



Stress Management for Farmers and Ranchers

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

Working in agriculture is accompanied by managing a variety of stresses on a regular basis. Learning to control events, attitudes and responses day-in and day-out will help you manage those hectic, stressful times. This fact sheet outlines key factors in stress management and offers a variety of stress management techniques for use in everyday life.

— On Farming —

“It isn’t the farm that makes the farmer – it’s the love, hard work and character.”

—
Unknown

Key Factors in Stress Management

You may have noticed that some farmers, ranchers or others you know struggle under the pressures of events that you find easy to handle. Or perhaps you have wondered how other individuals can function well in spite of the stress load they carry.

Why is it that some folks in life can handle lots of stress and others very little? What are key factors in managing stress? Researchers who have examined differences between successful and unsuccessful stress managers have identified three key factors.

Building Stress Tolerance

■ **First, individuals vary in their capacity to tolerate stress (known as stress tolerance).**

As an example, prolonged physical 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 problem. The key elements to increasing stress tolerance are good physical and mental health, development of coping skills and having good social supports (friends, family, etc.).

Emergencies on the farm, delays and other problems that one person takes in stride may be a stumbling block for one who is struggling with stress tolerance. While part of an individual’s stress tolerance is inborn, most people can increase their capacity by focusing on these questions:

1. What steps can I take to improve my physical and mental health?
2. What steps can I take to improve my stress coping skills?
3. What supportive relationships can I lean on or strengthen?

Focusing On What You Can Control

■ **Second, those who manage stress more successfully focus on what they can control.**

A second key factor is feeling in control. Managers and others who manage stress well learn how to accept those stressors out of their control – the weather conditions, a quick change in foreign markets or stock market fluctuations. Also, they learn how to effectively manage those stresses that are within their control – such as muscle tension, temper flare-ups or record keeping.

Managing Stress Perceptions

■ **Third, 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. For example, you will likely experience more stress if you think your dog is barking in the middle of the night because of a robber, than if you suspect a cat has wandered into your yard and set off your dog. In other words, how you perceive (or think about) a situation shapes much of your stress or anxiety about it, so managing stress perceptions is important to diminishing one’s stress.

Stress Management Techniques for Your Farm/Ranch Life

To relax and manage stresses well during peak farm/ranch stress seasons – planting and harvesting – takes discipline and daily practice. It helps to focus on controlling events, attitudes and responses. Following are some techniques individuals may adopt to increase their sense of control and improve their stress management efforts while working in agriculture.

Control Events

Stress can occur when we experience too many busy or challenging events at one time. To reduce the pile-up of too many stressful events at one time, think about how you might control some situations in your farm or ranch work efforts. Some ideas follow:

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

List three action steps you can take to better control events.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Control Attitudes

How farm/ranch family members or others in agriculture view (or think about) situations is a key factor in creating or minimizing unwanted stress. Some suggestions follow:

- Focus on seeing the big picture: "I'm glad that tire blew out here rather than on that next hill."
- List all the stresses you now have. Identify those you can change; accept the ones you cannot change.
- Shift your mental and emotional focus. Slow down and limit worrying about stresses. Instead, focus your attention on problem solving.
- Think about how to turn your challenges into opportunities. Learn from the examples of others.
- Notice what you have accomplished rather than what you have failed to do.
- Set realistic goals and expectations. Give up trying to be perfect.

List three action steps you can take to shift your attitudes to a more positive mindset.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Control Responses

There are many strategies that can be helpful in controlling your responses to stressful situations in agriculture. A variety of helpful hints follow:

- Focus on relaxing your body and mind. Whether you are walking, driving or doing another activity, take time to slow down and relax.
- 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 such as coffee, sodas and tea.
- Avoid smoking cigarettes, using alcohol or other drugs, or using tranquilizers or sleeping pills.
- If your health allows, tense and then relax each part of your body from toes to head, one part at a time.
- Take a stress break regularly. Climb down from your tractor and stretch or do a favorite exercise.
- Take three deep breaths – slowly, easily. Let go of unnecessary stress.
- Stop to reflect or 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 can and will succeed."
- Look for the humor in things that you do.
- Balance your work and your play. Do both well.
- Find someone with whom you can talk about your worries and frustrations.
- Seek help when you need it. There are times when all of us can benefit from professional help or support.
- Unwind before bedtime. Do stretching exercises, listen to soothing music, and be thankful for any blessings received today.

List three action steps you can take to improve your responses to stress.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Key Resources for Farm Stress

- **NDSU Extension** – Farm/Ranch Stress Resources: www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/ag-hub/ag-topics/farm-safety-health/managing-stress
- **North Dakota Dept. of Agriculture** – www.nd.gov/ndda
- **North Central Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Center** – www.farmstress.org
- **FirstLink Help Line** (24-hour helpline, services, referral) – Call 2-1-1 or go to 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.togethertocounselinggroup.com/farm-to-farm
- **North Dakota Regional Human Service Centers** – Counseling services available statewide. Go to 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
- **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline** (available 24 hours/day) – Call or text 9-8-8 or chat at 988lifeline.org.
- In an emergency, call **911**.

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Conclusion

Whether in farming, ranching, or other areas of agriculture, you can adjust and manage 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.