

Stress Management for Farmers/Ranchers

Learning to control events, attitudes and responses day-in and day-out will help you manage those hectic, stressful times.

Perhaps you have noticed that some farmers/ranchers crumble under the pressures of events that you find easy to handle. Or perhaps you have wondered how other farmers/ranchers can go on in spite of the stress load they carry.

Why is it that some farmers/ranchers can handle lots of stress and others very little? Researchers who have examined differences between successful and unsuccessful stress managers have identified three key factors. First, individuals vary in their capacity to tolerate stress. For example, prolonged exertion and fatigue that would be only mildly stressful to a young farmer/rancher may prove very difficult for an older farmer/rancher or someone with a heart defect. Emergencies, delays and other problems that a confident farmer/rancher takes in stride may be a stumbling block for one who feels inadequate. While part of an individual's *stress tolerance* is inborn, a crucial part depends on the quality of skills practiced. Learning to cope successfully with a stressor once makes it easier the next time.

A second factor is *feeling in control*. Successful stress managers know how to accept those stressors out of their control — the weather, their height, stock market fluctuations — and how to worry effectively (problem-solve) about those within their control-neck tension, temper flare-ups, record keeping.

Finally, the attitudes, perceptions, and meanings that people assign to events determine a large part of their stress levels. A person has to perceive a situation as stressful or threatening in order to experience stress. If you think your dog is barking in the middle of the night because of a vandal, you will experience more stress than if you suspect a skunk has wandered into your yard.

Stress can be defined as energy in a blocked or chaotic state. It is an absence of calm, free-flowing energy that promotes harmony and balance in a person's body, psyche and soul. To achieve the relaxation response during peak farm/ranch stress seasons — planting and harvesting — takes discipline and daily practice at controlling events, attitudes and responses. Following are some techniques individuals may adopt to gain control.



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Control events

To reduce the pile-up of too many stressful events at one time, farmers/ranchers can control some situations.

- Plan ahead. Don't procrastinate. Replace worn machinery parts during the off season.
- Before the harvest discuss who can be available to run for parts, care for cattle, etc.
- Set priorities about what has to be done today and what can wait until tomorrow. Plan your time.
- Say no to extra commitments that you do not have time for.
- Simplify your life. If possible, reduce your financial dependence on others.
- Postpone stressful events within your control, such as elective surgery.

Control attitudes

How farm/ranch family members view situations is a key factor in creating or eliminating unwanted stress.

- See the big picture: "I'm glad that tire blew here rather than on that next hill."
- List all the stresses you now have. Change those you can; accept the rest.

- Shift from worrying to problem solving.
- Turn your crises into challenges.
- Notice what you have accomplished rather than what you failed to do.
- Set realistic goals and expectations daily. Give up trying to be perfect.

Control responses

- Relax. Whether you are walking, driving or phoning, do it slowly and relax. Keep only that muscle tension necessary to accomplish the task.
- Tune in to your body. Notice any early signs of stress and let them go.
- Take care of your body. Exercise regularly and eat well-balanced meals. Limit your intake of stimulants like coffee, colas and tea.
- Avoid smoking cigarettes or marijuana. Avoid using tranquilizers, sleeping pills.
- If your health allows, tense and then relax each part of your body from toes to head, one part at a time.
- Shake away tension as you work by vigorously shaking each of your limbs.

- Take a break. Climb down from your tractor and do a favorite exercise.
- Take three deep breaths — slowly, easily. Let go of unnecessary stress.
- Stop to daydream for 10 minutes. Close your eyes and take a short mental vacation to a place you really enjoy. See the sights; hear the sounds; smell the smells. Enjoy. Then go back to work feeling refreshed.
- Think positive thoughts: "I will succeed."
- Look for the humor in everything you do.
- Balance your work and your play. Do both well.
- Find someone with whom you can talk about your worries and frustrations.
- Get help when you need it. There are times when all of us can benefit from professional help.
- Unwind before bedtime. Do stretching exercises, listen to soothing music, practice rewinding deeply, and be thankful for any blessings received today. Then sleep well.

Farm/ranch family members can manage their stress well — even during planting and harvesting. The key is to be flexible and to maintain a balanced lifestyle. Make time daily to take care of yourself, for your work is vital to all of us.

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