



# **Tips for Recognizing and Managing Excessive Stress**

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# Behavioral Well-being Is Key to Healthy Food Production

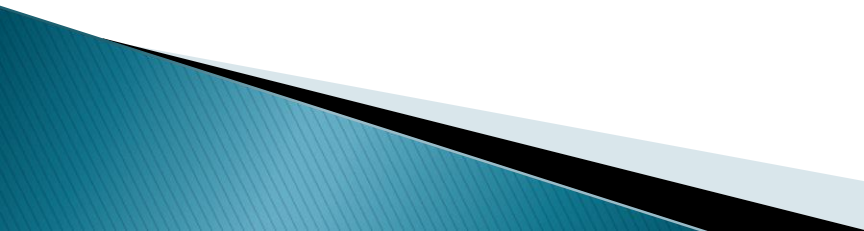
- The most important asset in the food chain from producer to consumer is the farmer
- Farmers' behavioral health is positively correlated with optimal livestock health, crop production, and sound decision-making
- Unlike the weather, unforeseen injuries, and unexpected illnesses, farmers can control their behavior for the most part
- The term, behavioral health, is more acceptable these days than the term, mental health, and by nearly everyone, including the U.S. government

# Contributors to Farm Stress

- The most important stressors are those we can't control and which are key to farming successfully
- Threatened foreclosure or loss of the family farm and loss of an important person, such as a farmer or farm child, are the most stressful
- Death of a loved one or valued employee who helps with work and advice, followed by severe injury, and divorce, are next in the stress rankings
- Most people can handle two stressors simultaneously, but three are usually beyond our capacity



# There Is Good and Not So Good News about Farming's Future

- ▶ First, the Not So Good: The farm economy favors very large producers, commodity purchasers and processors; there are some signs of a recession in the general—and the farm—economy
  - ▶ The Good News: Programs like AgrAbility and the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network are here to stay, albeit possibly in different forms
  - ▶ Farming-related injuries and suicides are declining
  - ▶ The media helped make the case for farming safer
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# To Farmers, the Land Means Everything

- ▶ To farmers, ownership of a family farm/ranch is the triumphant result of the struggles of multiple generations. Losing the land is the ultimate loss--bringing shame to the generation that let down its forebears and dashing the hopes for successors. Farmers cling desperately to the land and other assets needed to produce food, because they see these and themselves as essential to life for all.

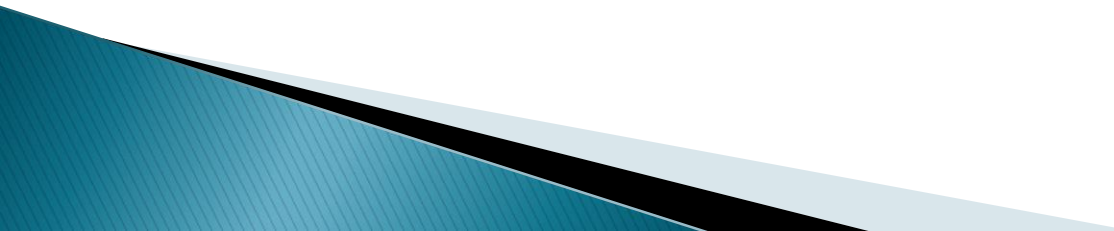
# The Agrarian Imperative Theory Explains Why People Farm

Like many animal species, humans have a basic need to acquire sufficient territory and the necessary resources (e.g., capital, equipment, buildings, livestock) to produce the food and shelter required by their families and communities. Also called “the agrarian personality,” this genetically programmed instinct drives farmers to hang onto their land at all costs. The agrarian imperative instills farmers to work incredibly hard, to tolerate unusual pain and adversity, to trust their own judgment, and to take uncommon risks.

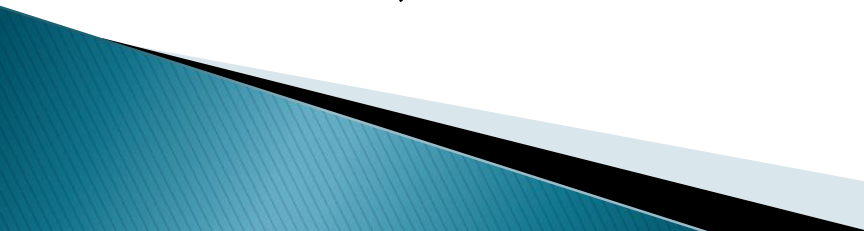
\*Rosmann, M.R. (2010). The Agrarian Imperative. Journal of Agromedicine, 15(2), 71-75.



# How Does AgrAbility Fit with the Agrarian Imperative Theory?

- ▶ Intense desire of agricultural producers to remain functional and to produce necessities for life is the major reason for AgrAbility
  - ▶ Recovery from injury is not just a physical event, it's a psychological imperative to heal, a social activity, and a highly spiritual pursuit
  - ▶ Managing behavior is key to recovery and accomplishment along the way and thereafter
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# Genetic Predispositions Contribute to Farmers' Behaviors

- ▶ Successful farmers have a propensity to exhibit ADHD, to require less sleep and to be attentive
  - ▶ ADHD also inclines these persons to sometimes take unwise risks, especially when under duress
  - ▶ Successful farmers have a genetic tendency to react strongly to threats to the extent that they may sacrifice their own well-being to achieve success
  - ▶ Farmers do not readily share their distress with others, but this tendency is changing
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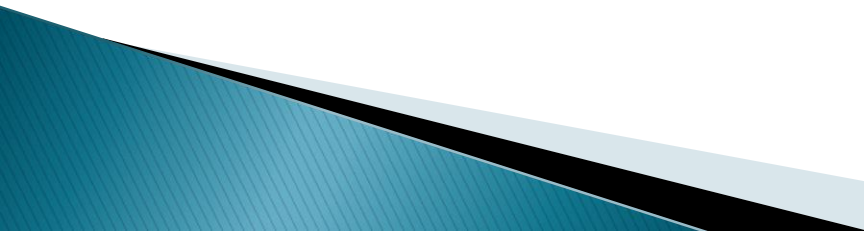
# The General Adaptation Syndrome (Arousal – Depletion Cycle)

- ▶ We appraise if a situation is threatening
- ▶ Our nervous systems become aroused to:
  - Take flight from the threat
  - Fight the threat
  - Freeze--become emotionally paralyzed
  - Our muscles tense, heart rate increases, blood pressure increases, senses sharpen and our pupils dilate as we become alert and alarmed

# The General Adaptation Syndrome (Arousal – Depletion Cycle) – Cont.

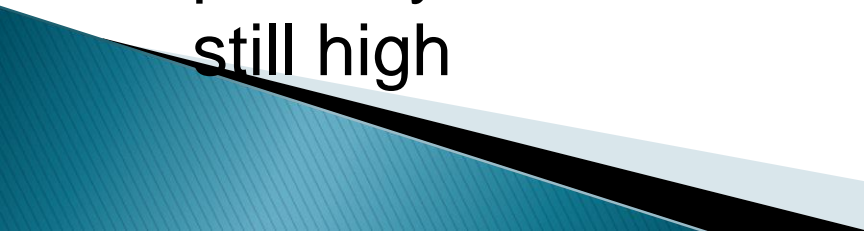
- ▶ After the threat dissipates or because we have taken flight, fought the threat, or froze, our nervous system tries to resume a state of normalcy:
  - Our adrenal glands secrete cortisol
  - Cortisol allows muscles and pupils to relax, blood pressure to decrease but it makes us feel tired
  - Cortisol encourages preparation for future emergencies

# Farmers' Behavioral Health Is Partially Understood

- ▶ Suicide in the agricultural workplace occurs at a higher rate than in any other workplace (Ringgenberg et. al., 2017)
  - ▶ Suicide in rural areas occurs at higher rates than in non-rural areas (Tarlow et. al., 2018; Singh & Siahpush, 2002)
  - ▶ Economic factors such as unemployment and loss of a farm increase the risk of suicide (Carriere et. al., 2018)
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# **Suicide by the Agricultural Population is Among the Highest of Any Occupational Group**

- ▶ The agricultural population includes farmers, ranchers, farm workers, migrant laborers, fishers, and foresters
  - ▶ Suicide in general is a national crisis, and among farmers in particular
  - ▶ Farmer suicide is higher than the rate of suicide among military veterans
  - ▶ Good news: The suicide rate has declined for the past 3 years in the US and among farmers, but is still high
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# Farmer Suicide: More Yet to Learn

- ▶ According to the CDC, farmers have one of the highest rates of suicide of any occupation (45 per 100,000 yearly, physicians have one the highest rates of any profession (around 28-40 per 100,000 annually, and veterinarians, dentists, and pastors also are high), construction workers and miners may be higher (around 52 per 100,000) and military veterans have a high rate (around 35 per 100,000)
- ▶ What do these occupations have in common?
- ▶ Educators, librarians are lowest (7.5 per 100,000)

# Danger Signals of Excessive Stress, Depression, and Suicide

- ▶ Verbalizations about hopelessness (e.g., “It’s no use, nothing I do works; I can’t do this anymore”)
- ▶ Verbalizations about loss of interest and pleasure in everything (e.g., “Nothing fun anymore; I haven’t laughed for weeks”)
- ▶ Dramatic threats (e.g., “I’ll shoot all my livestock before I let the court have them”)
- ▶ Lump in the throat phenomenon, in which the person wants to cry but can’t

# Danger Signals cont.


- ▶ Avoiding public events such as church or kids' school activities and meetings that he/she usually attends
  - ▶ Flat affect, retreating behaviors and isolation
  - ▶ Deterioration in personal appearance, the farmstead, livestock health
  - ▶ Inability to sleep or very limited sleep despite feeling tired for 3 or more successive nights
  - ▶ Tax and loan repayment seasons, planting and harvest of farm crops
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# Managing Our Behavior

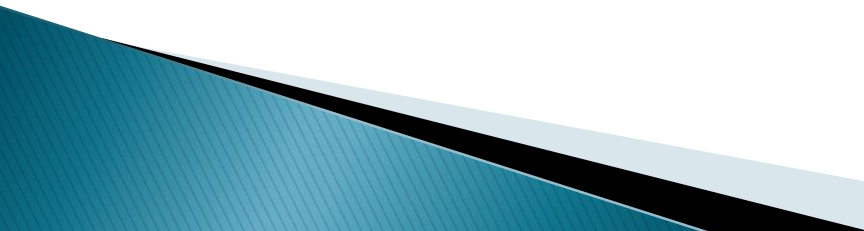
- ▶ For the most part, we can control our behavior
- ▶ Behavior, like a feed ration, has ingredients that can be varied to maximize our well-being
- ▶ Just as cattle need an ideal ration to grow the fastest or to produce the most milk, we humans can manage our behavioral well-being: Our daily and weekly behavior rations include how much and how hard we work, sleep, recreate, pray, laugh, talk and engage in stress management



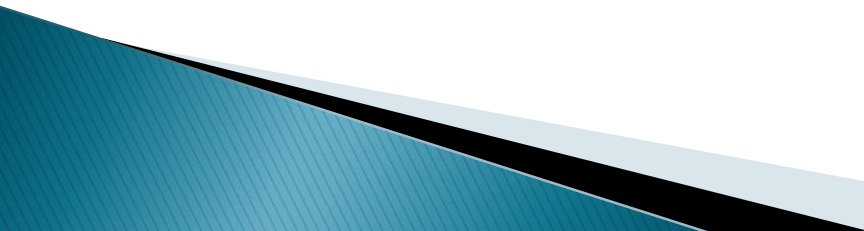
# Specific Behaviors that Help Us Deal with Stress

- ▶ Talking with people who understand our/their dilemma, and to form a support network
  - ▶ Physical intimacy and comforting touches, such as stroking arms and hands
  - ▶ Recreation and breaks away from the stressful environment such as sporting events & vacations
  - ▶ Prayer and meditation alone or with loved ones
  - ▶ Enjoying the outdoors or any other comforting environment with sunshine
  - ▶ Interacting with pets and beloved animals
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# What We Can Do to Help Distressed Farmers

- ▶ Visit them and offer help by forming a team
  - ▶ Don't leave them alone if they appear suicidal, but instead contact family members or others who are around to share concerns
  - ▶ Provide options for addressing their concerns, such as consultants (e.g., farm business experts), visiting their physician, attending community meetings and educational programs, and seeking behavioral health resources (e.g., the best counselors who understand agriculture)
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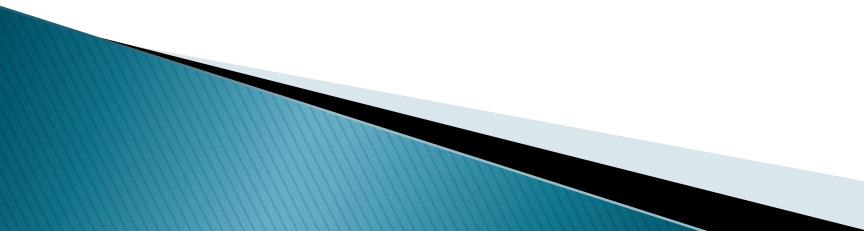
# Behavioral Sciences Will Bring a Revolution to Our Well-being

- ▶ Understanding behavior will improve crop and livestock production and human survival in an increasingly changing and crowded world
  - ▶ Behavioral sciences currently are where physics, chemistry, and biology were 100 years ago, but are among the fastest advancing fields of science, with application in genetics, understanding the brain, and what works in therapy
  - ▶ Agricultural behavioral health is emerging as a new field that will be integrated into curricula
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# Someone Else Always Has It Worse Than We Do

- ▶ More than anything else, our distress will diminish when we take charge of it, Most problems are resolvable, but succumbing to them by suicide or giving up in other ways are permanent solutions to problems that are usually temporary
- ▶ Anxiety, depression, family issues and most behavioral health problems are resolvable
- ▶ The current attention in the national media to suicide require that at-risk agricultural producers make getting help and prevention of unnecessary deaths a priority

# Statewide Resources Than Can Aid Farmers, Ranchers, and Employees

- ▶ State Hotlines and Helplines, such as the Iowa Concern Hotline: 1-800-447-1985, available 24/7
  - ▶ Farm-Aid, business hrs. only: 1-800-327-6243
  - ▶ National Suicide Prevention Hotline: available 24/7 but not familiar with agriculture: 1-800-273-8225
  - ▶ Literature about agricultural behavioral health, social, legal, family matters and many other topics are available at Farm Service Agencies, the Extension, and in most farming magazines
  - ▶ 988 is a quick and easy way to access emergency assistance during a behavioral health crisis
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# Check Out These Supplemental Articles and the PBS Film Entitled Facing Suicide

- ▶ Managing Ourselves
- ▶ Depression and Anxiety: Common and Management for Farmers
- ▶ Farm Stress Management Planning, Just in Case

The PBS network broadcast a 90 minute program, Facing Suicide, on September 13, 2022, that is available free online at:

<https://www.pbs.org/show/facing-suicide/>.

# Conclusions about the Behavioral Health of Farmers

- ▶ Rural residents and the agricultural population are better informed than ever before about managing their behavioral health and healing from injury
- ▶ Agricultural people are reaching out for help during and after crises, and proactively through education, literature, and the media
- ▶ There are inadequate resources for behavioral health assistance in rural areas, but improvements are developing, such as the National AgrAbility Program and many state affiliates, and the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network

# Thank You

- ▶ For being here today
  - ▶ For asking me to present at your conference
  - ▶ For being concerned about farm family stress
  - ▶ For contributing to the healing process from injuries and illnesses that farmers, ranchers, agricultural workers, and their families experience
  - ▶ For bringing hope and health to people
  - ▶ So long for now.
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