



TIPS FOR COPING WITH FLOOD-RELATED STRESS

FARM STRESS AND DISASTER STRESS



Disasters create stress in our lives. For farmers and people in agricultural industries, floods add to other stresses already experienced by farm families.

Stressors identified by farm families¹	
<i>Farm-specific worries</i>	<i>Worries shared with most families</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rising expenses & low prices• Concerns about farm finances• Machinery damage or loss• Prolonged bad weather or natural disaster• Weather-related crop loss• Delay in planting/harvest• Time pressures & long work hours• Farm viability and potential for restoration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Death in family• Divorce or separation• Major illness or disability• Aging parents who need care• Worries about owing money• Few vacations• Changing economic conditions

Studies show that stress may be even greater for young farmers, farmers holding a second off-farm job and women in farm families.

Stress related to flooding situations may be different than stress in other disasters because a flood may continue for an extended period that disrupts the productivity of the farm and may result in irreversible damage or loss of farm machinery, barns and structures, livestock, and the home. The loss of farm productivity and the resultant property damage may cause heightened anxiety that may increase over time and becomes chronic, making it less noticeable to ourselves and those around us.

SIGNS OF STRESS

Some common signs of distress are:

- ✓ Irritability and anger
- ✓ Feelings of anxiety & worry
- ✓ Headaches or gastrointestinal complaints
- ✓ Increased risk-taking behavior
- ✓ Changes in eating & sleep habits
- ✓ Increased alcohol or drug use
- ✓ Forgetfulness
- ✓ Fatigue
- ✓ Sense of helplessness
- ✓ Lack of concentration
- ✓ Avoidance or denial
- ✓ Sadness

Farmers and their families should remind themselves that these are common stress reactions and that they are not “going crazy”. It is important to recognize that these are normal responses to an unusual situation.

¹ Walker and Walker, 1987 and 2003 USDA Small Farm Digest.

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT STRESS?

If stress goes unrecognized, it can affect our mental and physical health. If we learn to cope with stress, we can better face the challenges each day brings and can be even stronger when we face other difficult circumstances in life. Focusing on our own strengths and our community of support, we can take steps to help ourselves and our families by:

- **Acknowledging feelings and talking them out.** Family, friends and neighbors can be helpful listeners and may share some of the same worries. Participating in church or spiritual renewal activities can also be sources of comfort and assistance in difficult times.
- **Paying attention to health, nutritious diet and adequate sleep is important.** Engaging in recreation or a favorite hobby, getting away for a few hours with close friends, reading a good book, volunteering to help others, and finding time to laugh can help.
- **Nurturing personal relationships should be a priority.** Couples should make time to be alone, to talk and to have fun. Families should re-establish important rituals such as mealtimes and holiday celebrations. Listening to and reassuring children who may need additional support is also important.

The good news is that, with time, we will bounce back and return to what is normal for us and our families.

WHEN SHOULD WE SEEK HELP?

If stress, anxiety, depression or physical problems continue for more than a few weeks or if someone is having feelings of extreme hopelessness or extreme anger, talking about suicide or becomes violent, it is important to seek help immediately. Contact a physician or community mental health center as soon as possible.

HOW CAN WE FIND WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

Information about community mental health services in Missouri can be found at www.dmh.mo.gov or by calling 1-800-364-9687.

Additional Web Resources

www.agriwellness.org

An organization that promotes mental health service availability for farm families in Iowa provides newsletters and information related to stress and access to services for farm families through the seven-state program called Sowing the Seeds of Hope.

<http://extension.missouri.edu/main/family/index.shtml>

This site offers an index of articles provided by the University of Missouri Cooperative Extension system that addresses strong families and programs to help families cope.

