

Agricultural Producers & STRESS

Identifying Stress on the Ranch and Farm

by Randy R. Weigel, Extension Specialist, Cooperative Extension Service

Rushing to town to buy spare parts, watching hay supplies dwindle during an unusually cold winter, helping a heifer live through a complicated birth—these images of agricultural life can be as familiar to producers as those of joyful times on the family land.

That said, it may be hard to imagine the need for a resource that helps to identify and control stress on the ranch or farm. For many agricultural producers, however, these and other situations are so much a part of routine living that they are not readily identified as stressful.

On the other hand, ag producers may inwardly suspect that these types of events are indeed stressors. But since these circumstances have been faced and overcome by previous generations, the expectation is that they should simply be “handled.” Above all, the stress should not show in the demeanor of a successful producer.

Simply masking the effects of stress is not always the best choice, though. Rather, it is healthy to identify stress and to find constructive ways to deal with it. This task may seem daunting or time-consuming at first, but in the long run it is comforting to know that there are strategies available.

The Agricultural Producers and Stress publication series begins with an introduction to the topic of stress that defines the concept and identifies common causes. The articles then present a holistic view of techniques for stress management, including ways to maintain a healthy attitude, relaxation ideas, healthy eating and activity strategies, and suggestions for using the support of others.

UNIVERSITY
OF WYOMING



What is stress?

Stress is the body's physical and psychological response to anything perceived as overwhelming. In other words, stress can be described as a result of life's demands and the perception (accurate or inaccurate) that you lack the resources to meet them.

When stressed, the body creates extra energy to protect itself. If not used, this energy surplus creates an imbalance within your system. Somehow the energy must be channeled in ways that allow you to regain balance.

Stress is a natural part of life. Each person thrives on certain amounts, but too much or too little stress will limit effectiveness. The idea is to find your optimal level of stress—the balance at which you are most motivated.

Why be concerned about stress?

Excessive stress in life interferes with interpersonal relationships at home, on the job, and in social settings. Stress can waste your vitality and deplete personal energy resources that could be used for enjoyment. You can

become negatively influenced in your attitudes and feelings about yourself more easily.

Stress can also interfere with the body's physical functioning and processes. High blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and heart disease have been linked to stress factors. Other stress-related ailments include ulcers, allergies, asthma, and migraine headaches.

In fact, current research indicates that stress is linked to the six leading causes of death in this country—heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, and suicide. Unmanaged stress is increasingly characteristic of many Americans today, and ag producers are not exempt.

Causes of stress

Everyone differs in terms of what is stressful or potentially stressful. What for one rancher or farmer might seem to be a catastrophic event may be a minor setback for another. There are, however, categories of stressors that are common to most people.

Fears cause stress. Some physical fears that can cause stress are dangerous



machinery, exposure to toxic chemicals or to extreme environmental conditions, and contact with diseased livestock. Psychological fears associated with stress include failure, not being able to get the crops in, inability to manage debts, and children giving up the agricultural way of life.

Uncertainty causes stress. Since the first domestic animal raised and the first seed sown, agricultural production has involved uncertainty. You make logical and informed predictions, but you just won't know what the market price will be in January until January. It is discomfoting not to know what is going to happen, particularly if the situation is likely to be impeded by government policies,



weather, interest rates, or accidents. Uncertainty may cause feelings of being out of control, which often cause more stress.

Attitudes cause stress. A positive or negative attitude influences a person's reaction to stressful situations. For example, if you feel that ranching or farming is worthwhile, you may see some of the problems you encounter as challenges. Seen as pluses, the problems or potential problems become motivators. However, if you resent your situation or feel "stuck" on the ranch or farm, similar experiences create stress—stress that frustrates instead of motivating you.

Change causes stress. All change produces stress, even change that is positive. Marriage is a positive change that results in a, sometimes, stressful period of adjustment. A vacation may also be stressful; arrangements must be made for the trip and for farm

chores, and there can be a tendency to plan too many activities.

Negative changes are not as difficult to recognize as stress producing. These are situations you would prefer to avoid, such as personal or family illness or injury, economic recession causing financial crisis, or loss of a valuable animal.

Whether positive or negative, change demands adjustment to the particular situation. Developmental changes that you are able to plan for—pregnancy and birth, children growing up, the aging process—may still be stressful even though they are anticipated.

Stress as part of life

Whatever the current stressors in your life may be, try to remember that you are not unique. Though what triggers stress varies from person to person, the fact of stress as a normal part of life is something that is common to all.



Revised and adapted from: Iowa State University. Cooperative Extension Service. *Stress on the Farm: Stress Management for the Health of It*. Pm-1172a. Ames: Iowa State Cooperative Extension Service, 1984.

References:

American Psychological Association. *APA Homepage*. www.apa.org. 30 January 2001.

Editor: Hattie Penny, College of Agriculture, Office of Communications and Technology
Graphic Designer: Tana Stith, College of Agriculture, Office of Communications and Technology

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Glen Whipple, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming 82071.

Persons seeking admission, employment, or access to programs of the University of Wyoming shall be considered without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, age, political belief, veteran status, sexual orientation, and marital or familial status. Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication or program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact their local UW CES Office. To file a complaint, write the UW Employment Practices/Affirmative Action Office, University of Wyoming, P.O. Box 3434, Laramie, Wyoming 82071-3434.