

Safe Farm

Promoting Agricultural Health & Safety

Manage stress to increase farm safety

Farming is one of the 10 most stressful occupations, according to a recent study, yet most farmers say they wouldn't trade it for any other job. The love of farming, in spite of all the hassles, indicates farmers must be doing something right to manage their stress.

However, stress that goes unrecognized and is not dealt with can play havoc with the farm family and the farm operation. When stress levels get too high, farmers are more likely to make poor farming decisions and be involved in farm accidents. Relationships between spouses and between parents and children also suffer during stressful times, as can health.

This publication will help you recognize things many farmers consider stressful, common symptoms of stress, and effective ways to manage stress. "Stressor" refers to the things that may cause stress; "stress" is the reaction you may have to that stressor.

Common stressors

Farming has many ongoing situations that can cause stress, such as large debt loads, the presence of government regulations, high interest rates, and lack of control over the weather. Farmers also face daily hassles including machinery breakdowns, long work hours, weather delays, livestock problems, unexpected interruptions, crop yield uncertainty, and disagreements with other family members in the operation.

No event or situation by itself is stressful. However, some kinds of events are

likely to add more stress than other kinds of events.

Negative events are most likely to produce stress. Not too surprisingly, situations considered undesirable, such as bad weather or trouble with livestock, are more likely to cause stress than situations viewed as desirable.

Uncontrollable or unpredictable events are stressful. Many situations in farming are beyond human control, such as the weather, prices, government policies and operating costs.

Ambiguous events are often stressful. Stress is more likely to occur when it isn't clear what the problem is or how you can cope with it. For example, how do you know when to sell commodities?

Long lasting problems are more dangerous than short-term ones. Most families can get by for a while with a difficult situation. When the stress continues to build over months and years, it's harder to handle.

Symptoms of stress

People experience stress in different ways. Some people react to stressful situations physically, others have emotional responses, and some respond with changes in behavior or relationships. Most people react to stress in more than one way at the same time. High levels of stress can affect several areas of people's lives.

Stress can show itself in physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomach

Farm safety and stress

Check your stress level

Take this quiz to find out how stress may affect your life. For each statement, consider whether you feel that way:

- a) rarely
- b) sometimes, or
- c) often.

- 1. I feel tense or anxious.
- 2. People or animals make me feel irritable.
- 3. I drink, smoke, or take drugs to relax.
- 4. I have tension headaches or pain in the neck or shoulders.
- 5. I have trouble going to sleep or staying asleep.
- 6. I find it difficult to concentrate on what I'm doing.
- 7. I have a difficult time finding time or being able to relax.
- 8. I feel sad or depressed for no good reason.
- 9. I feel tired even after I rest or sleep.
- 10. I argue with family or co-workers.
- 11. I give others the "silent treatment" when I'm upset.

See box on back for scoring.

problems, or in emotional symptoms, such as angry outbursts or depression. Behavior changes, like increased smoking or drinking, also can be a reaction to stress. In most people, stress affects their relationships with others, such as having difficulty getting along because of irritability or feelings of sadness.

Differences among farmers

Even under similar circumstances, farm operators vary in the amount of stress they experience. Some people may have many negative stressors, but experience low levels of stress because they have developed effective ways to cope. For other farm men and women, however, pressures may exceed their coping resources and they may show signs of chronic stress.

Studies show these differences in the way various groups tend to experience stress:

- Younger farmers, especially those younger than 50, report more stress than older farmers.
- Farmers in dairy or mixed (grain and livestock) operations report higher stress levels than farmers in grain operations.
- Farmers employed in off-farm jobs report more stress than full-time farm operators.
- Farm women may experience additional stressors. Besides working as a full partner in the farm business, many farm women have full responsibility for home and family matters. A farm woman with an off-farm job faces very difficult demands in addition to being the traditional nurturer for the rest of the family.

For more information

This publication covers only some aspects of stress management for farmers. Check your local Extension office for other publications on stress, or the *Stress on the Farm* home study series, Pm-1172a-f. The following resources also were used for preparation of this publication:

Ways to manage stress

- First, recognize your symptoms of stress and decide to do something about them.
- Watch what you eat. Just as machinery needs top quality fuel, your body needs nutritious food. Breakfast is an important meal for farm operators. Breaks for mid-morning and mid-afternoon snacks are helpful, especially during field work.
- Take time to talk, especially to your family. Let them know if you are feeling pressured or stressed. Find a friend who can listen to your problems.
- Do something relaxing every day. During busy times you may be able to relax for only a few minutes. During less hurried times, take at least a half hour every day to do something for yourself.
- Do some form of aerobic exercise at least three times a week. Even though farmers get a lot of exercise, vigorous exercise is needed to get the heart pumping. It also will help lower your stress level.

Making these changes may seem difficult at first, but the investment of time and energy can really pay off in feeling better and having a more productive farming operation.

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Farm safety and stress

What can you do?

- Recognize your symptoms of stress.
- Eat nutritious foods daily.
- Talk with family and friends.
- Take time to relax every day.
- Do aerobic exercise three times a week.

Stress test: Give yourself 0 points for every "a" answer, 1 point for every "b" answer and 2 points for every "c" answer.

Scoring:

0 - 5 points: You probably are handling stress well.
6 - 11 points: You could benefit from some stress reduction techniques.
12 points or more: Your stress is causing significant difficulties. It may be time to develop new strategies to cope with job and family pressures.



Safe Farm is an Iowa State University Extension project helping to make Iowa farms a safer place to work and live.

Check the World Wide Web at <http://www.ae.iastate.edu> for more safety information.

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