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Managing Farm Business and Family Stress

If you are part of a business, stress has always been part of your job description. While a certain amount of stress is unavoidable and usually manageable, too much stress can hurt both physical and mental health. Recognizing stress overload early in yourself or your business associates can help you take steps to minimize its harmful effects.

Because your business is unique, the way you experience and react to stress differs from the way your neighbors experience stress. Even if your business can withstand major financial fluctuations, you and your co-workers may still have to adjust expectations, dreams, and goals to fit new realities.

Symptoms of Stress

It helps to be aware of symptoms of stress in yourself or a co-worker. You might notice an increase in physical signs such as headaches, lingering fatigue, disrupted sleep patterns, and more frequent illness.

Although you might think a co-worker may just has a problem getting along with people, his or her frequent anger and irritability could be emotional symptoms of excessive stress. Inability to relax, discouragement, and a sense of futility also commonly result from prolonged stress.

It's important to separate the original problems or causes of stress from the resulting symptoms. Over time, stress can result in low productivity, increased use of drugs or alcohol, forgetfulness, marital or other relationship problems, loneliness and resentment.

Managing Stress

Once individuals recognize symptoms of stress overload, how should they manage it? It's unrealistic to think you can eliminate stress, but there are ways to reduce the impacts. These tactics have

been helpful to many people during particularly stressful times:

- Do something about one small piece of a bigger problem.
- Ask for help from family, friends, or community resources.
- Use exercise to reduce symptoms of stress.
- Do something enjoyable each day.
- Protect physical health by eating well and avoiding alcohol or drugs.
- Work on accepting change as a natural part of life.

Barriers to Managing Stress

Unfortunately, reactions to stress overload can make it difficult to take steps that might help. Too much responsibility can make it seem almost impossible to take charge. Some barriers that can block change include:

- Trying to solve too many problems at once.
- Blaming others or not recognizing the degree of control we do have.
- Letting stress affect our judgment.
- Using drugs or alcohol as substitutes for solving the problems.
- Having a negative outlook.

Strengthen Relationships

To help yourself take action during stressful times, strengthen personal and family relationships by:

- Increasing the time spent with supportive family and friends, who are important buffers in times of stress.
- Practicing positive communication with loved ones by listening and expressing appreciation.
- Making personal health a priority (because it is essential for coping with stress).

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- Strengthening spiritual resources.
- Being mindful of what is most important to oneself and one's family.
- Remaining aware of ongoing changes that contribute to stress, and postponing new commitments if they will add stress.
- Enhancing money and time management skills.
- Reaching out to people in the community (being there for others strengthens one's own circle of support).

Helping Co-Worker and Business Associates Cope with Stress

What can you do to help others cope more effectively? Here are nine points to assist you in relating to individuals experiencing stress.

- 1. Take time to listen. Stressed individuals should not be rushed. By taking the time to listen, you are showing that you care. Ask questions so you clearly understand the problem. By asking questions, the individual must respond to you in a manner that helps them frame and understand their own problem.
- 2. Be non-critical and non-judgmental as the individual shares his/her troubles. While their problem may not seem huge to you, it is to them.
- 3. Counsel on a one-on-one basis. Be a good listener don't interrupt. Try to draw them out. Get them to talk. This can be a tremendous pressure reliever.
- 4. Be empathetic. We cannot know how the individual feels unless we have been there. Avoid one-upmanship.

- 5. Try to separate the problem's causes from the symptoms. Assist the individual in recognizing the difference. As the saying goes, "sometimes it's hard to see the forest for the trees", especially when we're in the middle of the forest.
- 6. Try to help the individual think logically and rationally. Jotting things down on a yellow note pad and prioritizing them can do wonders. Keep it simple.
- 7. Encourage the individual to get back into a routine of doing things. Stress often brings on apathy and a loss of interest in things formerly enjoyed.
- 8. Learn to recognize the signs of stress. There are many excellent publications available.
- 9. Above all, make sure the individual retains ownership of his/her problems. If you pick up the other person's problem, you both have a problem and you lose your objectivity.

Dealing with stress often calls for professional help that is beyond your capacity regardless of how sincere you may be. When this happens, suggest that the individual seek professional help. In lessor situations, just being a caring, empathetic, supportive, and unhurried listener can go a long way in helping an individual through a difficult situation.

Call the Iowa Concern Hotline

Iowans can call the ISU Extension and Outreach Iowa Concern Hotline, 800-447-1985, for help and referrals for dealing with stress. Their website at www.extension.iastate.edu/iowaconcern has a live chat feature as an additional way to talk with stress counselors.

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