

Stress Management for Farm/Ranch Couples



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Working together under pressure, shifting roles and holding down more than one job add up to one thing – high stress levels for farm or ranch couples. However, by being thoughtful, communicating clearly and relaxing together, spouses can ease pressures on their relationship. This fact sheet offers tips for managing stress as a couple that partners can use to build their relationship and reduce life stress.

— On Farming —

“Remember that creating a successful marriage is like farming. You have to start over again every morning.”

—
H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

Working Together on the Farm/Ranch

One of the unique aspects of life in agriculture is couples often work closely together on the farm, ranch or other agricultural operation. Whether married or partnered, working together can bring particular stresses. Consequently, agricultural work and family life are tightly linked. Farming decisions are more likely to affect the entire family than are job decisions of workers in other occupations.

Couple Stresses in Farming/Ranching

Couples working together in agriculture face a variety of life stresses. Consider these examples and ask yourself the related question:

- **Example** – One farmer’s wife had plans for purchasing a needed refrigerator, but her husband insisted that a new piece of farm equipment was more important.
- **Question:** Do financial decisions related to the farm or ranch impact family financial plans in a way that becomes stressful or creates conflict?
- **Example** – A young fiancé planned some special couple activities to get away when fall arrived and her work schedule lightened up, but her partner farmed and told her she should not plan to see him much for six or eight weeks during fall harvest.
- **Question:** During planting or harvest seasons, how do we plan for and adjust to busy schedules, added stress or limited time together as a couple?
- **Example** – After a few years of marriage and a couple kids, one young rancher talked to his wife after she took an off-farm job in town to help the family. She said, “Since I am working some nights, I need you to get in the kitchen and handle meals and bedtime for the kids.” His mom had handled those family chores growing up and he had expected it to be the same in his marriage.
- **Question:** Do you have different expectations than a spouse about roles in family life and the differences in activities between husbands and wives? How are you each managing that process?

Couples on the farm or ranch may face stresses related to finances, busy schedules or shifting roles in family life. Often, one or both spouses or partners manage multiple roles, including farm/ranch partner, spouse and/or parent, and employee in an outside job.

Twelve Tips for Managing Couple Stress on the Farm

Relationship stress for couples in agriculture is not unusual considering the close working relationship and varied pressures. To relieve the strain, here are twelve tips you can pursue in your relationship.

- **Plan ahead.** Set measurable goals together for a year from now, five years from now and your lifetime together. Make decisions about time together in farming/ranching, other jobs or retirement. Then, focus on enjoying what you have decided to do. Remain flexible.
- **Check in with each other daily.** Take a moment to inquire how your spouse is feeling. Look for and give attention to early indications of stress, such as a furrowed brow or a tense voice. Respond with love and attention as needed.
- **Promote connection and appreciation for one another.** Take time daily to state one item you appreciate about your partner: “One thing I really appreciate about you today is . . .”
- **Communicate realistic expectations clearly.** In talking, use “I statements” more than “you statements.” Your partner will likely not change if you argue, “You’re always wanting to buy

something else!” Instead, try using an “I statement”: “I get worried and angry when I hear you wanting to buy a new _____. What I’d like is for the two of us to sit down and decide together which major purchases we can afford.”

- **Focus on listening well and really hearing your partner’s view and feelings.** Especially on serious matters, it is important to listen well and help your partner feel they have been heard and understood. Listen so that you can repeat back to your partner’s satisfaction what she or he says and feels. Focus on listening without being upset or defensive.
- **Be flexible in your roles and attitudes.** Letting others do things you usually do and adjusting your expectations when necessary can reduce pressures. Share the responsibility of things such as family chores, cooking or kid care.
- **Schedule regular “talk time” and negotiate solutions.** When problems arise, schedule time for the two of you to brainstorm and discuss ideas. Weigh the costs and benefits of each solution. Arrive at a plan that enables both of you to get something you want.
- **Schedule an evening a week to play together – whether a date, a walk or something else.** To keep your marriage or partnership growing, take a break from the work or the children or other distractions. If it helps, make it a rule to talk about only yourselves as a couple and not about the farm or ranch operation.
- **Ask for, or volunteer, a gentle massage.** Through a gentle neck rub, backrub, foot rub, head scratch or massage, you can ease sore muscles and give your spouse or partner the gift of a restful night’s sleep.
- **Get in touch.** Hold hands; hug each other; show your affection. Physical contact can be one of the best stress relievers of all. Take time to re-connect through caring affection or times of intimacy.
- **Laugh at yourselves.** Remember, always being serious is stressful while laughter reduces stress. Watch a funny movie, share funny stories or find other ways to laugh.
- **Celebrate small and big moments together.** Celebrate your anniversary, birthday, the arrival of a new foal or calf, getting the field planted before the rain and other milestones. Take joy in your lives together.

Key Resources for Farm Stress

- **NDSU Extension** – Farm/Ranch Stress Resources: www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/ag-hub/ag-topics/farm-safety-health/managing-stress
- **North Dakota Dept. of Agriculture** – www.nd.gov/ndda
- **North Central Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Center** – www.farmstress.org
- **FirstLink Help Line** (24-hour helpline, services, referral) – Call 2-1-1 or go to www.myfirstlink.org
- **Together Counseling LLC** – Offers in-person and telehealth farm-to-farm counseling services; counselors have farming backgrounds. Cost coverage available as needed. Call 701-404-0997 or go to www.togethercounselinggroup.com/farm-to-farm
- **North Dakota Regional Human Service Centers** – Counseling services available statewide. Go to www.nd.gov/dhs/locations/regionalhsc/
- **North Dakota Behavioral Health Supports** – To access mental and behavioral health supports in North Dakota, go to www.behavioralhealth.nd.gov
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** (available 24 hours/day) – Call 9-8-8 or call/text 1-800-273-8255 (TALK).
- In an emergency, call **911**.

10 Relationship Checkup Questions

Relationship checkups are for all couples, in every stage of their relationship. A relationship checkup can prevent getting disconnected or help with getting reconnected. It’s never a bad idea to slow down and get on the same page together. Here are 10 questions you can ask as a couple to check in on your relationship:

Focus on Positives

1. What am I doing now that you like?
2. What’s one of your favorite traits of mine?
3. What is one positive thing you appreciated about us in the last week?

Assess How Things Are Going

4. Are we happy with the way we divide household roles and responsibilities?
5. Are we happy with the frequency and quality of our sexual relationship?
6. How is our friendship? Are we happy with our time together and emotional connection?
7. Do we each feel supported and secure with each other?

Some Gentle Suggestions

8. Is there just one thing that you would like me to change or work on? (name only one)
9. What’s something specific I can do this week to help you feel loved or supported?
10. Do we have any recent hurts between us that we still need help resolving and healing?

Conclusion

Your life as a couple in farming or ranching will never be totally free from stress. But through daily practice you can recognize the early warning signs of stress and make it a habit to do what works best for you to ease pressures and stay connected. Through easing stress and following these tips, you will find that your work is more enjoyable and your marriage or partnership more enriching and supportive.

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