

Strategies for Dealing with Stress

Key Points

1. We know farming is dangerous-- the two most hazardous occupations are farming and mining.
2. Farmers also have the highest mortality rate from stress related illnesses. Individuals working in the farming, fishing, and forestry group also have one of the highest rates of suicide as compared to other professions. This is primarily due to stressors, such as job-related isolation, stressful work environments, and work-home imbalance. More importantly, stress is caused by those conditions beyond the farmer's control, such as weather, fluctuating commodity prices, variable crop yield, and machinery breakdowns.
3. Stress is simply a response to a threatening event, such as receiving some type of bad news. Unfortunately, our brain and body do not know the difference between being threatened by a saber toothed tiger, being late for work, or having a machinery breakdown during harvest. Our brain and body still respond by being prepared to either jump into a fight or run away quickly.
4. This response causes the body to produce stress related chemicals that make the heart beat faster, our muscles to tense, and the eyes to dilate. Blood is shunted away from midsection (including stomach)... and the mucous membranes dry up. All so you can fight harder, run faster, see better and breathe easier than you would without this response.
5. As stress is experienced over longer periods, our bodies may begin to experience high blood pressure, muscle tension, headaches, stomach upset, heartburn, ulcers, and diarrhea/constipation, which can eventually progress into more serious issues.
6. Serious wear and tear on the body can occur if the stress continues too long or becomes chronic. That is why chronic stress is a risk factor for heart attacks, weight gain, stroke, and diabetes. Individuals also become more prone to severe viral infections, such as the flu or common cold. It is also a risk factor in depression, anxiety, addiction and suicide.
7. Other emotional responses can include isolation or withdrawal. For example, a person may frequently miss work or not go to school or church activities they once attended.
8. Individuals who are stressed might talk in a monotone voice or have a lack of expression on the face. You could observe bursts of anger or abrasive behavior towards children or others. Worry or fearfulness about the future could become a key topic of conversation. You may notice confusion, forgetfulness or difficulty concentrating.
9. Others may respond to stress by trying to screen out unpleasant circumstances in a variety of ways. For example, a person might deny their problems. Sometime they may blame others, like the banks or their spouses. Other times, people try to escape through eating or gambling binges, spending sprees or excessive use of alcohol or other drugs. Some may sleep too much or not enough. Most of these are maladaptive attempts to cope, as a person tries to avoid dealing with the stress.
10. In farmers, a lack of social support, such as having few or no friends, is a predictor of depression. The person may not take care of his or her physical appearance or hygiene. A major concern would be if the farmer starts talking about shooting himself or others. These are signs of hopelessness or depression.

11. Here are some steps to take to help a person you are concerned about. This could be you or you might be asked for a consultation by a concerned friend or family member, the banker, veterinarian, the FSA representative or elevator manager. A conversation might look like this. You could start a conversation with care and compassion by saying "I've noticed you're feeling upset" or asking "What's going on in your life?" Let them talk. Listen carefully, provide support and share personal experiences, if you feel they would be helpful. Give them some time to express what is going on. When they are finished and you are concerned, be direct and ask, "Are you thinking about suicide?" If they say "Yes", get immediate help. Call 911 or take the individual to a hospital emergency room. If they say "No", ask, "What do you think might help?" or maybe "Where would you like to go for help?" Offer to make the contact together to a local resource found in a county resource directory, Iowa Concern, or the Suicide Prevention Lifeline, etc. by saying, "Why don't we make the call together?" It helps to have an awareness of or list of the resources available in your area.
12. There are many things that can minimize our natural stress response. Taking three slow and deep breaths, stopping to daydream or taking a short mental vacation for 10 minutes, or using repetitive prayer can help. A regular exercise program can provide break in the daily routine and is a constructive way to relieve stress. Having a strong network of friends, co-workers, and family can provide helpful support during difficult times.
13. Sometimes managing those items an individual **does** have control over can help to reduce stress. For example, replacing worn parts during the off-season or setting some long-term goals. Before key seasons, discuss who can be available to run for parts or care for livestock. Set priorities about what has to be done today and what can wait. Just say "No", especially to those commitments you do not have time for.
14. If stressed, first talk with someone you trust - friends, family or a trusted physician or minister. Taking your partner on a date helps to strengthen that very important relationship. Getting a good night's sleep, avoiding alcohol and drugs, and eating healthily help us to better manage our current stressors.

Resources

- **Iowa Concern:** 1-800-447-1985, offers confidential assistance and referral for stress, legal questions and financial concerns. The program began in 1985 as a toll-free number serving the agricultural community. Today, the toll free number **800-447-1985**, serves urban as well as rural Iowa.
www.extension.iastate.edu/iowaconcern/
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-8255 (TALK). The Lifeline provides 24/7 free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals. <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>
- **AnswerLine:** 1-800-262-3804 or 1-800-735-2942 (individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing) Call for free information related to your home and family questions. Calls are answered Monday through Friday, 9 a.m.–noon and 1–4 p.m.
- **Ask an Expert:** www.extension.iastate.edu/content/ask-isu-extension-expert-question. Submit your question online and we'll send it to someone in Extension and Outreach that can answer it. A response will be sent to your email address.
- **Dairy Farm Stress Webinar Series:** www.fourstatedairy.org/webinars.html. To help dairy farmers deal with stress, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach hosted a series of three webinars that discussed how to recognize the signs of stress, how to deal with dairy farm families experiencing stress, analyzing a dairy for profits, the profitability of various dairy systems and what FINBIN says about production costs.

Programs

- **ELEVATE: Taking Your Relationship to the Next Level:** Based on the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model (NERMEM), this program engages couples in learning and practicing seven core skills that have been found essential to maintaining healthy and stable relationships.
www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/elevate
- **What About Me? My Wellbeing:** A program designed to enhance adult individual wellbeing and quality of life in ways that are personally meaningful to participants. This introductory program includes four, 45-minute sessions that cover three areas of wellbeing and how they interact. www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/wellbeing
- **Writing Your Retirement Paycheck:** A program designed to provide information needed by those approaching retirement within the next ten years. The workshop outlines key factors to consider prior to retirement and describes two strategies for structuring your retirement income.
www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/retirement
- **Your Money, Your Future:** The Your Money, Your Future program is a series of workshops that will help you get more for your money and show you how to save money for your financial goals.
www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/your-money-your-future

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