



Agricultural Safety and Health Series: Stress on the Farm¹

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Farming is often described as a peaceful way of life. But the weather, fluctuating prices, animal and crop diseases, government programs and regulations, loan payments, and working the crops can cause a tremendous amount of stress for farmers and their families. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), farmers represent an occupational group with one of the highest levels of job-related stress.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is a person's reaction to something considered a challenge or a threat. It is the emotional strain and pressure exerted on mental and physical being by oneself and others. When under stress, the body begins to "gear up" for action. This makes a person stronger and more alert, but it also takes more energy.

HOW IS STRESS HARMFUL?

Health

When "geared up" under stress, the body begins to do more of some things and less of others. Blood circulation increases, but digestion slows down or even stops. This could lead to major health problems, such as heart disease and ulcers. Other less severe but serious health problems include sleeplessness, headaches, and poor digestion.

Relationships With Other People

Under stress, most people become so wrapped up in their own problems that they forget about everyone else. At the same time, they begin to take out their feelings on family members and friends. Stress quickly becomes a problem for the entire family--not just for the individual.

Efficiency in the Workplace

For a short time, stress may make someone a better, more efficient worker. But over the long haul, a person will wear down, becoming physically weaker and tiring more easily. A lack of concentration may result in poor management decisions. This can be especially dangerous when operating machinery.

More Stress

Stress will have a snowball effect. All the problems it causes with personal health, family, and work will become new troubles. Without learning how to control it, stress can become an endless cycle.

STEPS TO TAKE TO CONTROL STRESS

1. Take a good look at yourself. How do you feel--both physically and mentally?
2. Make a list of things that cause stress in your life.
3. Think about how serious a problem stress is for you. Do you feel under constant stress, or does it come and go? Think about how stress hurts you. How

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has it affected your health and work? How has it changed the way you treat other people?

4. Finally, try to decide if you are under more stress now than you were a year or two ago. If stress has increased, have the pressures changed or your attitude toward them?

LEARN HOW TO MANAGE STRESS

1. Talking about problems is a good way to relieve stress. Choose someone you can be honest with, and then share your problems and discuss solutions with them.
2. Learn how to recognize stressors. These might be a tightening of the neck and shoulders, stomach problems, or changes in behavior or relationships. The body is equipped with a complex system that give warning signs when the stress level is too high.
3. Look at the list of things that cause you stress and think about how serious each of them really is. Pick out things that no one can control, such as prices and the weather. Then, when feeling stressed, evaluate the cause. Is it something minor or something you have no ability to control?
4. When dealing with a major problem, try to break it down into smaller parts. If the barn needs repair, pick out one job and concentrate on getting it done. Once that task is completed, go on to the next one.
5. Schedule the time realistically. Don't try and squeeze more work into a day than can be completed.
6. Take occasional short breaks from work. A few minutes will provide a refreshing start at the job.
7. Learn how to relax. Sit back in a chair and concentrate on relaxing tense muscles.
8. Develop other interests that will help you forget about your problems for a while. Go to a movie or get involved in sports, hobbies, or crafts.
9. Consider outside help, such as counseling or group clinics. In Oklahoma, the Ag-Link Hotline provides counseling through its toll-free telephone hotline. For information and assistance, call 800-AG8-LINK (800-248-5465).

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Fight stress by taking care of yourself. Here are some tips from the American Heart Association:

- Exercise. Regular physical activity makes a person feel better and eases tension at the same time.

- Eat well. A balanced diet is good for physical and mental health. Food is fuel for the body. The better the input, the better the output.
- Sleep and rest. Make sure to get enough sleep and rest to refresh the mind and body.
- Balance work and play. Besides being just plain fun, recreation can help a person enjoy work more.
- Learn to accept the things you cannot change. Look for the best in people and situations. Remember, no one is perfect. Realize that fiscal and time pressure challenges due to weather, crop prices, and market demand are beyond your control.

SOURCES

Farm Safety Association, Unit 22, 340 Woodlawn Road West, Guelph, Ontario, Phone: 519-823-5600

Mona Lee Brock, Crisis Line Coordinator, Ag-Link, Farmers Union Foundation, P.O. 24000, Oklahoma City, OK 73124, Phone: 800-AG8-LINK (800-248-5465)

American Heart Association