

# stress in the farm family

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Nearly every person is touched in some way by the technical achievements of modern society. Yesterday we tried a better razor blade; today we board a supersonic jet; tomorrow we will plug into a sophisticated new computer. We're aware of this change, yet do we understand the full impact of such change on the structure of our lives?

As we assimilate each new phenomenon, we're also rearranging the patterns of our lives in subtle ways. What happens when we're required to change too rapidly? What are the consequences of accepting change that violates a personal value system?

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These are important questions, especially for Extension agents who serve as catalysts for the technological and economic advancement of the farm family enterprise. While understanding the economic necessity of incorporating new ideas into an agricultural operation, the human element, which is so characteristic of a family agribusiness, must also be assessed when change is advocated.

## **Farm Family Project**

Beginning in 1967, investigators at Cornell University conducted biennial interviews with each member of 20

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representative New York State farm families on topics related to decision making, individual and family goals, family and farm growth, and change and adjustment over time.<sup>1</sup> We tried to identify problems experienced by farm families by reviewing these interviews for evidence of psychological stress. For our purposes, stress was defined as conflict that dysfunctionally affects family relationships, the ability to achieve family goals, or the ability to perform farm tasks.

After isolating the most important sources of conflict, a panel of raters assessed each family in terms of incidence and type of stress. In our sample, 30% of the families reported marital stress, 30% manifested stress relating to intergenerational transfer of the farm, 20% of the families experienced stress relating to sibling rivalry. In addition, 35% of the farm wives reported stress relating to their farm role. In 75% of the families studied, at least 1 stress was identified.

The nature of the stresses reported in each of the areas of marriage, wife's role, intergenerational transfer, and sibling rivalry are briefly reviewed here. Many of the potential sources of stress are related to farming as a lifestyle and occupation and, thus, distinguish farm from nonfarm families. The unique characteristics associated with farm lifestyle have been previously documented and include closeness to the land, the requirement for all family members to work together, multigenerational involvement, and the advantages of individual or family entrepreneurship.<sup>2</sup>

## **Different Stresses**

### *Role Incongruence*

Congruence arises when husband and wife are in relative agreement about the role the wife will play in the farm business and when actual role performance is compatible with those expectations. Two areas in which role incongruence, and resultant stress, were observed were: (1) the marital relationship and (2) the wife's perception of her role.

In six (30%) of the families with observed marital stress, two ended in divorce while the other four families experienced serious conflicts over the nature and extent of the wife's involvement in the farm business. Inability of the husband and wife to arrive at a mutually satisfactory role definition for the wife appears to be a major source of marital stress in farm families.

Wives in our study reported numerous problems relating to their farm roles, including worry over debts, budgeting problems, increased housework and meal preparation, and conflicts between mothering and farm work. Such problems were categorized as wife's role stress because the conflict

appeared to be experienced primarily by the wife. As defined, wife's role stress was observed in 35% of the farm families.

Although only one family in the study exhibited evidence of both marital stress and wife's role stress, suggesting that they may be exclusive, it's acknowledged that the two types of stress could be related—one acting as a precursor for the other.

*Intergenerational Transfer*

Traditional to the farm family has been the transfer of business from one generation to the next. The demand for intergenerational continuity has provided an additional source of stress for the families. Ten families had the responsibility of farm transfer during the period under study. Of these 10 families, 6 experienced stress related to the task.

While problems with farm transfer were encountered in some of the other families, they weren't serious enough to meet our criteria of being stressful. The "non-stress" families avoided problems by planning ahead, being flexible about each other's needs, and sharing and discussing mutual concerns, goals, and expectations about continuity.

*Sibling Rivalry*

Sibling rivalry, usually destructive competition between brothers close in age, was present in 20% of the families. While in these families brothers had a large involvement with the farm business and shared a competitive attitude, other families with siblings close in age avoided this problem by allocating tasks equitably and encouraging the children to work together.

**Stresses Per Family**

While the statistics reported reflect incidence of various types of stress, all families didn't experience an equal number of them. Table 1 reports the percentage of families with no, one, two, or three stresses.

**Table 1. Stresses per family.**

Number of stresses	Percent of families (n=20)
0	25%
1	45
2	20
3	10

**Mediating Factors**

In addition to discovering the frequency of experienced stress, the presence or absence of stress was related to family and farm characteristics such as farm style, stage in the

developmental cycle, decision-making style, and communication style. Families with open communication, shared decision making, and a long-range planning perspective were able to avoid stress more often than those with poor communication, an authoritarian decision-making style, and short-sighted planning.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of these mediating factors suggests new ways in which Extension agents can work with farm families to achieve economic and production goals. Efforts to improve family communication, share decision-making activities, and plan realistically for the future will both help families avoid stress and enable them to make better use of the technical and economic information that agents bring to clients.

An understanding of the interaction of technological *advancements with the personal style and values of farm family members may help agents to circumvent some of the conflict and resulting stress that might be experienced when changes are advocated.* A consideration of these human or psychological factors may also help agents to assess whether families are capable of utilizing and adapting to technological innovations.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusions

The Extension agent is an important element in the transfer of technology to the farmer. Not only does the agent disseminate information, but he/she also acts as a counselor for the farmer when important decisions must be made. An examination of the feelings of the family toward changes in management practice, purchase of equipment, or other alterations in the farm operation may have important ramifications in the ultimate effectiveness of the decision.

If comprehensive counseling isn't always possible, the agent might start by incorporating a number of questions into discussions with the farmer: How would your family react to this decision? If your wife and children anticipate a change in responsibilities, how do they feel about this change? How do you and your family feel about an increase in debt load? A critical look at the emotional dimension of an important change might alert the Extension agent to potential conflict in the farm family system. A more compatible alternative could then be proposed.

While agents can't eliminate the psychological stress that's experienced by many farm families, an understanding of the effects of technology on the lives of family members may help to reduce potential anxiety and, consequently, preserve a more functional agricultural unit.

**Footnotes**

1. Gould P. Colman, "Farm Family Documentation Project: Ten-Year Report," *Documentation Newsletter* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Spring, 1977), pp. 1-4.
2. Harold R. Capener and Alan D. Berkowitz, "Farm Families: Variations in Attitude, Style, and Structure," *New York's Food and Life Sciences Quarterly*, IX (1976), 9-11.
3. Dalva E. Hedlund and Alan D. Berkowitz, "A Developmental Approach to Social Psychological Stress in Farm Families" (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, Department of Education, 1978).
4. Alan Berkowitz and Harold R. Capener, "The Human Dimension of Family Farming," *New York's Food and Life Sciences Quarterly*, XI (1978), 16-19.