



# Agricultural Producers & STRESS

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## **The Importance of a Healthy Attitude**

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The image of the solid and steady agricultural producer is so familiar that it may even be considered a symbol of the West. One animal is sick, and disease may be spreading; cattle prices are falling just as it is time to ship; a storm front is moving toward the property—but this producer can handle it. It is “just part of the agricultural way of life.”

Though producers may suspect this level of stoicism in the face of difficulty is not quite healthy, there is also the very human tendency to want to maintain exactly this type of image. Most ranchers and farmers would like to handle these situations themselves. And maybe they'd even like their friends and neighbors to observe them doing so!

But what happens when life's circumstances interfere with the image presented to the rest of the world? Well, an ag producer may work to the point of collapse vaccinating the herd, kick the tires of the cattle truck, or beat the hell out of a weather gauge. Or he or she might try out some strategies for stress management.

Much of the stress producers experience can come from within. Thoughts actually affect the physical condition of the human body. If it is true that thinking of an accident that might happen while your son or daughter is haying causes your blood pressure to rise, think about the stress-reducing effect that positive thoughts will have on your physical body.

### **Gaining control through healthy attitude**

It is often the perception of an inability to control events that makes them stressful. In other words, situations in which you perceive yourself as helpless to control will be more stressful than those in which you believe you have some



control. The following ideas help place those stressful events in the proper perspective and provide a sense of control.

**Good worrier.** Some ranchers and farmers feel that they must worry. If you are one of those people, try to be a “good worrier.” Instead of saying, “If only I had sold before,” or “If only I had fed them out,” turn the worrying into problem solving. Ask yourself, “If this happens again, how will I handle it,” or “What can I do to prevent this kind of problem from happening in the future?”

**Disaster role play.** A rancher who was afraid that he might die of a heart attack was asked to try as hard as possible to make his heart beat faster and die of a heart attack—right on the spot. He was to try it each time his fear of the heart attack occurred. As he thought about it and started laughing, humor helped him put his problem and himself in perspective.

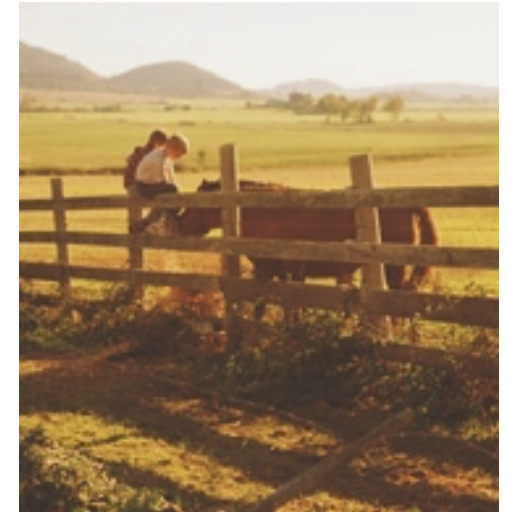
**Mind storming.** This is just like group brainstorming, but you do it yourself. Have you ever sat at a boring meeting and wondered, “What am I doing here?” Well, instead of

staying miserable, try some “mind” storming. Ask yourself, “How would I make this meeting more interesting?” Or you might want to take a “mind” vacation to a place you enjoy—a mountain meadow, a sunny beach, or a cabin by the lake.

**Reframing.** This strategy puts overly exaggerated or negative thoughts back in order. Reframing can help to replace stressed or irrational thoughts with more reasoned and rational responses. If the hay is lost in the field, instead of saying, “Now we’ll never have enough to last the winter,” the reply is “It’ll grow back.” If the tire blows on the truck, “I’m glad it happened here instead of up ahead on the hill.” In other words: “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.” –Reinhold Niebuhr.

*These next ideas use thinking techniques to gain control.*

**Drawing mental pictures.** Use your mind constructively by picturing a pleasant, favorite object (an elk with its rack covered in velvet is a good example.) Gently outline the object in your mind, picking out special details.



If your mind wanders, slowly bring it back. Practice this daily, for three minutes at a time. It works especially well in times of high stress or when it might be advisable to postpone a hasty or ill-advised reaction to a stressful event.

**Golden key.** Developed by philosopher Emmet Fox, the golden key unlocks the good in a person or situation, even if it may initially be hard to find. For example, your stress level may rise while riding a section of fence that neighbors have failed to maintain. “Golden key” this situation by seeing the good—Fox would say the presence of God—in the persons involved. Focus on the idea that





though you may not like your neighbors' behavior, they are Divine creations, just as you and your family are.

**Gratitude list.** This can be a difficult strategy because it requires such a radical shift from a stressed state of mind. Making your thoughts work for you, however, requires just such a change. For five minutes, take your mind off your stressors, and focus on the things in life for which you are grateful. Some things that many people are grateful for include spouses or partners, children and family, the land, and certain activities that they are able to enjoy since they've chosen to live in a rural area.

**Think of yourself less.** One way to describe a productive state of mind is to say that you don't think less of yourself, but think of yourself less. Rather than focusing on your own stressors, stop for a moment and consider the needs of another person, preferably

someone you care about. Taking a five-minute break from your own problems to consider one small action that might make the person you care about smile will likely relieve some stress and tension.

### **Practice and more practice**

Some may think that these techniques don't make any sense. Remember, though, that one aspect of controlling stress is to think differently. It's also important to keep practicing these activities and to not give up. Try them in a variety of situations. Keep trying them until you find one or more methods that work and until these methods feel natural. What have you got to lose—except stress?

### **More to come**

Sometimes, each individual person is the source of his or her own stress. By practicing a healthy attitude, you can *remove* some of the stress in your life.

However, there are times when attitude is not enough. See other articles in the "Agricultural Producers and Stress" publication series ("Learning to Relax," "Eating and Activity for Health and Pleasure," "Finding Your Team of Experts," and "When Do You Need a Counselor?") for ideas and techniques for *managing* stress.

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