

How do You Cope With Anxiety and Stress in Your Ag Legacy?

By Caleb Carter, UW Agriculture and Horticulture Educator

Rick and Lori faced tough times in the past but recently the farm's financial situation has gone from bad to worse. With lower commodity prices and the hail that took out much of this year's crop, they face the possibility that they could lose the farm. Lately, Rick has not been himself. While typically outgoing and involved in the community, more and more he has become withdrawn, absent from football games, skipping church services and not returning phone calls. His fields and livestock are looking more neglected all the time. Lori is becoming increasingly concerned and has expressed her fears to their good friends and neighbors, John and Sheila, who share similar worries about Rick. How can Lori approach Rick without making things worse?

Common stress factors

Farm and ranch families experience stress from a wide variety of factors, including:

1. **Operational stressors** (equipment breakdowns, disease outbreaks, accidents and government regulation),
2. **Environmental influences** (extreme weather events, early or late frost, irrigation issues), and
3. **Family stressors** (a child turning 13, caring for an aging loved one, personal health decline). Most factors are out of the families' control, potentially adding even more stress. In addition, the lines are often blurred between family and business issues, making efforts to address them even more difficult.

Situations where money is tight represent another case that can lead to stress for both farm families and the agricultural business. The financial ties between the operation and the families involved is often challenging and can lead to frustrations for young families that they are not yet "on their own." Mothers and daughters-in-law may also struggle as many times they don't feel they are a part of the operation. The founding generation can often feel added stress when things aren't going well, where they believe they should shoulder more of the risk and burden over disagreements about spending.



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It is not surprising, with these varied and difficult-to-manage emotions, that good communication is often identified as missing in surveys of multigenerational farm and ranch families. This includes concerns about how arguments are handled, what represents fair criticism, and general family problem solving.

One of the most stressful intergenerational farming issues reported is the transfer of the family farm or ranch to the next generation. Even talking about the transfer of management and ownership brings up and amplifies many of the stressors already mentioned.

Stress and anxiety in agriculture

Stress factors can and often do affect everyone involved in the family farm or ranch business, even if they are not directly involved in day-to-day operations. A variety of coping mechanisms can be employed to help address or mitigate the effects of these factors.

A survey of Iowa farm families identified several good stress management practices that are regularly practiced. They found that managers often:

- Are aware of their strengths, skills and weaknesses
- Practice time management and goal setting techniques
- Involve themselves in hobbies and recreation outside the business
- Use various support systems
- Practice a variety of stress-management techniques (relaxation, exercise, problem solving and assertiveness), both in response to a stress and even when not under stress

Three specific strategies that can help address stress in the moment include:

- **Self-talk.** Tell yourself you can adapt and overcome any challenge. Remind yourself you've faced hard times before and you can do it again. Choose three words to help maintain your mind-set, such as calm, capable, and controlled.
- **Breathing.** Practice deep breathing to calm your mind and to help you focus. Breathe deeply five times and exhale slowly. This also can help improve sleep and can help with chronic pain.
- **Acceptance.** If things are out of your control, it may be best to just accept them and focus on finding a solution instead of getting frustrated by the problem.

Exercise can also be a helpful coping mechanism. Research shows that even a brisk, 10-minute walk can reduce the brain's level of the stress hormone cortisol by 50 to 70 percent.

One of the best coping strategies for managing intergenerational stressors is open communication, especially for farm or ranch families. It is important to allow free expression of feelings and ensure that those feelings are acknowledged. Also, planning early for succession can also help alleviate stress over not knowing what is going to happen.



A word cloud of mental health terms. The word 'ANXIETY' is the largest and most central. Other prominent words include 'WORRY', 'TEMPER', 'DEPRESSION', 'AGITATION', 'SCARED', 'HEADACHE', 'WITHDRAWAL', 'NEGATIVE', 'MOOD', 'PANIC', 'TENSION', 'DISORDER', 'FEAR', 'DESPAIR', 'INSOMNIA', 'STRESS', 'NERVOUS', 'AWARENESS', 'PTSD', 'FRUSTRATION', 'OVERWHELMED', 'FATIGUE', 'FAILURE', 'LONELINESS', and 'NEGATIVE'. The words are arranged in a roughly circular pattern around the central 'ANXIETY' word, with varying orientations and sizes.

Don't forget the children

The unique arrangement of families on the farm or ranch means that the children are often very involved in day-to-day operations. Working right alongside their parents or other family members. Thus, they feel the stress and are aware when the operation is not doing well. This may show up as trouble with schoolwork, difficulty sleeping or concentrating, or stomachaches.

Suzanne Pish, a Michigan State University Extension educator specializing in social-emotional health says that, “Maintaining farm rituals and traditions can help them feel more secure.” She also encourages parents to remind children that nobody is perfect, encouraging physical exercise and healthy eating, and helping ensure kids get enough sleep. She also suggests making time for family time together and hobbies.



Anxiety and depression in individuals

A stigma exists among the general population when it comes to asking for help with anxiety and depression. It has been said that many men were raised to be John Wayne types, especially in rural families. They were taught to not ask for help and to not show any emotion. This can lead to cultural obstacles that often times keep people from reaching out. Thoughts such as:

- “I don’t need to see a counselor; I can solve my own problems.”
- “I don’t trust psychologists.”
- “Why should I tell a stranger the intimate details of my life?”
- “Even if little else is left, I still have my privacy.”

It’s interesting to note, that in the last bullet, “privacy” could be replaced by “pride.” Often, pride stands in the way of asking for help. It is important to

understand that it is not a sign of weakness to ask for help. In reality, it can take much more strength and courage to ask for help than to suffer in silence.

Seeking professional help

Making the decision to seek professional help can be intimidating. Knowing how and where to start can feel daunting. It might start with talking with a spouse, close family member or friends. A friend who has had a positive experience with counseling is a good place to start. A referral can be helpful as you search for the right counselor.

If a referral is not an option, or if you don’t feel comfortable with that, don’t give up. You can find certified counselors in the yellow pages or at: www.therapistlocator.net, where private counselors are listed by geographical area. You might also start by talking with your doctor. Wherever you decide to start, more than anything, admitting to yourself that you need help can be a big step forward in beginning to deal with your feelings.

Communication is key

In an article titled Practical Ways of Dealing with Stress on the Farm, Ted Mathews director of Minnesota Rural Mental Health and a long-time mental health practitioner, shared two coping strategies that he says he shares with all couples that he works with:

“I recommend to all couples that I work with that they spend a minimum of 15 minutes every day talking about their common daily occurrences. Before you think how easy that would be, do it for 7 days, most will see it is more difficult than they thought. The simple reasons for that is that 2 heads are better than one and bonding comes with communication.”



There may be times that our coping mechanisms are not enough, despite our best efforts. If you or someone you know and care about are experiencing any of the following symptoms, it may be time to seek professional help:

- Panic attacks with a high pulse rate and difficulty breathing
- Poor concentration
- Excessive drinking
- Thoughts of suicide
- Constant crying
- Constant fatigue
- Physical fighting where one spouse hits, shoves, or kicks the other
- Physical discipline of children that leaves marks or bruises
- Constant criticism of one of the children
- Neglect of personal or parental responsibilities because of an inability to cope, or
- Uncharacteristic behavioral problems in children

He goes on to encourage people to ‘BE NICE’. This begins by looking in the mirror first. If you can be kind to yourself, you will have a greater capacity to be kind to others.

Removing the stigma

This is not a new problem, not new to society, and not new to agriculture. However, if we are going to remove the stigma that keeps people and their families from feeling safe and getting to a point where they are okay with asking for help, we must begin by talking about it. As the Do More Ag Foundation promotes: Talk More, Ask More, Listen More.

Resources

Ted Matthews is a mental health practitioner with over 30 years of experience in counseling in rural areas. His focus for the past two decades has been on farmer mental health support. www.farmcounseling.org/.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800/273-TALK (8255) or visit suicidepreventionlifeline.org/GetHelp/LifelineChat.aspx

Crisis Text Line: Text "GO" to 741741

Do More Ag: Champions for the mental wellbeing of all Canadian producers and changing the culture of agriculture to one where all producers are encouraged, supported and empowered to take care of their mental wellbeing. www.domore.ag



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