

helping farmers handle stress

Randy R. Weigel

Stress. That word has become engrained in our daily language. It's hard to pick up a magazine or newspaper without finding an article about it. With the increased popularity of stress has come more and more stress management workshops. But, traditionally, these workshops have been conducted in the organizational setting for mid-management executives, government agencies, employees of large companies. Very seldom have they dealt with another potentially high stress occupation—farm owners.

Comparison of Stressors

This article builds a case for considering the uniqueness of farm owners in designing stress management programs. Let's first look at Table 1, a comparison between farm owners and mid-level executives of selected stressors (those events, situations, or relationships that precipitate a stress response).

Table 1. Comparison of selected stressors of two occupation types.

Farm owners	Mid-level executives
Machinery breakdown	Ineffective supervisor performance
Disease outbreak	Change in policy or procedure
High debt load	Poor relationships with supervisor/ subordinate
Physical illness at critical time	Major reorganization
Loss of help when needed	Work interrupted by new priority
Weather-caused delays	Transferred against will
Government regulations	Lack of job security
Heavy work load	No participation in decisions
Commodity uncertainty	Office politics
Father-son operating agreement	Under or over promotion
Competition for land	Role ambiguity
Equipment or facility purchase	Difficulty delegating authority

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Differences

Organization

The single most important factor that separates the executive from farm owner is that the executive operates within an organization. The farmer *is* the organization. When a mid-level executive makes a faulty decision, the probability is that it won't cause a breakup of the organization. The farm owner, on the other hand, often faces decisions that will make or break the entire operation.

Uniqueness

Many business organizations are quite similar in structure, policies, and procedures so the stress management process can be almost identical. The farming community, however, is marked by its uniqueness.

In Iowa, as in other states, there's variety in crops grown and livestock raised, size and sophistication of operation, years farming, and seasonal stressors. In central Iowa, where field crops predominate, planting and harvesting are extremely high stress periods. Once the corn is harvested, things return to normal and marketing becomes a concern. But in northeast Iowa, where dairy production is concentrated, winter can be a high stress period. This farm operator must fight cold, frozen pipes, snow drifts, and isolation to keep the farm open and production going.

Accessibility

Several large organizations provide their employees the opportunity to reduce stress through exercise rooms, bio-feedback training, or meditation instruction. If an accident or illness occurs to an employee, the organization is able to absorb the loss.

Most farmers don't have those opportunities for stress reduction. If an accident does occur, it's up to the family, neighbors, or friends to cover the loss. Sometimes it's not covered.

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Attitude Change

I've heard trainers in stress management suggest that if stress becomes too much or can't be changed, a different line of work might be in order. But for farm owners, there are many stressors that can't be changed nor are they necessarily negative. Instead of suggesting a new job for the

overstressed farmer, it might make more sense to develop a change in attitude toward the stressor. "Reframing" is a technique one farmer uses successfully. If the hay is lost in the field, the reply is, "It'll always grow back."

For those farm owners who feel they must worry, I suggest that they at least become "good worriers." Instead of saying, "If only I had sold before, or, If only I had enough help," turn the worrying into problem solving. "If this happens again, how will I handle it, or, What can I do to prevent this kind of problem?"

Stress Management Training

While most approaches to stress management training focus on one basic technique, usually relaxation, I think it's important to cover a variety of techniques and encourage farm owners to develop stress management plans suited to their own situations and preferences.

Characteristics

People who are effective stress managers seem to have these characteristics:

1. Self-awareness: know strengths, skills, weaknesses—practice time management, goal setting.
2. Variety of reactions: use many techniques depending on situation to stress—problem solving, assertiveness, relaxation, exercise.
3. Varied interests: draw on many sources for personal satisfaction—hobbies, recreation.
4. Active and productive: make things happen. Practice stress management when stressed, not just when things go well.
5. Use support systems: develop relationships with others to help reestablish competence in stress periods.¹

Designing Workshops

Consider the following points in planning stress management workshops for farmers.

Plan a multifaceted approach. Just as effective stress managers use a variety of coping techniques, so too should be our teaching approach. Emphasize problem solving, nutrition, personal management, relaxation, exercise, and leisure activities. We tend to overlook the value of leisure activities in stress management, especially for male farmers. The practice or awareness of different leisure/recreation activities as a change of pace should fit somewhere into the stress management process.

Become a "referral agent" support system. An important support for stress management is a person who can connect

someone with resources in the community through his/her knowledge of people and organizations. He/she can refer one to those places where needed help can be obtained. Extension agents can provide this function for the farm audience and it gives a farm owner more information to make important decisions.

Don't overlook physical fitness for farm owners. I'm reminded of a farmer who said, "I don't need to exercise, I'm always on the go." But the activities consisted of operating the milking parlor, driving to a livestock sale, driving the combine in the field, taking a load of grain to the elevator, hauling feed to livestock. As farming becomes more sophisticated and mechanized, the opportunities for physical exertion decrease. A study of coronary heart disease among farmers found those farm owners who did none of their own physical work had six to seven times higher incidence of heart attacks than those who did all the physical work.²

Special stressors require special responses. Farm owners face a number of almost crisis-type situations—disease outbreak, severe storm damage, loss of a valuable animal. The effect of sudden, severe stress can be reduced when the surprise element is removed. Farm owners should be helped to look at potential crisis situations and possible coping strategies. In this way, they can prepare for stress, be in control, and more able to weather that difficult time should it occur.

Summary

Farm owners provide a special challenge to stress management. There are as many potential stress events as there are types of farm operations. We need to build on the skills and strengths that the owners already possess, and may not even be aware of, and avoid placing them in a certain framework. If we can fill the key ingredient to effective stress management programs—understanding the audience—we can successfully help farmers manage stress.

Footnotes

1. John D. Adams, "Improving Stress Management," *Social Change*, VIII (1978), 1-12.
2. J. R. Donough and others, "Coronary Heart Disease Among Negroes and Whites in Evans County, Georgia," *Journal of Chronic Disorders*, XVIII (1965), 443-68.