Farm Stress

The Health of a Farm Family

Unpredictable weather, falling net farm income, spotty health care services and a host of other factors can make for incredible stress on farms and in rural communities. Many of the factors causing sleepless nights are beyond an individual’s control, yet there are often ways to manage the stress, according to a North Dakota State University family science specialist Sean Brotherson, a speaker at a recent K-State Research and Extension workshop in Manhattan.

“People will power through even if they don’t feel well,” said Brotherson. There’s a cost to that. You cannot put your health or relationships on the back end for long without consequences. The most important asset of any agricultural operation is the health and wellness of the farm operator.

Farming and ranching ranks in the top 10 of the most stressful occupations. That stress can lead to depression, anger, health concerns, failed marriages, loss of friendships or relationships with family members, alcohol or substance abuse or worse.

“When we talk about farm safety, we often talk about accident prevention but we tend to neglect to talk about mental and emotional health,” Brotherson said, adding that’s a mistake.

Current obvious causes of stress have been drought conditions this year, expectations that crop prices will continue to stay relatively low, the potential for trade disruptions linked to tariffs, and uptick in interest rates.

The situation is taking a toll. Some feel extra pressure because their farm has been in the family for generations and they don’t want to be the one to lose it.

“Stress signals are like the warning lights blinking on your truck’s dashboard,” Brotherson said.

“We often want to ignore them but at some point there is a price to pay—a heart attack, broken relationships, depression or worse. You maintain your car to keep it running properly. You have to maintain your health, too.”

We know that stress in a family affects each member of the household, not just the farmer themselves.

What can you do to help cope with your stress level. You need to learn how to unwind by listening to music sometimes, rather than farm news, political issues, or other news. Try taking a walk and include others in the family to walk with you. Make time to watch a movie with your family, better yet, choose one night a week to have a movie night or game night. Involve the whole family! If this can work for you, try to plan regular social nights with friends. DO NOT just keep to yourself.

Other General Suggestions:

- Exercise at least 20 minutes a day, Walk, bicycle or swim
- Get at least seven to eight hours of sleep
- Take time every day to reflect on good things in your life.
- Write your thoughts in a journal.
- Spend 30 minutes doing something with your hands. (Not working on equipment)
- Learn something new or restart a hobby or activity that you once enjoyed.
- Reach out to someone for support or help—a friend, a counselor, a loved one.
- Volunteer to help with a cause that’s important to you.
- Do random acts of kindness.