

Stress on the Farm: Strategies that Help

Key Points

1. Farming is stressful. Such stress is primarily related to pressures, such as job-related isolation, difficult work environments, and work-home imbalance. More importantly, stress is caused by those conditions beyond the farmer's control, such as weather, fluctuating commodity prices, variable crop yield, machinery breakdowns, and now COVID-19.
2. Stress is simply how the brain and body respond to a challenge, such as performance at work or school, a significant life change, or a traumatic event. Unfortunately, our brain and body do not know the difference between being threatened by a saber toothed tiger, being late for work, or having a machinery breakdown during harvest. Our brain and body still respond by being prepared to either jump into a fight or run away quickly.
3. This response causes the body to produce stress related chemicals that make the heart beat faster... our muscles to tense...the eyes to dilate...blood to be shunted away from midsection (including stomach)... and the mucous membranes to dry up. All so you can fight harder, run faster, see better and breathe easier than you would without this response.
4. As stress is experienced over longer periods, our bodies may begin to experience high blood pressure, muscle tension, headaches, stomach upset, heartburn, ulcers, and diarrhea/constipation, which can eventually progress into more serious issues.
5. Serious wear and tear on the body can occur if the stress continues too long or becomes chronic. That is why chronic stress is a risk factor for heart attacks, weight gain, stroke, and diabetes. Individuals also become more prone to severe viral infections, such as the flu or common cold. It is also a risk factor in depression, anxiety, addiction and suicide.
6. Other emotional responses can include isolation or withdrawal. For example, a person may frequently miss work or not go to school or church activities they once attended.
7. Individuals who are stressed might talk in a monotone voice or have a lack of expression on the face. You could observe bursts of anger or abrasive behavior towards children or others. Worry or fearfulness about the future could become a key topic of conversation. You may notice confusion, forgetfulness or difficulty concentrating.
8. Others may respond to stress by trying to screen out unpleasant circumstances in a variety of ways. For example, a person might deny their problems. Sometime they may blame others, like the banks or their spouses. Other times, people try to escape through eating or gambling binges, spending sprees or excessive use of alcohol or other drugs. Some may sleep too much or not enough. Most of these are maladaptive attempts to cope, as a person tries to avoid dealing with the stress.
9. In farmers, a lack of social support, such as having few or no friends, is a predictor of depression. The person may not take care of their physical appearance or hygiene. A major concern would be if the farmer starts talking about shooting himself or others. These are signs of hopelessness or depression.
10. Here are some steps to take to help a person you are concerned about. You could start a conversation with care and compassion by saying, "I've noticed you're feeling upset" or asking, "What's going on right now, you seem a little unhappy?" Let them talk. Listen carefully, provide support and share personal experiences, if you feel they would be helpful. Give them some time to express what is going on. When they are finished and you are concerned, be direct and ask, "Are you thinking about suicide?" If they say, "Yes", get immediate help. Call 911, take the individual to a hospital emergency room, or contact a mobile

crisis unit. If they say “No”, ask, "What do you think might help?" or maybe, "Where would you like to go for help?" Offer to make the contact together to a local resource found in a county resource directory, Iowa Concern, Iowa Warm Line or the Suicide Prevention Lifeline, etc. by saying, "Why don't we make the call together?" It helps to have an awareness of or list of the resources available in your area.

11. Again, the COVID-19 pandemic is another major stressor outside of the farmer’s control. Stressors like pandemics can cause trauma, placing all involved at a higher risk for many of the stress responses mentioned. Sometimes managing those items that an individual **does** have control over can help to reduce stress. This allows you to expend energy where it can be more effective. For example, you cannot control state, civic or community guidance on travel or gathering. However, there are some things you can control. A person can choose to keep a safe distance from others. Individuals can wear a mask or face shield and avoid public gathering spaces.
12. Keep connections happening. Set up forms of non-physical interaction for meetings. Check in on others via social media, texts, video chat or phone calls. If you are feeling sad or anxious, use these connections as an opportunity to reach out to others, to share experiences, or just talk.
13. Limit your and your family’s exposure to news. This includes information about COVID-19 from radio, television, social media or magazines. Seek information updates only at specific times during the day and only once or twice. The sudden and near-constant stream of news reports can cause anyone to feel worried or overwhelmed.
14. Maintaining a daily routine can help both adults and children preserve a sense of order and manage anxiety despite the unfamiliarity of working from home or being under quarantine.
15. There are some basic self-care strategies that all can benefit from. These can range from taking three deep breaths as needed during the day, to exercising 30-minutes, to making sure you get 7 to 9 hours of deep sleep. Not using alcohol or drugs helps us to avoid the habit of using substances to cope with stress. Going on a date with your partner helps to support that very important relationship.

Resources

- **COVID Recovery Iowa** offers free virtual counseling and assistance for all Iowans impacted by COVID-19. Farm and family finance consultation is also available. Visit the website at <https://covidrecoveryiowa.org/>, fill out a form, and a counselor or consultant will get back to you. Services can also be accessed through the Iowa Concern Hotline or the Iowa Warm Line at 1-844-775-9276.
- **Iowa Concern Hotline:** 1-800-447-1985, offers 24/7 free assistance and referral for stress counseling, legal education, and financial concerns. The program began in 1985 as a toll-free number serving the agricultural community. Today, the Iowa Concern hotline serves urban as well as rural Iowa. <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/iowaconcern/>
- **211** is a free, comprehensive information and referral line linking Iowa residents to health and human service programs, community services, disaster services and governmental programs. This service is collaborating with the Iowa Department of Public Health to provide confidential assistance, stress counseling, education and referral services related to COVID-19 concerns.
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-8255 (TALK), provides 24/7 free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals. <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>
- **Farm and Ranch Wellbeing.** Latest resources, publications, and hotline numbers related to farm and ranch wellbeing. <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/farm-ranch-wellbeing>