

Professional Development Series

Module

MANAGING FOR STRESS ON THE FARM



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Managing Stress on the Farm

OR

Building Stress Resilience

What do we know about farmers' stress and their quality of life from research?

A study by Duncan, Lewis, and Volk (1988) indicated that farm life has the potential to cause stress due to decreased income and high debt ratio. Walker and Walker (1987) showed that relationship issues and farm work (especially during the busy season) were major stressors for farmers. Keating, Munro, and Doherty (1988) emphasized that conflict in a farmers' life was associated with limited time for farm work or off-farm employment, especially during the busy seasons. Melberg (2003) analyzed the relationship between farm stress, social support, and psychological well-being. He measured farmers' stress using variables such as working conditions, numbers of working hours on and off-farm, domestic work, health issues, farm succession, rural and urban area isolation, loneliness, and experience of financial and economic pressure, including farm income and off-farm income. He also measured social contact using variables such as contacts with siblings, friends and neighbors, and attendance of different cultural, religious, and outdoor activities. Background variables considered by the study included age, level of education, and marital status, while symptoms of stress measured psychological well-being. This study found variation between social support and psychological well-being. Such factors decreased among farmers as their age increased.

Conclusions documented that work-related stress factors were rising among farmers and their families. Research by Melberg (2003) indicated that freedom in the workplace positively influenced farmers' well-being. He found that "farm people are particularly resistant to distress" (p.70).

The farming lifestyle brings positive aspects to mental health. Factors of freedom, independence, and fresh air are essential aspects of farmers' quality of life.

Coughenour and Swanson (1988) reported: "satisfaction with farm work is an important component in satisfaction with farm life" (p. 457). Findings revealed relatively high satisfaction with farming: 78% were "very satisfied" and "somewhat satisfied" with farming, and only 3% were dissatisfied. These researchers concluded that economic and non-economic rewards from farming contribute significantly to satisfaction with farm work. Melberg (2003) found that as farmers' working environment is important. "Farmers who are often exposed to physical dangers such as explosives, chemicals, and heavy machinery, and who work under bad lighting and ventilation conditions tend to report a low level of subjective well-being...experienced loneliness seems to be a strong predictor of male farmer's mental health while having positive

success has a positive influence . . . Off-farm work or farm work hours are not noticeable to subjective well-being . . . However, social support variables are not significantly related to well-being in this analysis of male farmers. . . . Having a close friend to confide in, having frequent contact with siblings or neighbors, or participating in cultural, religious or outdoor activities, have no significant influence on mental health For male farmers, well-being significantly decreases with age, while this is not the case for their wives" (Melberg, 2003, p.67-68). Goldschmidt (1978) found a relationship between farm size, farm structure, and quality of life in rural areas. His research results defined a higher index of quality of life among rural communities with a greater number of medium-sized farms.

COVID-19 and Farmers Stress

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented crisis that implied significant challenges for most business sectors; agriculture was one of those. Farming is considered one of the most stressful occupations; additionally, the current pandemic added more stress to farmers' lives (Johansson, 2021). The higher levels of psychological distress, depression, and anxiety in farmers have negative consequences for the person itself and agriculture (Rudolphi et al., 2020). Increased stress levels are associated with severe occupational accidents, poor health, farming turnover intention, depression, and in more severe cases, farmers' suicide (Dudensing et al. I., 2017). Resilience is the "human capacity to face, overcome, and even be strengthened by experiences of adversity" (Grotberg, 1997, p.13). It is a dynamic mode of interacting with events in the environment that are activated and nurtured in times of stress (Tait, 2008) wherein individuals display adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). In addition to resilience skills, career commitment is a critical component to grow in an agriculture pathway, helping farmers develop specialized skills and the power to persist in their jobs, even in challenging times (Mrayyan & Al-Faouri, 2008).

Learning Objectives of the Session:

The interactive workshop will provide an opportunity for participants to embrace collaborative work and utilize best practices for the purpose of:

- Understanding stress, factors influencing stress on the farm, and consequences of farm stress
- Building stress resilience

During this workshop, participants will:

1. Learn about stress and factors affecting farm stress
2. Learn about stress symptoms and consequences of farm stress
3. Measure their stress level and ability to handle stress.
4. Learn about the ABC Model of Stress
5. Foster self-confidence to manage stress through activities
6. Learn about mindfulness
7. Receive tips to practice mindfulness
8. Receive tips for how to create a positive state of mind
9. Learn about ten stress-relieving foods

Getting Started: Stress Situations (Activity # 1)

1. What does it mean for you to be stressed when working on the farm?

2. Do you have a role model who has faced the same difficulties/fears/stress and coped successfully?

What is Stress?

National Center for Farmer Health, 2016

Changes that cause worry, frustration, or upheaval and seem beyond our control can cause stress.

Merriam-Webster

Stress is a condition where an environmental demand exceeds the natural regulatory capacity of an organism

Keating, Doherty, & Munro, 1988

Stress is a set of physical or mental reactions to anything that places demands upon a person which exceed his or her ability to cope

Stress is a body's reaction to harmful situations.

Often what we cannot control causes farmers to feel the most stress.

Self-assessment (Activity # 2)

Determine How the Following Factors Affect Stress on the Farm

	Effect	No-effect
Weather condition		
Machinery breakdowns		
Input costs		
Diseases (animal or the plant)		
Uncertain crop yields and fodder production		
Safety issues (handling dangerous goods, farm chemicals)		
The market price for agricultural products		
Costs for agricultural equipment		
Financial pressure (Large debt loads)		
Long working hours		
Government regulations		
Eligibility for government programs and complicated paperwork		
OSHA regulation		
EPA regulation		
Disagreements with another family members in the farm operation		
Managing both farm and family in busy season		

From: Windon S.R., Jepsen, S.D., Scheer (2016)

Effects of Stress

- ✓ Change the way we think
- ✓ Tunnel vision can prevent us from exploring alternatives/options
- ✓ Focus on threat
- ✓ Become more suspicious
- ✓ Have difficulties handling anger
- ✓ Misinterpret social interactions

Stress occurs suddenly with no warning

- Frost negatively affected your garden

Build rapidly

- Not enough time for child-rearing
- The pressure of having too much to do in too little time

Snowball effect of stress

- High debt, escalation of worries, health issues
- Chronic stress is a response to a stressor that continues for more than a couple hours or days

Stress Symptoms			
<i>Emotional</i>	<i>Physical</i>	<i>Cognitive</i>	<i>Behavioral</i>
Frustration/moody	Cold & infection	Inability to focus	Procrastination
Feeling overwhelmed (losing control)	Clenched jaws & grinding teeth	Racing thoughts	Nail-biting/fidgeting
Have difficulties relaxing and quieting your mind	Insomnia & low energy	Disorganized	Not eating vs. eating too much
Short temper	Dry mouth & difficulty swallowing	Forgetting things	Lack of concentration
Neglecting health condition	Breathing quickens	Constant worrying	Changes in sleeping habits
Low self-esteem	Muscles tighten & Sweaty hands and feet	Poor judgment & being pessimistic	Drug or alcohol use

Consequences of Stress

1. Farm work
 - Poor farm management
 - Spontaneous decision making
 - Farm accident
 - Farm injury
 - Farm safety issue
2. Health
 - Mental health issues
 - Cardiovascular disease

- Reproductive issues
- Skin and hair problems
- Gastrointestinal problems

3. You feel helpless to change your circumstances
4. Unbalanced work and family life

How Stressed Do You Feel? (Activity # 3)

Activity: Measuring your level of stress

For each item, circle the number that best represents your answer

	Never	Occasionally or almost never	Sometimes	Fairly often	Very often
Items	0	1	2	3	4
<i>In the past month, how often have you ...</i>					
been upset because of an unexpected frustration/event?	0	1	2	3	4
believed that you couldn't control important life outcomes?	0	1	2	3	4
felt "on edge" and "stressed out"?	0	1	2	3	4
believed that things weren't going your way?	0	1	2	3	4
believed that you had more to handle that you could deal with?	0	1	2	3	4
felt irritable and impatient about small things?	0	1	2	3	4
felt your heart racing or butterflies in your stomach?	0	1	2	3	4
been unable to sleep because of your worries?	0	1	2	3	4
felt anxious when you woke up in the morning?	0	1	2	3	4
had difficulty concentrating because of your problem?	0	1	2	3	4

If you circled at least two 2s, 3s, or 4s, you probably feel moderately stressed. If you circled several 3s or 4s, you are perhaps under high stress and are not managing it well.

How do you deal with stress? (Activity # 4)

Awareness about Stress		
Can you name three recent situations that have caused stress in your life?	Yes	No
Can you list three signs (physical, emotional, or behavioral) that you suffer under stress?	Yes	No
Accepting Stress		
Can you maintain a positive or neutral attitude when dealing with the "little things" in life?	Yes	No
Can you change the way you view stressful situations to be more constructive in how you react?	Yes	No
Coping with stressors helps direct your energy toward problem-solving		
Do you know and use relaxation techniques like deep breathing and meditation?	Yes	No
Do you ever use exercise to get rid of stressed feelings?	Yes	No
Action		
Do you make a list and prioritize tasks to keep yourself from feeling overwhelmed by all there is to do?	Yes	No
When conflict arises, can you express your feelings and communicate them to others effectively?	Yes	No

"Yes" total _____

"No" total _____

YES (Less than 7) – Any effort made to improve your ability to recognize and deal with stress will help promote balance in your life.

YES (7 or more) – You are on the right track! Share your ability to balance farm stress through difficult times with friends, family, and community members. Be aware there can be a big difference between knowing what to do and doing it.

Building Stress Resilience

ABC Stress Model



Adversity/ Beliefs/ Consequences

A - is the activating event or triggering situation. It is a stressor or stress trigger.

B – your beliefs, thoughts, or perceptions about A

C – The consequences, or stress, result from holding these thoughts and beliefs.

Abraham Lincoln

"PEOPLE ARE ABOUT AS HAPPY AS THEY MAKE UP THEIR MINDS TO BE"

Monitor Your Stress

Day: Tuesday, October 1, 2019		
<i>Time</i>	<i>My Stressor Triggers (Importance level 1-10)</i>	<i>My Stress Level (Stress level 1-10)</i>
6:00 am	I couldn't find my key (2)	Annoyed, upset (4)
9:30 am	Call from a dealership: equipment is not ready to pick up, major issue (5)	Annoyed (8)
10:20 am	Mail came, a big credit-card bill (6)	Upset, worried (8)
2:10 pm	Problem with partnership/deadline (7)	Worried, anxious (9)
4:00 pm	Ag commodity price drop (5)	Worried (8)

PRACTICE:

Research shows that overcoming some level of stress and adversity can make us more resilient in the future.

Finding the Confidence to Manage Your Stress (Activity # 5)

If you feel confident that you can manage your stress, you will feel less stressed (Curtis, Groarke, and Sullivan 2014)

Ask the following questions:

1. *What stressful situation are you facing?*

2. On a scale of 0 (no confidence) to 10 (complete confidence), rate your level of confidence in your ability to manage stress

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
No confidence							Complete confidence		

3. *Explain your rating. Why do you believe you can or can't manage the situation successfully?*

4. *What helped you survive other difficult circumstances in your life?*

5. *What skills or personal qualities do you possess to help you manage the situation?*

6. *Can you apply any of these qualities, efforts, or skills in your current situation? How?*

7. *Do you know of anybody who has faced a similar situation and gotten through it successfully? Find a role model who faced the same difficulties and coped successfully.*

Reaching out to that person and asking for advice can improve your confidence and coping skills.

8. *What external resources or support can you rely on to help yourself deal with the stressor? Can you do Internet research? Can you rely on your courage?*
-

Discussion Topic: (Activity # 6)

Situation:

In 2013, I conducted a study (thesis research) on Ohio AgrAbility clients. One of the farmers who had severe disability condition wrote me a letter where he indicated that ". . . *STRESS DOES NOT BOTHERME ANYMORE*".

Let us discuss the farmer's attitude toward the farm stress while having severe health issues.

PRACTICE:

Deciding What You Can & Can't Control (Activity # 7)

Think about the most stressful situation you are facing. Consider different aspects of the problem, and list them on a piece of paper. If they are mostly under your control, write them under "Things I Can Control." If they are mostly not under your control, write them under "Things I Can't Control." If you are not sure, write them under "Not Sure."

Things I Can Control

For example:

- Feeling isolated on the farm
- Delegating some tasks or asking for help if I need it
- Worrying about keeping the farm in the family/farm succession
- Being expected to work on the farm as well as manage the house

Put in this box things you can control

Things I Can't Control

For example:

- Low ag commodity prices
- Yield loss due to weather conditions
- Farming related accident
- The increased workload at peak times

Put in this box things you can't control

Not Sure

For example:

- Dealing with salesperson
- Conflict with spouse over spending priorities
- Having to wear too many hats (e.g., farmer, spouse, parent, son, daughter, etc.).
- Keeping up with new technology and products

Put in this box things you can't control

PRACTICE:**Put Things You Can't Control into a Box (Activity # 8)**

1. Choose a box (e.g., oak, metal safe, or a large vase, dark grey metal box). Be very specific about size, shape, color, and texture. Imagine labeling your box with a description such as "Yield loss due to weather conditions" or "Low ag commodity prices."
2. Image putting all your worries and fears about the uncontrollable outcomes of your stress into the box. Visualize yourself packing them in, or see your worries as a stream of smoke, light, sand, or water that flows into the box/container. Give them the form that feels right to you
3. Once all your worries are in the box/container, imagine sealing it. You could use a lid, a lock, chains, plastic wrap, or all of the above. It is up to you how to seal your box/container. When your container/box is sealed tight, imagine storing it somewhere. You could bury it deep underground, put it in the cave, stow it in an attic, load it onto a boat, or send it into space in a rocket ship. Anywhere you want to store it is okay.
4. When your box/container is sealed and stored, imagine yourself walking away from it and back into your life. You can come back and open it if you need to, but for now, it's safely put away
5. Set an intention to focus your effort and energy on the parts of your stressor that you can control.

MINDFULNESS

In 1994, Jon Kabat-Zin defined mindfulness as a way of paying attention purposefully and with nonjudgmental acceptance to your present–moment experience.

1. Adopt the stance of mindfulness toward your own experience at the moment, whatever that may be
2. Sit peacefully; examine your thoughts, feelings, or body sensations.
3. Replace fear with a curious, gentle, and welcoming attitude free of judgment, self-blame, and aversion.

PRACTICE:

Practice STOP (Stop, Take a breath, Observe, Proceed) to help yourself (Activity # 9)

When you first wake up, make time for the STOP practice. It will help start your day off on a mindful note. Continue to use the technique throughout the day whenever you feel stressed.

Practice STOP

1. **Stop.** Stop whatever you are doing, and bring your mind back to the present moment
2. **Take a breath.** Take a few breaths to slow down your “fight, flight, or freeze” response.
3. **Observe.** Begin to notice what you are feeling, thinking, and doing. Pay attention what is going with your body; are there emotions? (describe them – scared, angry). Try to stay in the moment with these feelings and breathe into them: imagine sending your breath into the areas that feel tight, constricted, or activated by these feelings.
4. **Proceed.** When you are feeling sufficiently present and aware, go about your business in a deliberate way. You may want to continue what you were doing, but with a more mindful demeanor

Breathing creates space for anger and frustration and allows us to see solutions.

Breathing Exercise (Activity # 10):

Before getting out of your truck at the farm/orchard,
*Take three more long, deep
breaths. Find something to be
thankful for.*

Before getting out of bed, lie still for a moment.
*Take three long, deep breaths.
Pause for a moment between the inhale and exhale.
Try not to fall back to sleep.*

Repeat this process as needed throughout the day (like before the catch crew shows up).

You can't stop the stressors from popping up, but you can control them from stressing you out

Benefits practicing mindfulness

Taking the time to focus on the present moment hits a reset button on your current situation. The following benefits are proven:

- Reduced error rate
- Decreased Stress
- Better managed triggers
- Increased focus
- Increased happiness

Creating the Positive States of Mind

One way is to build a "resilience plan" in which you proactively engage in activities that create positive emotions and then deliberately use these positive moods to fuel your thoughts about stressors. Different type of activities creates different moods.



<https://www.maxpixels.net/Funny-Troop-Anti-stress-Balls-3660833>



<https://www.maxpixels.net/Anti-stress-Balls-Funny-Troop-2472633>

Pick two to four activities that might work for you, and then make a plan to fit these activities in your schedule regularly. Soon after you finish your activity, schedule 20-30 minutes to sit and think about dealing with your stressors. Notice creative solutions come to mind.

Creating Positive Moods



CREATE JOY

CREATE
INTERESTCREATE
CONTENTMENT

CREATE LOVE

CREATE
RELAXATIONCREATE
ENGAGEMENTCREATE
AMUSEMENT

- **Create joy** through creative activities that will push the limits of your mind and problem-solving creativity.
- **Create interest** through exploring and trying new things that help you integrate new information and expand your horizons.
- **Create contentment** through enjoying nature or beauty, practicing gratitude, or recalling positive memories, which help you have a positive focus and find a new perspective.
- **Create love** through spending time with loved ones, which helps you feel energized, inspired, or safe.
- **Create relaxation** through sports or entertainment, which helps you slowdown and find a new perspective.
- **Create engagement** through challenging tasks that help you have confidence, focus, and feel a sense of flow.
- **Create amusement** through humor that helps you find a new perspective, get some distance from your problems, and attain objectivity.

BONUS PAGE

Ten Stress-Relieving Foods

Nuts (B2, E, zinc)



https://www.maxpixels.net/search?cat=&min_width=&min_height=&q=nuts&order=popular

Broccoli (B, folic acid)



https://www.maxpixels.net/search?cat=&min_width=&min_height=&q=broccoli&order=popular

Fish (B6, B12)



https://www.maxpixels.net/search?cat=&min_width=&min_height=&q=fish&order=popular

Milk (B6, B12)



<https://www.maxpixels.net/Drink-Fresh-White-Glass-Cows-Milk-Milk-Food-1379822>

Bananas (potassium)



https://www.maxpixels.net/search?cat=&min_width=&min_height=&q=bananas&order=popular

Blueberries (C)



https://www.maxpixels.net/search?cat=&min_width=&min_height=&q=bluberry&order=popular

Oranges (C)



https://www.maxpixels.net/search?cat=&min_width=&min_height=&q=oranges&order=popular

Sweet potato (B6, A)



<https://www.maxpixels.net/Potatoe-Potatoes-Sweet-Vegetarian-Meal-Potato-1161819>

Brown rice (B1, B3, B6)



<https://www.maxpixels.net/Nutrition-Rice-Asian-Herbs-Vegetables-Food-Brown-4264846>

Avocado (potassium, A)



<https://www.maxpixels.net/Green-Avocados-Growing-Tree-Fruit-Hass-Avocado-3594376>

PRACTICE (Activity # 11):

Your answers to the following questions can help you figure out:

- how you feel about a particular stressor
- why it's stressful for you, and
- what skills, support, and resources can help you cope

When you break the stressor down logically, stepwise, you are using your brain to create a planned, motivated response to stress, rather than just feeling anxious and overwhelmed.

Identify the most stressful aspect of the event or frustration and explain why it was so stressful?

Read the following questions and write down your answers

1. How do you feel about this situation? For example, you may have one or more of the following emotions: anger, sadness, confusion, surprise, fear, shame, guilt, or happiness. Try to name the specific emotions you are feeling. Are any emotions conflicting with one another?

Your Answer:

2. What are the actual or potential losses involved in this situation? They may include relationships, status, or security, your business, other material things, hopes and dreams, or other types of loss. What adverse outcomes do you fear? How likely are these losses or negative outcomes, and which of them are within your control?

Your Answer:

3. To what extent did you choose this situation? Is there a way for you to accept this situation, even if you didn't choose it? Can you work on accepting those parts of the situation that are out of your control? What can you do to cope with the things you can control?

Your Answer:

4. How well are you meeting the demands of the stressful situation? Are you getting the work done and completing the tasks you need to? Are you managing your emotions effectively and making healthy choices? Are you communicating and managing your relationship effectively? What skills (assertiveness skills or time management skills) might help you cope? How might you begin learning and practicing these skills?

Your Answer:

5. Are there other stressors draining your energy, making you more anxious, or making the situation more complicated? How can you better focus on one thing at a time?

Your Answer:

6. What type of help or support do you need to deal with the stressor or its emotional impact? For example, do you need practical help in formation, resources, or emotional support? Who might be able to provide these for you?

Your Answer:

7. What personal meaning or positive challenge can you find in this situation? Is there an opportunity for you to stretch yourself and grow as a person, live by your values, or meet important personal goals?

Your Answer:

Reflect on Stress and Stress Reduction Strategies

1. How can you determine your stress level?
2. What factors affect your high-stress level and stress symptoms?
3. How can you foster self-confidence to manage stress?
4. How can you utilize mindfulness to reduce your stress level?
5. How can you create a positive state of mind?
6. How can breathing exercises help to reduce your stress level?

Resources:

1. Adopted from Greenberg, M. (2016). *The stress-proof brain: Master your emotional response to stress using mindfulness and neuroplasticity*. New Harbinger Publications.
2. Adopted from Elkin, A. (2013). *Stress management for dummies*. John Wiley & Sons.
3. Adapted from Happy farming. Manage Farm Stress Using Mindfulness <https://www.val-co.com/manage-farm-stress-using-mindfulness>
4. Managing Stress on the Farm. National Centre for Farmer Health <https://www.farmerhealth.org.au/>

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Managing Stress on the Farm session was developed & adopted by Dr. Suzanna Windon

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