

# McHenry Case Study:

## Our Brain on Stress

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**Note**, this is a fictitious case study assembled from many real stories and lessons-learned over the last two decades in Wisconsin and Minnesota. All names, references and specific circumstances that connect to real-life stories are completely coincidental. At the end of this story, you will find a set of discussion questions.

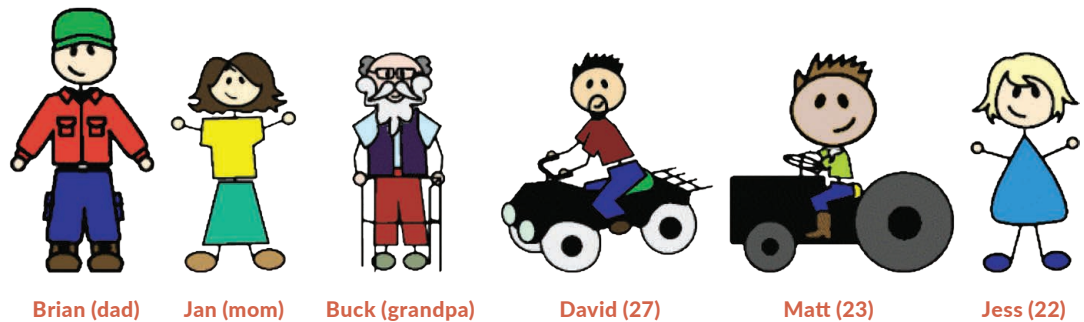
### Case study:

Three generations of the McHenry family live within a one-mile radius of each other on a mid-sized farm in central Wisconsin. **Brian** and **Jan**, 63 and 61, respectively, just celebrated their 40th anniversary. Jan retired from her job at the local grocery store in March to care for Brian's 86-year-old father, **Buck**, who moved in with them earlier in the year. Buck's health and memory have deteriorated steadily since his wife died two years ago.

Brian and Jan have two adult sons. **David**, 27, is the older son. David went away to school for a semester after graduating from high school, but he did not do well. He acknowledges that he was "just not ready" when he was younger, but now expresses interest in going back to the local college. He lives in a mobile home on a parcel that Brian rents. David has difficulty communicating with his father and brother, especially when work gets hectic.

**Matt** is 23. He's married to **Jess**, whom he met just before they graduated from college. Matt and his parents have a good relationship, and his parents adore Jess. Matt and Jess, expecting twins in December, recently moved into the house where Matt's grandparents had once lived. Jess works in a senior care facility in town, which provides excellent benefits for their growing family.

David's irritability is sometimes aimed at his younger brother. David can also be nasty toward his sister-in-law. The two siblings have been rivals since childhood, but Matt's success and the benefits of Jess having a good job seem to add to David's apparent jealousy.



Matt enjoys farming and has creative ideas for improving efficiency. Matt has yearned for the chance to sit down with his parents and David to look at assuming a formal financial role in the farm, but his father (Brian) has always said he's too busy, and they both know it might be difficult to engage David. His mother (Jan) worries about the future of the family and resolves to make "planning" for the future a priority this winter.

The farm has been teetering financially because of overinvestments in machines and facilities. The farm's debt-to-asset ratio is over 65%. The operation's current debt is now higher than its assets, so it's in a negative working capital position. Matt is aware of the financial situation, but David does not pay much attention to the farm's finances. Jess, meanwhile, has been patient during the family's transition. She wants Matt to be happy, but she still worries about how the farm's finances will affect their children's future.

Jan is aware of the financial concern, but post-retirement, she's been occupied with getting Buck settled. Brian rarely wants to talk about the farm's finances, though he does wake in the middle of the night distressed and anxious, often unable to return to sleep. On the rare occasion Brian does express his concerns with the farm, he tells Jan,

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## Case Study - continued

“We just have to keep our heads down and work extra hard through this tough stretch.”

While heading out one summer morning, Brian complains of severe chest pains. Jan rushes him to the ER, where they spend the day doing cardiac tests. Thankfully, the cardiologist and Brian’s family doctor determine that the pain was most likely attributable to anxiety. Brian’s doctor tells him, “Consider this a wake-up call. I’m concerned about your blood pressure and the stress you face on the farm. You really need to make some changes.”

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Because of this close call with their dad, Matt and David grow closer, as they see that their father is not immortal and that they must work together to be successful. On a late-September Sunday, everyone is invited to Brian and Jan’s place to watch the Packers. David is temperamental that day and lashes out at the family, including Grandpa.

As the game ends, Matt slides his boots on to head outside and prepare equipment for chopping the next day with his brother. But David refuses to get off the couch. Finally, at 6 p.m., David gets up and goes into his old bedroom. He curls up and pulls the covers up over his head.

The next morning, David sleeps much later than normal. After much coaxing and prodding and a heart-to-heart with his mom, he heads out, now in a hurry. David and Matt work feverishly to get the chopper ready, crawling underneath, greasing bearings and replacing two belts.

In the haste to make sure everything is running “just right,” David narrowly avoids a harrowing accident: a rotating drive shaft entangles his sweatshirt, throwing him violently to the ground.

Luckily, his shirt rips away, but the incident results in a trip to the hospital by ambulance and ends up in an overnight stay with two broken ribs and lots of bruising.

Late that evening, Jan, Brian and Grandpa Buck are with David as he’s released from the hospital. Back home, Matt finishes up work and enjoys the quiet and the cool fall breeze blowing gently through the barn. Jess throws on a jacket and steps out of the house toward the barn. She walks up quietly behind Matt. Matt turns, a little startled and surprised. He smiles, happy to see Jessica.

Here is their dialogue:

Matt: *“Hey Jess...”*

Jessica: *“Hey buddy...It’s been a challenging week...You hanging in there?”*

Matt stops what he’s doing: *“Yeah. It’s all good. It’s a lot for one family to go through. I’m grateful we have each other. Hope you’re doing okay...”*

Jessica: *“I’m doing just fine...But we have to look out for each other...That’s what families do.”*

Matt reaches to turn up the old radio hanging from a tarp strap nailed to a dusty pillar. It’s playing an old tune, “Can I Have This Dance...”

Matt: *“Can I have this dance?”*

Jess: *“I’d love to”*



## Discussion Questions:

- 1 What do we know about the way in which stress is felt or manifested in EACH of the individual members of the McHenry family?
- 2 In this case and in others you deal with, how (and why) does stress affect:
  - Physical health?
  - Mental health?
  - Injury risk?
  - Ability to make informed decisions?
  - Communication and relationships with loved ones or with the community?
- 3 How do the situations and circumstances in the McHenry family connect to recent brain science research on the effects of chronic stress on brain function?
- 4 Past stress and behavioral science research shows that perceived “control” is a primary determinant on how stress impacts our lives. Where is having a sense of control an issue here with the McHenry family?
- 5 As a family member, community leader or agricultural professional, what are things that could be done in this case to help family members regain a sense of control?
- 6 Who are the partners and resources in the community who might be able to help and support the McHenrys?
- 7 Listening to the fears, dreams and concerns of any family in situations like this is incredibly important. Having empathy and a willingness to ask questions and then listen for true meaning is a critical skill. If you had an opportunity to meet with and provide support and assistance to any member of the McHenry family, what questions would you like to ask?

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