



## Manage stress to increase farm safety

Farming often is listed as one of the most stressful occupations, yet most farmers say they wouldn't trade it for any other job. The love of farming, in spite of all the hassles, indicates farmers must be doing something right to manage their stress.

However, stress that goes unrecognized and is not managed well can play havoc with the farm family and the farm operation. When stress levels get too high, farmers are more likely to make poor farming decisions and be involved in farm accidents. Relationships between spouses and between parents and children also suffer during stressful times, as can health.

This publication will help you recognize things many farmers consider stressful, common symptoms of stress, and effective ways to manage stress. "Stressor" refers to the things that may cause stress; "stress" is the reaction you may have to that stressor.

### Common stressors

Farming has many ongoing situations that can cause stress, such as large debt loads, the presence of government regulations, high interest rates, and lack of control over the weather. Farmers also face daily hassles including machinery breakdowns, long work hours, weather delays, livestock problems, unexpected interruptions, crop yield uncertainty, and disagreements with other family members in the operation.

No event or situation by itself is stressful. However, some kinds of events are

likely to add more stress than other kinds of events.

**Negative events are most likely to produce stress.** Although all change can bring stress, situations considered undesirable, such as bad weather or trouble with livestock, are more likely to cause stress than situations viewed as less negative.

**Uncontrollable or unpredictable events are stressful.** Many situations in farming are beyond human control, such as the weather, prices, government policies and operating costs.

**Ambiguous events are often stressful.** Stress is more likely to occur when it isn't clear what the problem is or how you can cope with it. (For example, how global events will change farm profits.)

**Long lasting problems are more dangerous than short-term ones.** Most families can get by for a while with a difficult situation. When the stress continues to build over months and years, it's harder to handle.

### Symptoms of stress

People experience stress in different ways. Some people react to stressful situations physically, others have emotional responses, and some respond with changes in behavior or relationships. Most people react to stress in more than one way at the same time. High levels of stress can affect several areas of people's lives.

## Farm safety and stress

### Check your stress level

Take this quiz to find out how stress may affect your life. For each statement, consider whether you feel that way:

- a) rarely
- b) sometimes, or
- c) often.

- 1. I feel tense or anxious.
- 2. People or animals make me feel irritable.
- 3. I drink, smoke, or take drugs to relax.
- 4. I have tension headaches or pain in the neck or shoulders.
- 5. I have trouble going to sleep or staying asleep.
- 6. I find it difficult to concentrate on what I'm doing.
- 7. I have a difficult time finding time or being able to relax.
- 8. I feel sad or depressed for no good reason.
- 9. I feel tired even after I rest or sleep.
- 10. I argue with family or co-workers.
- 11. I give others the "silent treatment" when I'm upset.

See box on back for scoring.

Stress can show itself in physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomach problems, or in emotional symptoms, such as angry outbursts or depression. Behavior changes, like increased smoking or drinking, also can be a reaction to stress. In most people, stress affects their relationships with others, such as having difficulty getting along because of irritability or feelings of sadness.

### Differences among farmers

Even under similar circumstances, farm operators vary in the amount of stress they experience. Some people may have many negative stressors, but experience low levels of stress because they have developed effective ways to cope. For other farm men and women, however, pressures may exceed their coping resources and they may show signs of chronic stress.

How farmers and their spouses experience stress is influenced by factors like these:

- Age and past experience with stressful times
- Type of farming operation
- Time and energy demands from off-farm jobs
- Availability of opportunities for supplementary income
- Emotional support from family members
- Shared goals of spouses
- Flexibility and adaptability

### Ways to manage stress

- First, recognize your symptoms of stress and decide to do something about them.

## For more information

This publication covers only some aspects of stress management for farmers. Check your local Extension office for *Stress: Taking Charge*, Pm-1660a-i. Visit [www.extension.iastate.edu/pubs/](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/pubs/) for more publications.

- Brainstorm with your family members about alternatives and options that might reduce stressors in your life.
- Watch what you eat. Just as machinery needs top quality fuel, your body needs nutritious food. Breakfast is an important meal for farm operators. Breaks for mid-morning and mid-afternoon snacks are helpful, especially during field work.
- Take time to talk, especially to your family. Let them know if you are feeling pressured or stressed. Find a friend who can listen to your problems.
- Do something relaxing every day. During busy times you may be able to relax for only a few minutes. During less hurried times, take at least a half hour every day to do something for yourself.
- Do some form of aerobic exercise at least three times a week. Even though farmers get a lot of exercise, vigorous exercise is needed to get the heart pumping. It also will help lower your stress level.

Making these changes may seem difficult at first, but the investment of time and energy can really pay off in feeling better and having a more productive farming operation.

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For assistance with financial and legal questions and family transitions call Iowa Concern 1-800-447-1985.

## Farm safety and stress

### What can you do?

- Recognize your symptoms of stress.
- Eat nutritious foods daily.
- Talk with family and friends.
- Take time to relax every day.
- Do aerobic exercise three times a week.

**Stress test:** Give yourself 0 points for every "a" answer, 1 point for every "b" answer and 2 points for every "c" answer.

#### Scoring:

**0 - 5 points:** You probably are handling stress well.  
**6 - 11 points:** You could benefit from some stress reduction techniques.  
**12 points or more:** Your stress is causing significant difficulties. It may be time to develop new strategies to cope with job and family pressures.



Safe Farm is an Iowa State University Extension project helping to make Iowa farms a safer place to work and live.

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