types and degree of stress farm families faced, (2) how farmers reacted when stressed, and (3) how they managed stress.

During the spring of 1979, adult farm family members in northeast Iowa were asked to rate a series of events on a scale from 0 to 200 as to how much stress each produced for them. Two hundred thirty men and eighty-nine women responded. Table 1 shows the average rating of stress events.



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**Table 1. Life events scale for farm families.**

Rank	Rating	Events
1.	164	Death of spouse
2.	134	Death of close family member
3.	123	Day when nothing goes right
4.	123	Machinery breakdown
5.	122	Disease outbreak
6.	121	Divorce
7.	120	Illness during critical time
8.	117	Major personal illness
9.	104	Valuable animal dies
10.	103	Loss of help or no help when needed
11.	102	High debt load
12.	102	Production loss due to disease, insects
13.	101	Poor cash flow to meet obligations
14.	99	Weather caused delays
15.	97	Government regulations
16.	95	Living with inflation and budgeting
17.	91	Family member starts heavy drinking
18.	90	Sudden drop in commodities
19.	89	Long work hours
20.	87	Livestock getting out of pens
21.	79	Investment with no return guarantee
22.	76	Major increase in arguments with spouse
23.	74	Unplanned interruptions
24.	73	Machinery or facility purchase
25.	70	No control over weather
26.	69	When to sell with rising market
27.	66	Crop yield uncertainty
28.	65	Balancing work and family responsibility
29.	65	Children behavior problems
30.	64	Size change in operation
31.	62	Failure to make cost saving decision
32.	61	Handling toxic pesticide
33.	60	Service problem with agri-business
34.	59	Family demands away from home

35.	58	Operating partnership
36.	57	Son or daughter leaving home
37.	57	Retire from farming
38.	54	Parent-child operating agreement
39.	53	Meeting with loan officer
40.	51	Dealing with salespeople
41.	50	Trouble with in-laws
42.	50	Wife's/own pregnancy
43.	50	Farm odors—dirt in home
44.	48	Running errands
45.	47	Marriage
46.	41	Competition for land
47.	38	Unexpected guests

The results demonstrate several factors about stress on the farm:

- the more important the event, the more stress is felt (for example, death, machinery breakdown, major illness).
- events that occur suddenly or unexpectedly cause a greater feeling of stress (for example, disease outbreak, death of valuable animal).
- the more things happening simultaneously, the greater will be the stress (as in a day when nothing goes right).
- the longer an event takes place, the greater will be the stress (for example, high debt load, poor cash flow).

### Farmers React to Stress

A variety of answers were given to the question, "How do you know when you're experiencing stress?" Table 2

**Table 2. Perceived reaction to stress.**

Stress reaction	Male		Female	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Physical discomfort	49	29.0	17	25.4
Emotional outburst	40	23.7	17	25.4
Inability to relax	26	15.3	12	17.8
Mental confusion	21	12.4	8	11.9
Depression/anxiety	14	8.3	6	9.0
Excess fatigue	13	7.7	5	7.5
Apathy	6	3.6	2	3.0
	169	100.0	67	100.0

summarizes the types of stress reactions reported by farmers.

Why can some farmers handle lots of stress and others very little? Why do some feel challenged by problems and others fear them? The major reasons for different reactions to stress are a farmer's perception, tolerance, and skills.

### Perception . . .

Research indicates that how events are interpreted will affect the reaction to stress. In order for stress to occur, you must perceive the situation as stressful in the first place. Stress is "in the eye of the perceiver." For example, one farmer may view a broken arm as annoying and a major set-back to production. Another farmer may see it as unfortunate but also lucky since it could have been worse.

A farmer's feelings on a particular problem depend on his or her whole belief system. If a farmer views farming as boring or unrewarding, each new stress is viewed in that context and seen as adding one new element to the already troublesome burden. However, if farming is seen as basically challenging and rewarding, stresses will be viewed as less severe.



### Tolerance . . .

Stress tolerance refers to a farmer's capacity to withstand stress or the amount of stress the farmer can tolerate before abilities are seriously impaired. Both physically and mentally, farmers differ greatly in the amount and types of stress they can handle. Prolonged exertion and fatigue that would be only mildly stressful to a young farmer may prove very difficult for an older farmer or someone with a heart defect. Emergencies, delays, and other problems that a confident farmer can take in stride may be a stumbling block for one who feels inadequate.

### Skills . . .

Whatever the problem, its difficulty will depend on the skills of the farmer to solve it. The greater the skill, the less severe the stress. A well trained farmer may be able to turn a profit even in the most marginal of situations; whereas one with less training may not be able to manage as successfully and become hopelessly frustrated.

But the farmer's actual level of skill is not the whole story—the way a farmer views his or her capabilities is important too. If the farmer feels generally self-confident and expects to solve a problem successfully, the stress will not be as severe even if it is a difficult problem.

### Improving Stress Management

Stress management consists of strategies that assist farmers in avoiding unnecessary stress. It also helps the farmer to better withstand the pressures and conflicts that are an inevitable part of life. Table 3 summarizes the practices or techniques farmers reported using to relieve pressure and tension.

The distribution of responses indicates that there is no "one and only" method of managing stress. Rather, farmers should look at using a variety of ways depending on the type of stress and the interests of the farmer. (One of the techniques—chemical release—may be a short term coping technique if not abused, but has not been proven an effective long term stress management skill.)

### Effective Stress Managers . . .

From the study mentioned above, several things were learned about farmers and managing stress. Those farmers who are successful stress managers seem to share these characteristics:

- Have self awareness—they know their strengths, skills, and weaknesses. They plan for the future. "They never bite off more than they can chew."
- Use a variety of techniques—they utilize many stress-reducing techniques as the situation dictates.
- Have many interests—they are able to draw on several sources for personal satisfaction—hobbies, recreation, family.

- Are active and productive—they make things happen, practicing stress management during the bad and good times.
- Use support—they develop friendships with others for help and comfort during periods of stress.

### What Can Be Done About Stress

A farmer can offset the harmful effects of stress by practicing the 3 R's of stress management: **Remove, Respond, Revamp.**

#### Remove

- self awareness—know strengths and weaknesses, positive attitude, clarify values
- personal planning—time management, goal setting

Sometimes farmers are the source of their own stress. Other times the source of stress is beyond control; for example a hailstorm or government regulation. Stress might be **removed** simply by looking at your attitude toward work, yourself, and others. By managing time,

Table 3. Stress coping techniques.

Coping techniques	Male		Female	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Leave problem	38	22.2	15	22.7
Change attitude	37	21.6	7	10.6
Hobby/recreation	22	12.9	8	12.1
Sleep/relax	16	9.4	13	19.7
Chemical release	20	11.7	4	6.1
Confide in others	12	7.0	6	9.1
Prayer/meditate	10	5.8	6	9.1
Combination	16	9.4	7	10.6
	171	100.0	66	100.0



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defining goals, accepting things beyond your control, and accepting yourself as you are, you may rid yourself of much of the unnecessary worry, guilt, and anger.

### Respond

- problem solving skills
- farming skills
- management skills
- communication skills

Managing risk, balancing budgets, meeting with loan officers, working with hired help are situations that demand attention and cannot be managed with a positive attitude alone. Learning successful skills to **respond** to these events improves a farmer's stress management.

### Revamp

- farmer management—nutrition, exercise, leisure
- relaxation
- team of experts

The national attention to health care and changes in farming practices indicate that some farmers need to **revamp** their lifestyles as an effective way of managing stress. Research is showing the importance of good nutrition and exercise for healthy living. However, technical advances in farming may actually decrease the amount of physical exertion needed. Developing an attitude towards health improves a farmer's long term protection and ability to live through stressful events.

There is also support from the community—fellow farmers, neighbors, human service agencies and community organizations—that provide a team of experts to help farmers face the stress of farm life.

For a more detailed discussion of these management techniques, see the other publications in this **Stress on the Farm** series: NCR-192b, *Farming and Fatigue*; NCR-192c, *Team of Experts*; NCR-192d, *Exercise for the Health of It*; NCR-192e, *Skills for Stress Management*.

File: Family Life 7

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