

FS1804 (Revised March 2023)

# Farming and Ranching in Tough Times

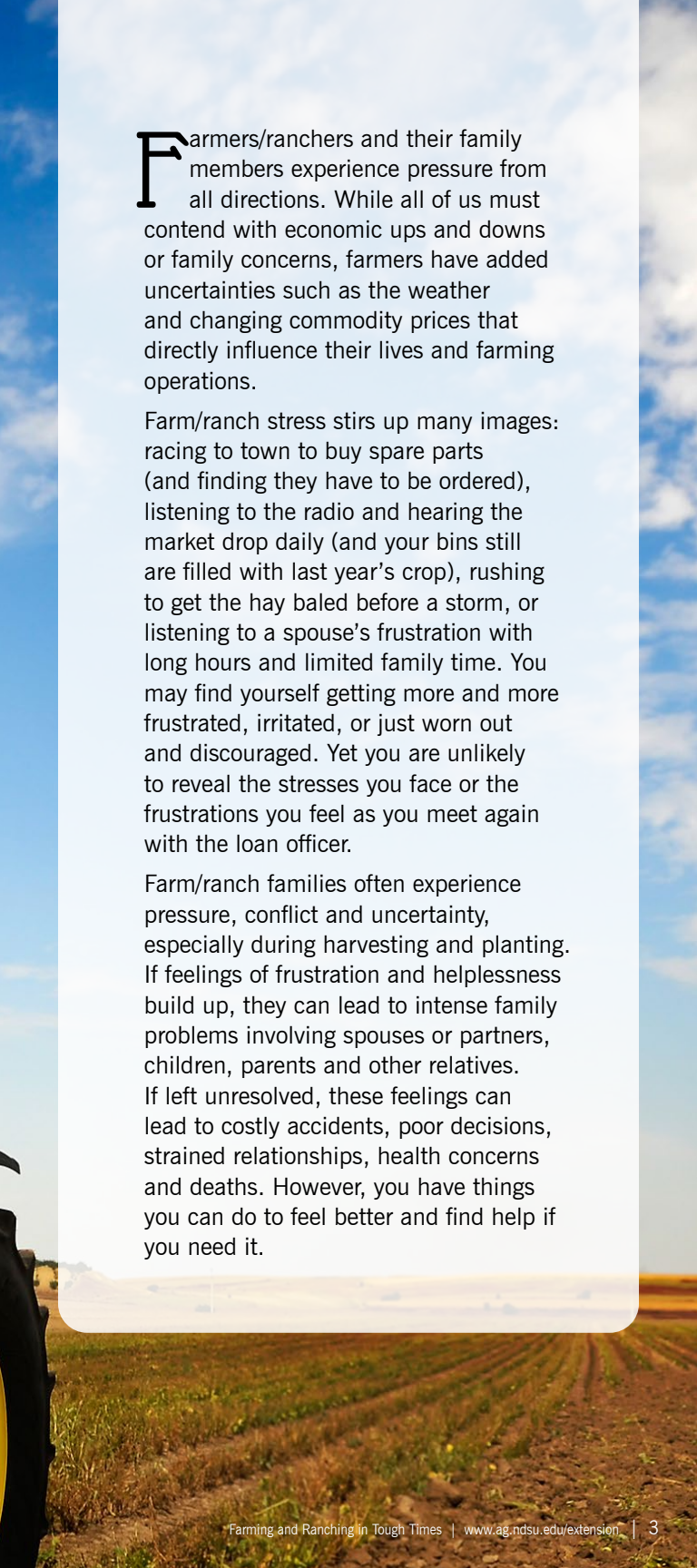
Sean Brotherson, Ph.D.  
Family Science Specialist

**NDSU**

EXTENSION

North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota





**F**armers/ranchers and their family members experience pressure from all directions. While all of us must contend with economic ups and downs or family concerns, farmers have added uncertainties such as the weather and changing commodity prices that directly influence their lives and farming operations.

Farm/ranch stress stirs up many images: racing to town to buy spare parts (and finding they have to be ordered), listening to the radio and hearing the market drop daily (and your bins still are filled with last year's crop), rushing to get the hay baled before a storm, or listening to a spouse's frustration with long hours and limited family time. You may find yourself getting more and more frustrated, irritated, or just worn out and discouraged. Yet you are unlikely to reveal the stresses you face or the frustrations you feel as you meet again with the loan officer.

Farm/ranch families often experience pressure, conflict and uncertainty, especially during harvesting and planting. If feelings of frustration and helplessness build up, they can lead to intense family problems involving spouses or partners, children, parents and other relatives. If left unresolved, these feelings can lead to costly accidents, poor decisions, strained relationships, health concerns and deaths. However, you have things you can do to feel better and find help if you need it.

# Stress and Health in the Farming/Ranching World

Farming/ranching has long been one of the more stressful and dangerous occupations, but also has its share of rewards and satisfactions. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health has examined multiple occupations and found those working in agriculture often deal with stress-related conditions. These may include sleep difficulties, heart and artery disease, high blood pressure, ulcers, and depression or anxiety. What are some reasons for the stresses you may feel in farming/ranching?

## Safety Concerns

- ❑ Farming/ranching can be dangerous. According to the National Safety Council, agriculture is one of the two most hazardous occupations.
- ❑ In 2021, 16 accidental deaths occurred per 100,000 agricultural workers, compared with a national average of 3.6 deaths per 100,000 workers for all industries.

## Lack of Health Insurance

- ❑ Each year, one of every eight farm families experiences an accident requiring medical attention.
- ❑ Farmers and ranchers are the most underinsured group of workers around, especially for health and disability insurance.



## Changes in Agriculture

- ❑ Farming/ranching has changed rapidly from being largely a physical occupation to one that requires more and more mental input.
- ❑ Farmers/ranchers often have intense management responsibilities with money, employees, partnerships and business decisions.
- ❑ Farmers/ranchers face continual pressures with technological advances in machinery, as well as production and management advances in livestock and crops.

## Common Farming and Family Stresses

- ❑ Common farming stresses include machinery breakdowns, the death of a valuable animal, uncontrollable weather, variable crop yields and fluctuating commodity prices.
- ❑ Common family stresses include economic difficulties, turmoil in the world, loss of a family member or divorce.



# What is Stress?

In the engineering field, stress means the capacity to withstand strain. When applied to people, stress is more complex. Everyone takes in energy (strength) from the sun, air and food. When people remain relaxed and balanced as they go about their daily tasks, this energy flows in and out of their bodies in a healthy, harmonious way. But when they feel anxiety and their muscles tie up in knots, their breathing tightens, and their stomachs, shoulders or necks become tense? This is the experience of **stress** — energy in a blocked or chaotic state.

When you put your body in passing gear to work as fast as possible to bale that hay before the storm comes, you experience stress. You feel the effects of powerful hormones being released into the body. *Your blood pressure rises, your heart rate quickens, and your breathing and blood flow accelerate.*

If you adjust to the stressful event, you move on into the relaxation response in which blood pressure goes down to a normal, healthy rate. While occasional operation in passing gear in an emergency situation does little, if any, harm, keeping yourself under heavy strain for lengthy periods of time or experiencing too many stressful events at one time is dangerous. Just like a boiler that bursts under too much pressure, your body breaks down and your health suffers.

You always have two choices: the *stress response* or the *reaction response*. If, at the first warning signs of stress, you take a moment to relax and breathe deeply, you will find that you have more energy, can concentrate better and actually can get more done in less time.

# Understanding Stress Symptoms

Many people learn to screen out unpleasant circumstances and related stresses. Much of the time, people do not know they are feeling stress or do not give much attention to what is going on in their bodies and in their relationships with others.

For example, they deny their problems. One farmer insisted, “Everything is fine, just fine.” The truth is, his net income had dropped 20 percent that year and 15 percent the year before. He was denying reality.

Sometimes we blame others. One farmer who was feeling totally helpless because of an upcoming loan payment blew up at his wife for suggesting they take a vacation: “There you go again talking about ways to waste money.” At other times, people try to escape reality through eating binges, spending sprees, or using alcohol and other drugs.

Such avoidance efforts are attempts to screen out any unpleasant, uncomfortable stress alarms. But early warning signs are like a flashing red light on the dashboard of your car when the engine is overheating. If you ignore it long enough, the engine will malfunction. Rising blood pressure, rapidly beating heart, clenched teeth, aching neck and shoulders, sweating hands and feet, churning stomach, dropping sexual interest — these are all red lights flashing on your body’s dashboard and warning you that trouble could lie ahead.

If you ignore your body’s physical signals of stress and strain too long, you invite real problems: hypertension, declining health, accident proneness, depression or other mental health issues, or heart disease.



# A Stress Symptom Checklist



Recognizing early warning signals of stress in your body, your actions, your emotional life and your relationships with others is important.

### **Physical Symptoms**

- Head aching
- Back or neck muscles tense, aching
- Stomach upset or distressed
- Breathing short or labored
- Low energy
- Body fatigue, tiredness

### **Behavioral Symptoms**

- Difficulties with sleep
- Inability to relax, concentrate
- Getting angry easily
- Trouble making decisions
- Increased use of alcohol or other drugs
- Difficulty being flexible

### **Emotional Symptoms**

- Irritable about little things
- Sense of frustration, anger
- Impatient, restless
- Feeling discouraged, hopeless
- Withdrawal, isolation
- Anxiety, panic feelings

### **Relationship Symptoms**

- Communication difficulties
- Conflict with family members
- Lack of satisfaction
- Verbal or physical outbreaks
- Strained interactions
- Avoiding others

# Ways to Manage Your Stresses

Working in agriculture is accompanied by managing a variety of stresses on a regular basis. Learning to control events, attitudes and responses day in and day out will help you manage those hectic, stressful times.

## Control Events

To reduce the pileup of too many stressful events at one time, farmers and ranchers can control some situations.

- Plan ahead.** Don't procrastinate. Replace worn machinery parts during the off season.
- Before key seasons (harvest, etc.), discuss who can be available** to run for parts, care for livestock, etc.
- Set priorities and plan your time.** Decide what has to be done today and what can wait until tomorrow.
- Say no to extra commitments** that you do not have time to do.
- Simplify your life.** If possible, reduce your financial dependence on others.
- Schedule stressful events within your control,** such as elective surgery.

## Control Attitudes

How those in farming or ranching view situations is a key factor in creating or eliminating unwanted stress.

- See the big picture:** "I'm glad that tire blew out here rather than on that next hill."
- List all the stresses you have.** Identify those you can change; accept the ones you cannot change.
- Shift your focus from worrying to problem solving.**
- Think about how to turn your challenges into opportunities.**
- Notice what you have accomplished** rather than what you failed to do.
- Set realistic goals and expectations daily.** Give up trying to be perfect.

## Control Responses

- ❑ **Focus on relaxing your body and mind.**  
Whether you are walking, driving or phoning, do it slowly and relax.
- ❑ **Tune in to your body.** Notice any early signs of stress and let them go.
- ❑ **Take care of your body.** Exercise regularly and eat well-balanced meals.
- ❑ **Limit your intake of stimulants** such as coffee, sodas and tea.
- ❑ **Avoid smoking cigarettes, using alcohol or other drugs, or using tranquilizers or sleeping pills.**
- ❑ **Tense and then relax each part of your body** from toes to head, one part at a time.
- ❑ **Take a break.** Climb down from your tractor and do a favorite exercise.
- ❑ **Take three deep breaths slowly, easily.**  
Let go of unnecessary stress.
- ❑ **Stop to reflect or daydream for 10 minutes.**  
Close your eyes and take a short mental vacation to a place you really enjoy.
- ❑ **Think positive thoughts:** “I can and will succeed.”
- ❑ **Look for the humor in things that you do.**
- ❑ **Balance your work and play.** Give time and energy to both of them.
- ❑ **Find someone with whom you can talk** about your worries and frustrations.
- ❑ **Seek help when you need it.** All of us have times when we can benefit from professional help or support.
- ❑ **Unwind before bedtime.** Do stretching exercises, listen to soothing music, practice relaxing deeply and be thankful for any blessings you received today.
- ❑ **Get sufficient and restful sleep.**

Farmers, ranchers, and their family members and employees can learn to manage their stresses well, even during planting, harvesting or times of difficulty. The key is to be flexible and maintain a balanced lifestyle. Make time daily to take care of yourself because your work is vital to all of us.

# Resources

For stress-related illnesses or concerns, depression and/or suicide risk:

- ❑ Call 211: statewide 24-hour crisis intervention, health and human services information and referral.
- ❑ Refer yourself or anyone you have concerns about to a local health-care provider or local mental health professional. If you run into difficulty or resistance, suggest and accompany the person to a professional you know. Some examples might be clergy members, medically trained personnel, nurses or other health-care professionals, law enforcement agencies or personnel, and local counselors, social workers or other mental health professionals.
- ❑ North Central Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Center Resources: [www.farmstress.org](http://www.farmstress.org)
- ❑ Mental Health America Resources: <https://mhanational.org/live-b4stage4>
- ❑ National Suicide Hopeline Network: Text “Hopeline” to the number 741741
- ❑ National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: Call 9-8-8 or call/text 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

## References

- Brotherson, S.E. (May 2000). *Making family decisions in farming and ranching*. Extension publication FS518. Fargo, N.D.: NDSU Extension Service.
- Brotherson, S.E. (June 2022). *Farming, ranching and work-life stress*. Extension publication FS282. Fargo, N.D.: NDSU Extension.
- Brotherson, S.E. (June 2022). *Stress management for farmers and ranchers*. Extension publication FS284. Fargo, N.D.: NDSU Extension.
- Olpin, M., and Hesson, M. (2020). *Stress Management for Life: A Research-based Experiential Approach*, 5th ed. Cengage Learning.
- Segal, J., Smith, M., Robinson, L., and Segal, R. (2023). *Stress Symptoms, Signs, and Causes*. Santa Monica, Calif.: HELPGuide.org. Available at <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-symptoms-signs-and-causes.htm>
- U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2022). *National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries in 2021*. U.S. Department of Labor.
- Wheeler, C.M. (2007). *10 Simple Solutions to Stress: How to Tame Tension and Start Enjoying Your Life*. Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications Inc.

NDSU Extension does not endorse commercial products or companies even though reference may be made to tradenames, trademarks or service names. NDSU encourages you to use and share this content, but please do so under the conditions of our Creative Commons license. You may copy, distribute, transmit and adapt this work as long as you give full attribution, don't use the work for commercial purposes and share your resulting work similarly. For more information, visit [www.ag.ndsu.edu/agcomm/creative-commons](http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/agcomm/creative-commons).

For more information on this and other topics, see [www.ag.ndsu.edu](http://www.ag.ndsu.edu)

County commissions, North Dakota State University and U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. NDSU does not discriminate in its programs and activities on the basis of age, color, gender expression/identity, genetic information, marital status, national origin, participation in lawful off-campus activity, physical or mental disability, pregnancy, public assistance status, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, spousal relationship to current employee, or veteran status, as applicable. Direct inquiries to Vice Provost for Title IX/ADA Coordinator, Old Main 201, NDSU Main Campus, 701-231-7708, [ndsu.eoaa@ndsu.edu](mailto:ndsu.eoaa@ndsu.edu). This publication will be made available in alternative formats for people with disabilities upon request, 701-231-7881. 400-6-16, 500-7-17, 500-10-17, 500-2-18, 1M-9-18, 2.5M-10-19, 2.5M-8-21; 1M-3-23