

# What is Stress?

**Stress is anxiety, strain, or tension caused by a new burden or outside force, resulting in an internal struggle that often causes apprehension or uneasiness. Believe it or not, some stress is good!**

**GOOD stress** is that energizing feeling we get when excited about an event in our lives. Anticipation helps us get ready for a task, mentally and physically.

## ATTITUDE

**It's not the stress that matters.  
It's your reaction to it.**

**BAD stress** is called distress. Distress occurs when there are increased levels of stress for a long period of time. Stress can occur with no warning, building quickly, with one thing after another going wrong over weeks and months. Distress threatens our mental and physical health. The key to dealing with stress can lie in our acceptance skills that allow us to see the stressor as controllable or uncontrollable. **See other side for tools to control your acceptance of stress.**

**If you or someone you know needs help with stress management or would like to talk to someone confidentially, Nebraska has some great resources.**



Rural Response Hotline offers no-cost vouchers for confidential mental health services, also offering information about farm mediation clinics: **800-464-0258**

Farm Mediation is a way to resolve disputes involving farm loans, etc.: **402-471-4876**

Nebraska Legal Aid: **legalaidofnebraska.org**

Nebraska Resource and Referral System (NRRS) lists toll-free numbers, websites, and email contacts to help you connect faster to the services you are seeking. Visit **nrrs.ne.gov**.

(See other side for helpful tools)

Nebraska



**800-471-6425**  
**agrability.unl.edu**



# Tools to control our acceptance:

## Keep things in perspective. Ask yourself:

- ”Has this happened before?”
- “What did I learn last time this happened?”
- “Are my fears realistic?”
- “Next year, how important will this be?”
- “What else can I do?”

## Use helpful self-talk to let go of blame.

- “I did the best I could in that situation.”
- “Things are hard, so I will focus more.”
- “Someday we will laugh about this.”
- “This is a learning experience.”
- “Focus on controlling what is controllable.”

**Keep a positive attitude** to make it easier to live and work with others and find solutions.

**Be aware of the automatic assumptions** you make in certain situations. Don't always assume the worst of situations or people.

## Develop a stress-resistant personality:

- Set realistic goals and expectations.
- Prioritize time for leisure activities.
- Look at problems as challenges.
- Look for possibilities and get creative.
- Connect with a positive friend that is supportive.
- Share responsibilities and ask for help.
- Talk to someone you trust to help clear your head and focus on eliminating or reducing stress and anxiety.
- Consider seeking out a professional counselor or a confidential phone line program if you feel completely alone, overwhelmed and hopeless.

# Recognizing Symptoms of Stress:

## EMOTIONAL

Moodiness, frustration, anger, impatience, neglecting health conditions, difficulty relaxing, loneliness, hopelessness, low self esteem, anxiety or depression, thoughts of taking your own life

## PHYSICAL

Fatigue or lack of energy, headaches, stomach problems like diarrhea or constipation, chest pain, change in sexual interest, procrastination, frequently sick, impulse buying or gambling, nervousness, grinding teeth, forgetfulness or lacking focus, constant worrying, poor judgement

## BEHAVIORAL

Sleeping too much or too little, eating too much or too little, increased use of alcohol / drugs / cigarettes, sarcastic arguments, fewer enjoyed activities, withdrawn from others, nervous behaviors

# To Decrease Stress:

- Exercise Regularly
- Take time for yourself
- Eat healthy, real food
- Manage time and prepare
- Start a new hobby or pick up with a previous one
- Get enough sleep with consistent waking time
- Find something positive in each day
- Politely stand up for yourself
- Spend time with people you love
- Avoid negative people
- Use effective coping strategies
- Connect with sources of support
- Set realistic goals and expectations
- Shift from worrying to problem solving
- Take breaks during monotonous work
- Take 3 deep breaths
- Think of setbacks as challenges to conquer
- Look for humor in everything you do
- Balance your work and play
- Talk with a friend or counselor
- Do not be afraid to ask for help
- Unwind before bedtime with low lights

**There is no shame in reaching out!**  
**Do it for YOU.**



# STRESS



Try any two of these ideas each day for 2 to 3 weeks and you will be able to notice how much less stressed you have become.

*"Human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspects of their lives."*

-William James

## REFLECT

Think of any moment that made you feel comforted and content. Close your eyes and relive that moment.



© istock.com/ juanmonino

## THINK "B-R-A-I-N."

**B = Breathe.** Breathe deeply 5 times. Release the air slowly.

**R = Relax.** Tell yourself to relax, whether in your head or out loud. Notice areas of tension in your body, and try to release that tension.

**A = Ask** yourself what you need or want to feel. We usually ask why the other person is such a jerk or why we goofed up. Instead, ask yourself what you need to feel: calm, in control, at peace, and other comforting feelings.

**I = Imagine** feeling that way.

**N = Now**, after doing those four things, ask yourself, "How do I feel now?"

## SELF-TALK

Tell yourself you can get through it. You have come through rough times before. You can do it again. You have gotten through difficult situations.

## EXERCISE



© istock.com/fertnig

Physical activity can help to lessen cortisol in the body and protect against negative impacts of stress (Puterman et al., 2012; Hamer, 2012; Heaney et al., 2014). What physical activity might you be able to add in that you would enjoy? Even taking a short walk can improve our mood and heart health (McGuire & Ross, 2011; Hansen et al., 2001).

## REFERENCES

- Hamer, M. (2012). Psychosocial stress and cardiovascular disease risk: The role of physical activity. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 74(9), 896-903.
- Hansen, C.J., Stevens, L. C., & Coast, J. R. (2001). Exercise duration and mood state: How much is enough to feel better? *Health Psychology*, 20, 267-275.
- Heaney, J. L. J., Carroll, D., & Phillips, A. C. (2014). Physical activity, life events stress, cortisol, and DHEA: Preliminary findings that physical activity may buffer against the negative effects of stress. *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*, 22(4), 465-473.
- McGuire, K.A., & Ross, R. (2011). Incidental physical activity is positively associated with cardiorespiratory fitness. *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, 43, 2189-2194.
- Puterman, E., O'Donovan, A., Adler, N. E., Tomiyama, A. J., Kemeny, M., Wolkowitz, O. M., & Epel, E. (2012). Physical activity moderates stressor-induced rumination on cortisol reactivity. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 73(7):604-611.

**To learn more, visit [msue.msu.edu/managingfarmstress](https://msue.msu.edu/managingfarmstress).**

**MICHIGAN STATE**  
UNIVERSITY | **Extension**

MSU is an affirmative-action, equal-opportunity employer, committed to achieving excellence through a diverse workforce and inclusive culture that encourages all people to reach their full potential. Michigan State University Extension programs and materials are open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, gender identity, religion, age, height, weight, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, marital status, family status or veteran status. Issued in furtherance of MSU Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Jeffrey W. Dwyer, Director, MSU Extension, East Lansing, MI 48824. This information is for educational purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names does not imply endorsement by MSU Extension or bias against those not mentioned. 1P-12:2018-WEB-PA/MR WCAG 2.08



# HOW TO TALK WITH FARMERS UNDER STRESS

Farmers face multiple issues that can cause acute or chronic stress on a daily basis.

Problems with machinery, weather, labor, animal or plant diseases, commodity prices and economics, and even consumer opinions are all issues farmers have little control over. You can provide support and help to farmers who are going through times of extreme stress, but it's important to *be prepared*. By keeping an open eye for the warning signs of stress, practicing active listening and empathizing with farmers, you may be able to help them and their families avert a more serious situation.



© istock.com/LivingImages

## WARNING SIGNS OF STRESS

Warning signs people show when under stress vary by the individual. Consider their demeanor, words and behavior in the context of what is normal for them. Signs commonly observed in farmers under stress include:

- **Changes in emotions** – show little enthusiasm or energy for the future, anxiety, loss of spirit, depression, loss of humor
- **Changes in attitudes and cognitive skills** – become more frequently critical or agitated over small things, lack concentration, have trouble making decisions
- **Changes in behavior** – become quieter than usual, have trouble sleeping, do not join friends for coffee; miss meetings with farm staff, suppliers or the banker
- **Changes on the farm or ranch** – reduce care given to farm animals, machinery or fields, or themselves, increase in accidents

© istock.com/track5



Other potential warning signs might include any change in routine behavior or appearance, injury or prolonged illness or increased drinking (or drug use) (Fetsch, 2012). Farmers may also express negative thoughts about themselves (“I’m a failure,” “It’s impossible to make it in this business climate”) and even disclose they are considering including suicide to end the problems they face.

## WAYS TO HELP

If you believe that a farmer is going through a difficult time and showing signs of stress, you can help by taking the following actions:

### PRACTICE ACTIVE LISTENING

Just being there and listening are the first and most useful forms of help you can provide. There are several ways to listen, but in this case, it's important that you practice active listening. Active listening requires using your ears and eyes while encouraging the person you are interacting with to reveal more about their thoughts and feelings than they may at first be willing to share.

## WAYS TO HELP, CONTINUED

### Questions and statements that might be helpful to use when talking to a farmer under stress:

- I hear you saying \_\_\_\_ (repeat back the main concerns the farmer is expressing).
- This sounds like a lot to manage. How are you coping with this? (or, What are you doing to take care of yourself?)
- It sounds like the current situation is very difficult. What can I do to support you?
- These are some tough challenges. How can I help?
- Would it be helpful if we work together on an action plan for how to manage your concerns?
- Every situation is different. In a similar situation on another farm, they tried \_\_\_\_\_. What do you think about that?
- Are there other people who have been helpful or supportive when times have been tough in the past? Are any of those people able to help now?

## SHOW EMPATHY RATHER THAN SYMPATHY

Often, when we hear about someone else's difficult situation, we feel compassion or pity for them, and we let them know by offering our *sympathy*. In most cases, however, sympathy is not helpful for the person receiving it. When we make a sincere effort to understand what the other person is going through, think about the feelings they are experiencing, then offer constructive ideas for addressing the challenging situation or feelings they are experiencing, we are showing *empathy*. For example, if a

farmer tells you that he is worried, sad or ashamed because he needs to sell part of his farm, a *sympathetic* response would be: "I'm sorry, it's devastating that you have to sell the farm." That is not helpful to the farmer. A more helpful and *empathetic* approach would be to tell the farmer that: "Being in this type of situation is incredibly challenging, and every farm's situation is unique. But I know about a few other farmers that experienced somewhat similar challenges and were able to work their way through them by (taking some specific actions)." Then, share what those successful actions were (see box on right for specific examples of constructive actions farmers might take). Sharing the emotions that someone else is feeling, showing that you understand the challenging situation leading to them and helping them formulate a game plan to address the challenge is not easy. However, showing empathy rather than sympathy can go a long way to help farmers realize they are not facing the challenge alone. Developing a game plan that calls for specific, time-tested actions is a constructive alternative to self-defeating, self-destructive behavior.



© istock.com/shotbydave

### Examples of specific actions that could be suggested to farmers in times of farm-related causes of stress:

- Suggest working with the farmer in a way that involves your area of expertise.
- Contact your state Extension office to schedule a visit by farm or species-appropriate agribusiness program managers to develop a near- and long-term plan for addressing the specific business-related issues confronting the farm.
- Contact your local commodity-specific agribusiness resource center to find out if they have resources available that may be useful to the farmer.

**Don't end your meeting with a farmer who is under extreme stress without agreeing to some type of game plan or next action going forward, however simple. This helps him understand that there are constructive options available to him, and that there are people who both care and are qualified to provide useful assistance.**



## WAYS TO HELP, CONTINUED

### BE PREPARED TO DEAL WITH CONFLICT

Whether you are meeting with a stressed farmer for the specific purpose of helping him or her through a crisis or just doing your job, you might encounter conflict. People under stress may be prone to show angry, occasionally violent, behavior. If you work for a company that the farmer believes has been unfair or caused him harm, he might confront you solely on the basis of your association with that company. Think about, and have in mind, an approach and some specific, constructive goals for your conversation. In this process, take steps to preserve your relationship with the farmer, create and maintain safety, and work with the farmer to resolve the conflict as efficiently as possible (Wichtner-Zoia, Peterson, & Vandenberg, 2016). Be prepared to communicate through conflict using the following tips:

- Use active listening techniques.
- Describe the facts and impacts on yourself and others without judgment or blame.
- Explain the outcome needed.
- Ask often for the other person's views.
- Ask for clarification whenever in doubt.
- Restate: Is this what you said or meant?
- Paraphrase what you are hearing.
- Reframe the situation with a mutual purpose.
- Brainstorm to come up with an accurate assessment of what is needed; develop an action plan.
- Summarize what you mutually agree on.

After your meeting with a farmer under stress, make the commitment to stay in the dialogue. **Always** follow up soon after the meeting whether you said you would or not.

### STEPS TO TAKE IF YOU THINK A NEAR-TERM CRISIS IS LIKELY



© istock.com/SolStock

- Make time to listen actively to the farmer. Ask open-ended questions to find out what's going on at the farm. Show that you care. Don't promise things you can't deliver.
- Ask directly if they have thoughts of suicide. Offending the farmer is less a concern than the potentially fatal consequences of not acting. Do not promise to keep someone's thoughts or plans of suicide a secret.
- Take action. Call 911 if you think suicide is being seriously contemplated. Get help from family and friends. Do not leave the person alone.

**MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY** | Extension

To learn more, visit [msue.msu.edu/managingfarmstress](https://msue.msu.edu/managingfarmstress).

MSU is an affirmative-action, equal-opportunity employer, committed to achieving excellence through a diverse workforce and inclusive culture that encourages all people to reach their full potential. Michigan State University Extension programs and materials are open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, gender identity, religion, age, height, weight, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, marital status, family status or veteran status. Issued in furtherance of MSU Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Jeffrey W. Dwyer, Director, MSU Extension, East Lansing, MI 48824. This information is for educational purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names does not imply endorsement by MSU Extension or bias against those not mentioned. 1P-12:2018-WEB-PA/MR WCAG 2.08

### RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Places to contact at first signs of a crisis:

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- State Helpline: Most states have a toll-free 24-hour helpline; in Michigan, it's 734-624-8328.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Mental Health Services Locator: <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help>

### REFERENCES

Fetsch, R.J. (2012). Managing stress during tough times. Fort Collins, CO: Colorado State University Extension. <http://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/consumer/10255.pdf>

Wichtner-Zoia, B., Peterson, G., & Vandenberg, L. (2016). *Communicating through conflict*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Extension. [http://msue.anr.msu.edu/uploads/234/94068/2017\\_LSLI\\_Materials/Zoia\\_Communicating\\_Through\\_Conflict.pdf](http://msue.anr.msu.edu/uploads/234/94068/2017_LSLI_Materials/Zoia_Communicating_Through_Conflict.pdf)