

## FARM STRESS MANAGEMENT PLANNING, JUST IN CASE IT'S NEEDED

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Most farmers and ranchers I talk with these days are pretty happy about how things are going for them. The high prices paid by farmers for additional farmland and expensive farm equipment bear out their optimism.

However, an increasing number of mostly older agricultural producers say they are concerned about a possible US and global economic recession in the foreseeable future. A few farmers are worried about a collapse similar to the Farm Crisis of the 1980s.

Among the major threats they cite are: rising interest rates on operating loans and land purchases, instability in the world economy due to Russia's war with Ukraine, shifts in China's role in world matters, growing consolidation of market control by ever larger corporations that supply fuel, fertilizer, herbicides, and seeds, and fewer processors of such major commodities as beef, pork, and milk.

There are undeniable similarities between the factors that preceded the farm crisis of the 1980s and current conditions: rapid increases in farmland and farm equipment costs, rising interest rates for farm operating notes--although not nearly as high as during the worst of the 1980s' farm crisis, and the loss of a major purchaser of American farm commodities then and now, Russia.

In many ways, farmers are better prepared for economic problems if they occur now than they were forty years ago. Crop insurance and livestock indemnity coverage are available to reduce losses, if they occur.

Moreover, bankruptcy laws have changed since the 1980s to ease the burden of starting anew. Most lenders and borrowers now share in farm business planning as partners. The Extension Service and other USDA agencies offer education about managing stress, and there are more behavioral health supports for at-risk farmers and their families at local, state, and federal levels, including the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network.

In her 1987 book entitled *Mending a Broken Heartland*, Joyce Barrett noted that the lack of mental health supports for distressed and displaced farmers and families was a major contributor to emotional trauma and significantly higher rates of suicide among farmers during the mid-1980s.

Currently there are educational and counseling resources for farmers who become economically imperiled. All people connected with agriculture, and especially the producers themselves, would be wise to develop a stress management plan in case the current farm economy heads in an unfavorable direction.

What might a behavioral health management plan look like?

First, the behavior management plan should fit the circumstance of the operator and the persons dependent on the land, including family members and employees, even if they don't participate in its development. The plan should result in a written document with important information available for everyone, such as:

- Farm crisis hotlines or websites; 13 states and Farm Aid have telephone numbers that can be found online
- Suicide hotlines (e.g., 988, and 1-800 SUICIDE)
- Local hospital emergency numbers, family doctor offices, and available mental health care providers' telephone numbers, all of which can be found online or by asking 911 if the situation is an emergency

Second, the plan should include the signs and symptoms of excessive anxiety, especially these:

- Excessive worry, with the inability to disconnect with troubling events when appropriate
- Physical symptoms, such as heart palpitations, trembling, sweating, shortness of breath, chest and/or extremity pain, nausea, dizziness or lightheadedness
- Fears of losing control, choking, dying, or "going crazy"
- Feelings of numbness and/or detachment from reality
- Unwarranted fears of specific places, events, and persons
- In short, an overwhelming feeling of wanting to fight a threat, avoid or flee from the threat, or to become emotionally paralyzed

Third, the plan should include signs and symptoms of depression, including these:

- Withdrawal from usual social events, such as church activities
- Inability to focus on and complete tasks that are usually handled satisfactorily
- Decline in personal appearance or in the condition of the farm and its animals and equipment
- Complaints about inability to sleep or sleeping too much
- Loss of appetite and/or significant weight loss
- Statements that nothing is enjoyable anymore or worth looking forward to
- Inability to laugh that persists for multiple days
- Fixation on negatives without consideration of positives
- Statements that imply self-harm or harm toward others
- Feeling agitated and/or fatigued nearly every day
- Feeling the need to cry but inability to do so, sometimes called the "lump in the throat phenomenon"

Fourth, develop a farming plan that includes a team of advisors, such as a farm business manager, professionals in areas where personal expertise is insufficient (e.g., a veterinary consultant, agronomist), a trusted family member, employee, or neighbor who has wisdom and the capacity to maintain confidentiality, and someone who understands behavioral health and agriculture (e.g., an Extension Specialist). Include literature of an educational nature about dealing with farm stress and attend educational meetings about managing behavioral health on the farm.

Having a farm stress management plan provides a measure of comfort and confidence in case of an economic recession or depression.

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