



**Farm Safety Association**

## **DEALING WITH STRESS**

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Today's farmer faces pressures that often seem too much to handle. They range from financial problems, to bad weather, to simply too much work!

While you can not escape these pressures, there are ways of handling the stresses they cause. This is important, because too much stress can disrupt your family and do serious damage to your health. If it gets out of control, stress can make it hard to face day-to-day life, let alone the bigger problems.

### **What is stress?**

Stress is your reaction to something you consider a challenge or a threat. Some situations -- a car accident, for example -- are stressful for anyone. Others affect different people in different ways. For instance, haggling over a price is very stress-producing for some people, but enjoyable for others.

When you are under stress, your body begins to 'gear up' for action. This makes you stronger and more alert, at least in the short term. In cases of extreme danger, this extra strength can save your life. Other times, it can help you get through a job or help you adjust to a major change, like the arrival of a new child.

### **How stress can harm you**

Occasional stress is a natural part of life. However, when it gets out of control, it can become very harmful. Often, a build-up of stress involves a problem that stays with you for months, or even years. Financial pressure is a prime example. Other times, it might be something beyond your control, like a stretch of bad weather. Still another time, it could be a problem that just seems too big to handle.

In all of these cases, you can not deal with the cause of the stress, at least not quickly enough. As a result, the stress persists and begins to take its toll on:

**1 Your health** When you 'gear up' under stress, your body begins to do more of some things and less of others. For example, blood circulation increases, but digestion slows down or even stops.

Once the stress ends, your body goes to work to restore the balance. However, if stress returns too soon, your body will never have time to get back on an even keel. Eventually, this can lead to major health problems. Some, like heart disease and ulcers, can put you in hospital. Others (sleeplessness, headaches, poor digestion) are less acute, but still serious.

**2 Your relations with other people** Under stress, most people become so wrapped up in their own problems that they forget about everyone else. At the same time, they begin to take out their feelings on family and friends.

The result can be bad feelings between family members, along with the loss of friends. As well, stress quickly becomes a family problem, not just your own.

**3 Your efficiency in your work** For a short time, stress can make you a better, more efficient worker. However, over the long haul, it will gradually wear you down. You will become physically weaker and begin to tire easily. At the same time, you will find it difficult to concentrate and will begin to make poor management decisions.

Because of weariness and lack of concentration, you also will become much more accident-prone.

**4 More stress** Stress will have a snowballing effect, because all of the problems it causes -- health, family, and work -- will become new troubles in your life.

## **The first step in controlling stress**

To learn to cope with stress, begin by taking a good look at yourself. Be as honest and objective as possible!

**1** First, make a list of the things that cause you stress. Try to include any 'problem behind the problems'. For example, if you feel life is passing you by, that will colour the way you see everything else.

Also, make sure to include all of the little things, like doing business over the phone or hunting for the right size of bolt to fix an implement.

After making the list, expect things you missed to crop up from time to time. As they do, simply add them to the end of your list.

**2** Next, think about how serious a problem stress is for you. Do you feel under constant stress, or is it 'on and off'? If it is an occasional problem, is it something that hits several times a day, or just now and then?

Also, think about how stress has hurt you. Has it affected your health or work? Has it changed the way you treat other people?

**3** Finally, try to decide if you are under more stress now than you were a year or two ago. If you are, have the pressures changed, or just your attitude toward them?

## **Learn to handle stress**

Once you understand how stress is affecting you, you can begin to bring it under control. This will be a gradual process because, for the most part, it involves learning good habits and forgetting bad ones.

**1** Talking about your problems is one good way of relieving stress. Choose someone you feel you can be open and honest with, and tell him or her about your problem(s). If there is no one close you feel you can talk to, consider someone like a clergyman or family doctor.

**2** Learn to recognize when you are coming under stress. Everyone has a definite physical response, but it varies from person to person. In one, it might be tightening of the neck or shoulder muscles; in another, queasiness; in yet another, frowning.

When you learn what your own stress signals are, try to respond to them by telling yourself to relax. Concentrating on something other than the problem -- for example, taking a deep breath or deliberately relaxing your muscles -- will often help.

**3** Look at the list of things that cause you stress and think about how serious each of them really is. Also, pick out things that are basically beyond your control, such as prices and the weather. Then, when you feel under stress, evaluate the cause. Is it something minor, or something you have no ability to control? If so, is the stress actually causing you more harm than the problem itself?

**4** When dealing with a major problem, try to break it down into smaller parts. For example, if you have a barn that needs a lot of repairs, pick out one job and concentrate on getting it done. Once that task is completed, pick out another, and so on. Gradually, the problem as a whole will begin to seem more manageable.

**5** Schedule your time realistically. Don't try to squeeze more work into a day than you can actually complete. Also, leave room for the unexpected. Usually, there will be something (for example, an unexpected visitor) that will hold up your work.

**6** Take occasional short breaks from your work. A person who works without breaks becomes steadily less effective during the course of the day. By contrast, a few minutes off will refresh you and give you a new start at the job.

**7** Learn how to relax. One way is to practice doing certain things slowly (eating or walking, for example). Another is to just sit back in a chair and concentrate on relaxing your muscles. If you find this difficult, try alternately tensing and relaxing, until you become familiar with the difference.

**8** Develop other interests that will help you forget about your problems for a while. Sports work for some people, reading, exercising or socializing for others.

**9** Consider outside help, such as counselling or

group 'clinics'. While this is a more public approach to your problems, it has the advantage of input from other people. Often, they can point out things you might never see for yourself.

### **The focus is control**

Whatever you do, there is no way to completely

eliminate stress. Instead, your goal should be to limit the amount of stress and to keep it under control. This requires a definite personal commitment, but the rewards should prove well worthwhile!

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