

# Stress Symptoms

## Unhealthy Approaches to Stress

Before those involved in the field of agriculture can do much about managing stress, they have to know when they are experiencing it. Much of the time, people do not know or give attention to what is going on in their bodies, their thoughts or feelings, or their relationships with others. They may also deal with stress in unhealthy ways.

### Ways We Might Avoid Stress

Many people learn to screen out unpleasant conditions or life stresses. Consider if any of these examples are familiar to you.

- **Denying there are problems.**  
*Example:* One farmer insisted, "Everything is fine, just fine." In truth, the farm's net income had dropped 20% that year, and he had stopped meeting friends for coffee.
- **Putting blame or lashing out at others.**  
*Example:* One rancher who was feeling stressed because of an upcoming loan payment blew up at his wife for suggesting they take a vacation: "There you go again talking about ways to waste money!"
- **Withdrawing from family members, friends or partners.**  
*Example:* A crop adviser who was dealing with stressed farm clients canceled several outings with friends and instead just watched TV for hours late at night.
- **Escaping reality or feelings by acting out in unhealthy ways.**  
*Example:* At times, people try to escape reality through eating binges, spending sprees, or using alcohol and other drugs.

## Stress Symptoms as Warning Signals

Through avoidance or other unhealthy approaches to stress, you attempt to screen out any unpleasant, uncomfortable stress alarms. *But stress symptoms are early warning signs like a flashing red light on the dashboard of your car when the engine is having trouble or overheating. If you ignore it long enough, the engine will break down.*

Stress symptoms can include:

- Breathing more quickly.
- Aching neck and shoulders.
- Dropping sexual interest.
- Rapidly beating heart.
- Sweating hands and feet.
- Feeling highly anxious.
- Clenched teeth.
- Churning stomach.

These and other stress symptoms are all red lights flashing on your body's dashboard and warning you that trouble could lie ahead. If you ignore your body's physical signals of stress and strain too long, you invite real problems – high blood pressure, declining health, accident proneness, depression or other mental health issues, or heart disease.

It is important that you recognize early warning signals of stress in your body, your actions, your emotional life and your relationships with others. Review the "self-check" items for each area two or three times a day (before meals, etc.).

### Physical Stress Symptoms

Ignoring or avoiding stress will let it overwhelm you and limit your energy, also resulting in tension in your body. Physical symptoms in your body that warn of stress include aching or knotted muscles in your head, neck or shoulders, stomach problems, diarrhea or constipation, shortness of breath, cramps and fatigue. Become aware of what your body is experiencing.

#### Physical Stress Self-Check

- My muscles (loose or tight)
- My head (clear or aching)
- My stomach (calm or upset)
- My breath (easy or tense)
- My energy (good or low)

Reviewed and revised by: **Sean Brotherson**,  
Family Science Specialist, NDSU Extension

*Recognizing the early symptoms of stress – such as rising blood pressure, rapidly beating heart, clenched teeth, aching neck and shoulders, sweating hands and feet, churning stomach, excessive fatigue or dropping sexual interest – is helpful. You and your family can take steps to reduce stress and to regain health and self-esteem by noting and managing stress symptoms.*

— On Farming —

**"Agriculture is the most helpful, most useful and most noble employment of man."**

—  
George Washington

## Behavioral Stress Symptoms

When under stress, some people have trouble relaxing, concentrating, making decisions or sleeping. All of these may lead to farm/ranch accidents.

Others find that when under pressure, they smoke more, drink alcohol more, or eat too much or too little. A good clue you are stressed is when you have difficulty being flexible or adapting to changing circumstances. Give attention to your behaviors.

## Behavioral Stress Self-Check

- My eating habits (typical or eating much less/more)
- My sleep patterns (typical or sleeping much less/more)
- My use of alcohol or other substances (none/mild or increased use)
- My activity level (regular activity or exercising less, being sedentary)

## Emotional Stress Symptoms

One nice thing about working in agriculture is that parents, children, other family members, or work associates can often labor side by side. Nevertheless, too much togetherness and not enough privacy or personal time can lead to tension over chore assignments and supervision.

Some emotional warning signs of stress include increased irritability over trifles, impatience, frustration, depression, angry blowups, difficulty controlling emotions, withdrawing from others and feeling negative about oneself. Tune in to your feelings.

## Emotional Stress Self-Check

- My anxiety level (peaceful or worried)
- My emotional energy (restful or restless)
- My sense of motivation (focused or uninterested)
- My patience level (calm or irritable/angry)
- My general mood (positive or gloomy/depressed)

## Relationship Stress Symptoms

Often individuals from diverse family or other backgrounds work together in farming and ranching. While many of these arrangements work well, sometimes problems arise in relationships. Those working together may disagree about work priorities, how to handle a farming issue, or who should be involved in decisions.

Relationship stresses may result from fatigue or irritability, lack of good listening or poor communication skills. Warning signals in relationships include intense family conflicts, communication breakdowns, strained relationships, sarcastic arguments, shutting down or isolation, or even verbal and physical threats or abuse. Tend to your family and work relationships.

## Relationship Stress Self-Check

- My listening efforts (patient or hurried)
- My talking efforts (helpful or sarcastic/blaming)
- My conflict management (gentle or hostile)
- My social interaction (engaged or isolated)
- My relationship satisfaction (positive or negative)

Made possible with support from the North Dakota Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Center project, with funding from USDA-NIFA.

Reprinted from University of Kentucky College of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Leaflet 284

Original publication by Robert J. Fetsch, Professor and Extension Specialist, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Colorado State University

## Conclusion

By recognizing the early warning signs of stress, family members and others involved in farming, ranching or other aspects of agriculture can begin early to manage stress and regain personal health and self-esteem. Also, they can improve the emotional well-being of others engaged in agriculture and maintain better relationships with one another. The key is to slow down, check for stress signals and then take steps to focus on health and wellness.

## Key Resources for Farm Stress

- **NDSU Extension** – Farm/Ranch Stress Resources: [www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/ag-hub/ag-topics/farm-safety-health/managing-stress](http://www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/ag-hub/ag-topics/farm-safety-health/managing-stress)
- **North Dakota Dept. of Agriculture** – [www.nd.gov/hdda](http://www.nd.gov/hdda)
- **North Central Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Center** – [www.farmstress.org](http://www.farmstress.org)
- **FirstLink Help Line** (24-hour helpline, services, referral) – Call 2-1-1 or go to [www.myfirstlink.org](http://www.myfirstlink.org)
- **Together Counseling LLC** – Offers in-person and telehealth farm-to-farm counseling services; counselors have farming backgrounds. Cost coverage available as needed. Call 701-404-0997 or go to [www.togethercounselinggroup.com/farm-to-farm](http://www.togethercounselinggroup.com/farm-to-farm)
- **North Dakota Regional Human Service Centers** – Counseling services available statewide. Go to [www.hhs.nd.gov/hsc](http://www.hhs.nd.gov/hsc)
- **North Dakota Behavioral Health Supports** – To access mental and behavioral health supports in North Dakota, go to [www.behavioralhealth.nd.gov](http://www.behavioralhealth.nd.gov)
- **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline** (available 24 hours/day) – Call 9-8-8 or chat live at [988lifeline.org](http://988lifeline.org).
- In an emergency, call **911**.

NDSU Extension does not endorse commercial products or companies even though reference may be made to tradenames, trademarks or service names.

County commissions, North Dakota State University and U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. NDSU does not discriminate in its programs and activities on the basis of age, color, gender expression/identity, genetic information, marital status, national origin, participation in lawful off-campus activity, physical or mental disability, pregnancy, public assistance status, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, spousal relationship to current employee, or veteran status, as applicable. Direct inquiries to Vice Provost, Title IX/ADA Coordinator, Old Main 100, 701-231-7708, [ndsu.eoaa@ndsu.edu](mailto:ndsu.eoaa@ndsu.edu). This publication will be made available in alternative formats for people with disabilities upon request, 701-231-7881.