



Running on Empty

Farm stress can be crippling to you and your operation.

by **Katie Maupin Miller**

Most farmers and ranchers will not skip the yearly service on their most valuable equipment before taking it to the field. Yet, farmers and ranchers are often left running on empty, pushing their health to the back burner. But, as farm stress experts will tell you, health — mental and physical — is an essential asset to farm success, and it is often at odds with the chronic stress and demands of the industry.

This year, the pandemic has shaken markets and increased uncertainty around the country, adding to an already hefty list of everyday stressors farmers and ranchers face. Volatile markets, weather, trade wars, natural disasters, labor shortages, an increasing sense of isolation, the cost of health insurance and animal health are just a few examples named by experts. According to a national poll sponsored by the American Farm Bureau (AFB) Federation, 91% of farmers and farmworkers said financial issues impacted their mental health, followed by 88% responding

farm or business problems and 87% citing the fear of losing their farm.

According to Meg Moynihan, senior advisor with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, most of these pressures are chronic, or long-lasting stressors. Sean Brotherson, North Dakota State University professor and Extension family science specialist, says many of these pressures are thought to be outside farmers' and ranchers' control.

"When people are dealing with factors they perceive beyond their control, they often feel these are challenges beyond their resolution," he says. "However, the good news is that your health is something you can exercise tremendous control over regarding the choices you make and the way you respond to existing stressors in your life. That makes you feel in control and more able to respond to those stressors."

The first step in controlling health is noticing when it is affected by such pressures and chronic stress. As Brotherson explains,

there are often signs and signals these stressors are weighing down you or someone close to you.

"I like to use the analogy that signals of stress in your life are like the warning signals on the dashboard of your vehicle. You might not know exactly what the concern is when your check engine light comes on, but it is important to slow down and address these concerns," he says. "Health is what you rely on to be resilient in times of higher stress. Just like you rely on your equipment during a key time. The same is true for your health — you really rely on your physical and mental health during high-stress times during your life."

Signals of stress

Frequently, those struggling with the pressure of farm stress do not realize the impact the stressors have on their lives. But, those close to them — friends, family, coworkers, pastors and neighbors — might notice signals of farm stress. Such signs, according to *NYFarmNet.org*, include:

- Changes in routine or social activities
- Decline in care of domestic animals
- Increase in illness or chronic conditions
- Increase in farm accidents
- Decline in appearance of the farmstead
- Decreased interest in activities or events

Some often-used examples by farm stress experts are a suddenly absent coffeeshop regular, an empty pew at church or a once well-kept pasture falling into disarray. While these do not always indicate individuals are struggling with their mental health, these signs could suggest they are

grappling with something — physical health, mental health, finances, relationship problems, etc. So, if you notice these stress signals in someone, you should reach out.

Reaching out

The mere thought of asking fellow farmers or ranchers if they are doing OK can be very intimidating. People often worry they will say the wrong thing, do not know what to say or are scared mentioning a potential stressor will make the situation worse.

"Someone always is concerned they're going to say the wrong thing," says John Shutske, University of Wisconsin-Madison professor and Extension specialist. "Ask open-ended questions that show you care and understand. Show that you're there, available and that you're there to listen."

The AFB's Farm State of Mind website (FarmStateOfMind.org) offers several ways to start these conversations, including:

- Acknowledge what they're going through.
- Remind them of something they've said and express interest.
- Share a habit you've seen change.
- Don't wait for them to ask.
- If they're willing to reach out, encourage them.

When you are visiting with people close to you, it is most important to listen and to let them know you are there for them. Remember, their problems are not your problems, so they might want to seek different solutions than you would. Still, always offer help, even if it is as simple as babysitting their children while they meet with a financial advisor or counselor, Moynihan says. Most importantly, she reminds what you



learned in confidence should not be shared in the local coffee shop.

If you believe someone may be considering self-harm, Ray Atkinson, AFB Federation director of communications, encourages action. In most suicide cases, many victims mentioned harming themselves or exhibited several stress signals beforehand.

“The misconception is if someone is considering harming themselves, you might think asking them will push them over the edge. But just the opposite is true; they may realize someone really cares about them since they asked that,” he says. “Have the suicide hotline number on your phone...connect people to crisis resources and stay with them to keep them safe.”

While suicide and mental health are often taboo and scary subjects, Atkinson says the research gives us hope in avoiding such farm stress crises. For those struggling, simply knowing people care is like a lifeline in a high sea.

“Farmers as a whole are strong. To be good at farming, you need to be strong, resilient, and really stoic,” says Atkinson. “But, those are also qualities that make it really hard for people to ask for help.”

While it may be hard to ask for help, there are some steps farmers and ranchers can take to control their health and to push back against the pressures in their day-to-day life.

Self-maintenance

The idea of self-care is often met with scoffs in the agricultural community, as farmers and ranchers picture meditation as sitting cross-legged in yoga pants. But, self-care is often taking a small amount of time for yourself to check in, to plan and

to care for your health. It can take many forms.

Walking in nature, listing your priorities for the day, talking to a friend, pastor or counselor, gratitude, and taking several five-minute breaks through long workdays are all great ways to regroup and to recharge, according to experts. Being well fueled and well rested is also imperative, according to Shutske.

“You would never dream of going out into an expensive piece of machinery in the field and putting low-grade fuel in there, yet that is exactly what we do to our bodies. We eat a lot of sugar. We don’t eat breakfast. Fueling the machine is really, really important. Our brain is really small, but it uses 25% of the calories we consume,” he says. “Another big one is sleep. People take great pride in the fact that their first child was able to

sleep through the night. But, as we get older, we look at getting by on as few hours as possible almost as a badge of honor.”

Perhaps most important to self-care are regular check-ups with your primary care physician. Since mental and physical health are often intertwined, a physician can help farmers and ranchers sort through their symptoms. Physicians can discover if exhaustion is related to depression or sleep apnea and if heart palpitations stem from anxiety or a cardiac event.

Help is on the way

There is help available, and it can come in several forms — family, friends, neighbors, pastors, counselors, physicians, etc. For Atkinson, this is the most crucial message in the conversation surrounding health on the farm.

“One of the things that we really want to talk about is how they help each other out. People drop what they’re doing and go help their neighbors. We want to get people thinking in that same mindset. They will look out for their friend,” he says.

There are countless resources available for farmers and ranchers and those close to them addressing farm stress and health. Many are available through your local Extension office. We have gathered several (see sidebar), and Farm Credit, the AFB Federation, and the National Farmers Union have partnered together for free online rural-resilience training.

“I want people to know they are not alone,” Moynihan concludes. “They are not alone in the fact that they may be struggling; they’re not alone and struggling all by themselves.” **HW**

Physical and mental health resources

There are several resources available through your local Extension office and state department of agriculture regarding farm stress and health. Below is a list of resources from the American Farm Bureau Federation’s Farm State of Mind website, FarmStateOfMind.org, that are helpful to those struggling with their physical and mental health.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: Call 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)

Free and confidential, you’ll be connected to a skilled, trained counselor in your area.

Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741

The crisis text line provides free support 24 hours a day.

Avera Health Farm and Rural Stress Hotline: Call 800-691-4336

Avera’s hotline will connect you with a skilled, compassionate mental health professional who can help you navigate whatever you’re experiencing — such as symptoms or signs of anxiety or depression.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): Call 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

SAMHSA offers a number of valuable resources including treatment locators, SAMHSA’s National Helpline and other important information.

Free Rural-Resilience Training for Farm Bureau members: canr.msu.edu/managing_farm_stress/rural-resiliency-online-course-afbf

Free Rural-Resilience Training for non-members: OpenCoursesStore.d2l.com/product?catalog=msu_urmfs_2020

TransFARMation: A radio and podcast series featuring farmers’ own stories of coping with adversity, from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and the Red River Farm Network.

Resilient Farms, Families, Businesses & Communities: Responding to Stress, FYI.Extension.wisc.edu/farmstress/

University of Wisconsin – Madison Extension helps farmers, families, businesses and communities remain resilient by learning how to manage stress. **HW**