

Don't Let Stress Harm Your Health

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We can all clearly see the effects of the current economic recession. Money and jobs are tight across the board, and those involved in agriculture are feeling the financial squeeze firsthand. Unfortunately, the economic crisis isn't just doing a number on farmers' bank accounts; it may also be adversely affecting their mental health. Depression and desperation are causing farmers to call into crisis hotlines, declare bankruptcy, change careers and, in some very unfortunate cases, even take their own lives.

The very nature of farming is stressful. The pressures of running a family business are often compounded by concerns over crops, weather and rising costs. Long days of hard physical labor, often in adverse weather conditions, can result in feelings of anxiety and isolation among workers.

Some people thrive on stress: it motivates them to push extra hard to get that last field finished before the rain falls, to get up earlier and work harder to keep their farm running against the odds. For others, the external pressures can feel overwhelming, and the stress weighing on them becomes unbearable.

Stress affects each of us in different ways. The symptoms may be mild or severe, and can be temporary or long-term. Those under heavy stress might have trouble sleeping due to racing thoughts. They may feel powerless, anxious and depressed, and might even take out their frustration on their friends, family and coworkers in uncontrolled outbursts of anger. If you recognize the following symptoms of stress in a loved one, they may need help.

Physical symptoms:

- headaches
- stomach problems
- high blood pressure

Emotional symptoms:

- impatience
- depression
- difficulty controlling emotions

Behavioral symptoms:

- increased smoking/drinking
- trouble adapting to changing circumstances
- difficulty relaxing or falling asleep
- communication problems
- verbal or physical abuse
- sarcastic arguments

If you or someone you love is showing signs of stress, there are free resources available that can help. Cornell's FarmNet program provides farmers with support services that include personal and financial counseling. New York FarmNet's toll free hot line is (800) 547-FARM. Additionally, NYCAMH's Farm Partners provides confidential assistance to farmers and their families with stress-related issues, at no cost to the farmer. NYCAMH case managers, counselors, safety specialists, medical professionals and educators help support farm families with stressful issues. We understand farming and will come to your farm to help you sort out your concerns. Farm Partners can:

- provide one-on-one support and counseling for stress-related issues
- facilitate family meetings to resolve conflicts and assist with decision-making
- assist you with problem solving
- direct you to other available resources

Counseling can help farm families learn to appropriately deal with stress and set realistic goals and expectations. Talking to a NYCAMH social worker can help farmers move from anger and frustration to successful problem-solving.

When you feel stressed, it's even more crucial to take some time for yourself. I talked to a young farmer who manages a 700-cow dairy and recognizes the importance of time off the farm. He says, "I wish all farmers could spend a little more time away from work. I think everyone needs to get time off to keep from going crazy." Even though he aims for a healthy balance between work and free time, he says that "it doesn't always seem to work that way..." and added that, "with these milk prices, it's tough to relax at all." Still, it's important to try to spend some time with family and friends, and take part in hobbies or activities that you enjoy. Even a couple of short breaks during the workday may help you to deal with your stress more effectively.

There is no one blanket answer for all the hard questions farmers are facing these days. Some may opt for counseling, or decide to take medication to help cope with their stress. Some may turn to religion, family and community for support during this challenging time. Others may struggle alone, too proud or stubborn to seek help, and feeling increasingly isolated and depressed.

No matter how you choose to cope, remember that the health and safety of yourself, your family and workers should always be a priority. Don't let stress cloud your judgment – taking risky shortcuts could ultimately cost you much more than the few minutes you might have saved. Take care of yourself and stay safe. Get as much restful sleep as you are able to. Stay hydrated. Eat healthy foods. Talk about your feelings with friends and family. Remember, you are not alone – the economic crisis affects us all, and everyone has stress in their lives.

We may not always like them, but we always have choices. We can choose to become paralyzed by stress and let it control our thoughts and actions, or we can choose to learn to effectively manage it. There's nothing wrong with asking for a helping hand. For more information about Farm Partners, contact Patrick O'Hara, LMSW at 800-343-7527,

x235 or email pohara@nycamh.com. NYCAMH, a program of Bassett Healthcare Network, is enhancing agricultural and rural health by preventing and treating occupational injury.