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Recognize and Manage the Stress of Farm Life

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Farming is a very stressful occupation. It ranks in the top ten most stressful occupations in the United States. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health recently examined 130 occupations and found laborers and farm owners had the highest rate of deaths due to stress-related conditions like heart and artery disease, hypertension, ulcers, and nervous disorder. It is important to know how to manage stress levels and to reduce the effects of unwanted stress. Too much stress can make a person more accident-prone. This is why it is important to identify common stressors, recognize the symptoms of stress, and manage stress. By doing these three things, you will make the work place safer.

Stress is:

- Energy in a blocked or chaotic state.
- It can occur suddenly. For example, your combine starts on fire and burns up in the middle of harvest.
- Stress can build up, as one thing after another goes wrong in a single day.
- It can also build up over a period of time.

Common Stressors:

Farm families experience the same stress that nonfarm families face; however, they have added pressures during harvest and planting seasons. There are also added stressors associated with agriculture, such as, uncontrollable weather, handling of dangerous pesticides, variable crop prices, and machinery breakdowns.

Common situations and events that effect stress levels in farm families:

- No control of weather
- Large debt loads
- Government regulations
- High interest rates
- Machinery breakdowns
- Livestock problems
- Working long hours
- Crop yield uncertainty
- Disagreements with other family members in the operation of the farm

When these situations and events begin to pile up on each other, farm life can become very stressful. To prevent this from happening, individuals needs to recognize the symptoms of stress and then manage the stress.

Early warning signs or symptoms of stress:

Stress can surface in the form of physical, emotional/mental, or behavior/relationship changes depending on the person and the situation. People react to stress in different ways and have different thresholds of stress.

Physical symptoms:

- Headaches
- Stomach problems
- Rising blood pressure
- Rapidly beating heart

- Clenched teeth
- Dropping sexual interest

Emotional/mental symptoms:

- Impatience
- Frustration
- Depression
- Angry blow-ups
- Difficulty controlling emotions
- Low self-esteem

Behavioral/relationship symptoms:

- An increase in smoking and/or drinking
- Trouble adapting to changing circumstances
- Finding it hard to relax or to sleep
- Communication problems
- Verbal and or physical abuse
- Sarcastic arguments

Stress Management

Once your symptoms of stress have been identified, you must learn how to manage the stress because the body's reaction to stress can have serious implications to your health. By managing stress, you will ease some of the actual stress of your everyday life. Successful stress management includes: taking care of both your mental and physical health, knowing the warning signs of stress, and controlling your reaction to stressful events.

To Control Stress:

Control events that can later cause stress.

- Plan ahead. Replace worn machinery parts during the off season instead of at the last minute.
- Plan to use time efficiently by setting priorities for tasks to be accomplished.
- Prior to stressful seasons, such as planting or harvest, determine who will take care of everyday chores.
- Learn to say no to extra commitments.

Control attitudes that can lead to additional stress in your life.

- Set realistic goals and expectations daily.
- Emphasis what was accomplished, not what failed to be accomplished.
- See the big picture: "It's a good thing the tractor quit working in the driveway instead of in the middle of the highway."
- Shift from worrying to problem solving.

In Summary

Reduce life and work stress by:

- Eating a well-balanced diet. Visit **MyPyramid.gov** (<http://www.mypyramid.gov>) for a guide to eating a well-balanced diet.
- Keeping a positive attitude.
- Exercising a half hour a day every other day.
- Getting enough sleep to meet the demands of your body.
- Accepting that stress is a part of life.
- Clearly defining home and work responsibilities.
- Managing time efficiently.
- Setting realistic goals.
- Learning to relax.
- Spending time with your family.

References

Managing Farm Stress:

<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/drought/old/dro-3.html>

Farming — A Stressful Operation:

<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/drought/old/dro-31.html>

Farm Stress 3: Stress Management for Farmers:

<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/drought/old/dro-33.html>

Personal Stress Management:

<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/drought/old/dro-1.html>

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