

Managing Stress, Anger, Anxiety, and Depression on Dairy Farms¹

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INTRODUCTION

Most dairy farm families are survivors. They are resilient. They have learned well over the years how to bounce back from stressful times. They are optimistic. They have positive attitudes, strengths, and skills to persevere through good times and tough times. How else could their family business have survived to the fourth, fifth, and sixth generations?

WHY IS MANAGING STRESS IMPORTANT IN AGRICULTURE?

Farming is one of the top 12 high stress occupations (Swisher et al., 1998). The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health studied 130 occupations and examined the incidence of stress-related diseases (coronary heart and artery disease, hypertension, ulcers, and nervous disorders; Smith et al., 1977). They examined more than 22,000 Tennessee workers' health records, death certificates, hospital admissions, and mental health center admissions and found that farm owners were among 12 categories of workers that displayed high incidence of stress-related illnesses. When the death certificates were analyzed alone, farm owners were second only to laborers in the rate of death from stress-related diseases. People in agriculture and mining have the highest rates of disabling injuries and fatalities (National Safety Council, 1976-2012).

Among farmers, who experiences more stress?

Among two-generation farm families in which both parents and their adult children were actively involved in operating the farm or ranch, researchers found that the younger generation experienced more stress, less perceived social support, and less occupational satisfaction than the older generation (Weigel et al., 1987). The authors inferred that feelings of powerlessness from working on a multi-generational farm, where they had little power and more financial pressure and debt load, may contribute to higher stress levels among younger farmers. The most frequently occurring stressor for two-generation farm families in Iowa was living with *tight money* (Weigel and Weigel, 1987). For sons- and daughters-in-law, another frequently reported stressor was not being on one's own. For mothers and fathers, the most frequently reported stressor was taking responsibility for risks and disagreements over spending. A frequently reported stressor for daughters-in-law and mothers was "not being a part of the operation."

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A study of 242 senior generation farmers and 239 junior generation farmers found that: "...neither generation is happy with the communication in their two-generation farm family. Items such as handling arguments, fair criticism, and family problems were ranked low by both groups" (Weigel & Weigel, 1990). In another study, daughters-in-law were reported to experience the highest level of stress within family units with a negative relationship with the parents-in-law exacerbating her stress level (Marotz-Baden and Mattheis, 1994). Stress levels were found to be higher for mixed type operations (e.g. livestock and grain) than for grain farmers (Walker and Walker, 1987). Agrifamily systems can include immediate family members, producers, and other workers which can lead to tense and stressful environments (Bennett, 1982). High stress levels can lead to depression, suicidal thinking, suicide, and domestic violence (Booth and Lloyd, 1999; Fraser et al., 2005). Overall, the integrated nature of working, playing, and living side-by-side, day-after-day seems to lead to stressors that may be unique among farm and ranch families.

Do farmers and ranchers experience significantly higher levels of stress than does the general population?

Research with more than 22,000 Tennessee workers, as reported earlier, indicated that farming is one of the top 12 (of 130) high stress occupations (Smith et al., 1977; Swisher et al., 1998). In a study of 303 people in the United Kingdom, farmers scored significantly higher than the general population on measures of stress (Booth & Lloyd, 1999). More research is needed comparing the stress levels of farmers and ranchers with the general population.

In a comparison study of rural and urban families, researchers found that they experienced different stressors. For example, rural husbands and wives reported that financial and business strains contributed to overall Pileup of stressors, while urban families reported that intra-family strains contributed to a majority of their Pileup (Marotz-Baden and Colvin, 1986). In the same study both rural and urban families reported using *reframing* the most, followed by seeking spiritual support. Reframing happens when a person changes the meaning or perception of a stressor which can assist them in handling a stressor, e.g. "After dad died I knew it was up to me to step up to the plate and take the lead in where we're going with our dairy farm business." Seeking help was the next most commonly used coping strategy. Rural families used these coping strategies significantly more than urban families.

Farm and ranch families faced different hardships than urban families, many of which centered on economic, family, and personal strain (Carson et al., 1994). Stressors unique to ranch and farm families that contributed to discord included:

- Ambiguous roles within the family due to illness or injury.
- Intimate living and working conditions between immediate and extended family members.
- Unpredictable or uncontrollable factors such as equipment breakdown, weather, or financial markets (Carson et al., 1994).

However, with the unique stressors also come notable strengths in farm and ranch families. In addition to external support from family members, hardiness was identified as a characteristic of many resilient farm and ranch families (Carson et al., 1994). Hardiness involves “a sense of commitment to work together to manage and solve problems, a belief that families are in control of their responses to stressful life events, and a conviction that those changes and events can be both challenging and growth-producing” (Carson et al., 1994). Therefore, families that have high hardiness are considered to have effective coping strategies; whereas families with low hardiness are considered to be more susceptible to negative effects of stressors.

Research findings on the quality of life levels of farmers and ranchers are mixed. Some found low quality of life levels due to the high stress levels of ranchers and farmers (Frank et al., 2004), while others reported them having comparable or higher quality of life levels than non-ranchers and non-farmers (D’Agostini and Fantini, 2008; Deller et al., 2001). A recent study found that the more farmers and ranchers with disabilities were able to complete chores, operate machinery, manage their farm/ranch, access workspace, live in their homes on the ranch or farm, and modify their machinery, the higher their quality of life levels (Jackman et al., 2014).

Additional studies found that rural men and women tend to possess similar strengths and coping strategies that help them manage their many stressors. Gorman et al. (2007) found that rural families expressed more reasons to feel positive, despite difficult times, and they felt needed and supported by family, friends, and their communities; which gave them a purpose and hope in life. This strong sense of purpose and belongingness was found to be a helpful

resource in coping with significant life stressors and is particularly salient among farm and ranch communities in which family is nearby and good social structure is in place (Gorman et al., 2007; McLarren and Challis, 2009).

All families deal with stressors and crises at some level. Families that are at increased risk for suffering from crisis have limited social support, coping strategies, family cohesion, flexibility and support, and negative appraisal of their situation. They are at higher risk for falling apart rather than adapting healthily to a crisis. Additionally, families experiencing more non-normative stressors, such as financial strain, non-normative caregiving, or ambiguous loss are at higher risk.

The purpose of this paper is to assist dairy farm families in understanding the effective coping strategies and resources that families can use to bounce back from crises rather than disintegrate to a point that is no longer manageable. Learning and understanding some of these tested methods for dealing with stressor Pileup is important in achieving healthy family functioning.

To understand the process of how families move from a state of stress or strain through a crisis to re-balance afterwards, it is critical to identify what determines whether a family will end up in trouble or will end up with increased skills at handling crises and at re-establishing their family equilibrium, balance, or homeostasis (Lavee et al., 1985).

FOUR STEPS TO MANAGING STRESS, ANGER, ANXIETY, AND DEPRESSION

Managing stress, anger, anxiety, and depression is essential for the survival of dairy farms. Research studies have shown that survivors of major stressors do four

things differently with their stressful times than do non-survivors. They manage their stressor *Pileup*. They utilize existing and new internal and external *resources*. They reframe their meanings or *perceptions* of their stressful times from negative to more positive meanings. Finally, they *adapt* to the crisis and rebalance their family after a crisis. Let's explore each of these in more detail.

Pileup

Pileup refers to the Pileup of stressors and strains that a family experiences when dealing with a crisis. Dairy, farm, and ranch families, like all families, experience normal stressors, stressors unique to their occupations, and nonnormative stressors.

Livestock are a major cause of injury. Male principal operators who worked with animals more than 15.75 hr / wk were found to have twice the risk of sustaining injury (Park et al., 2001). Dairy farmers' rate of injury was 2.5 times higher than for non-dairy farmers in Iowa (Nordstrom et al., 1995). Injuries that resulted from animals tended to be more serious than for other farming accidents. For farmers or ranchers with a physical disability, secondary injury was more likely to occur in a livestock-related accident (Allen et al., 1995).

Several research studies have identified major stressors of dairy farmers in New Zealand and of farmers in New Zealand, England, Wales, and Iowa. In a study of close to 1,000 New Zealand dairy farmers, the major stressors included time pressures, machinery failures, weather, and government policies (Alpass et al., 2004). A study of 1,015 individuals from 669 New Zealand farms reported that their leading stressors were "increased work load at peak times," "dealing with workers' compensation," "bad weather," and "complying with health and safety

legislation" (Firth et al., 2006). In a study of 500 farmers in England and Wales, the major stressors were government regulations, paperwork, financial difficulties, and health related problems (Simkin et al., 1998). Other studies identified the top stressors as economic factors, work overload, relationship issues (Simkin et al., 2003), coping with new legislation, excessive paperwork, and media criticism (Booth and Lloyd, 1999). A study of 1,343 Iowa farm residents identified their top ten stressors to include death of a spouse, death of a child, disabling injury of a family member, disabling injury to oneself, foreclosure on a mortgage or loan, divorce, machinery breakdown during harvest, loss of crop to weather, loss of crop to pests or disease, and severe weather conditions (Freeman et al., 2008). One of the most stressful intergenerational farming/ranching issues is the transfer of the family ranch/farm from one generation to the next and the need to keep it stable and operating in order to sustain profitability (Anderson and Rosenblatt, 1985; Fraser et al., 2005; Russell et al., 1985; Zimmerman and Fetsch, 1994).

The more Pileup of stressors and the more previous life stressors that a family faces, the more at-risk they are for high stress and strain (Lavee et al., 1985). Not surprisingly, higher stress levels often result in lowered satisfaction with family life style, personal well-being, and an increase in probability of health, emotional, and relational difficulties (Lavee et al., 1985). They are more at risk for accidents that could lead to injury or fatality (National Safety Council, 1976-2012). Additionally, they are at risk of experiencing relationship problems including family, marital, and parenting difficulties; psychological distress for children and adolescents; increased risk of domestic violence, alcohol, and other

drug abuse; and increased levels of depression and suicide.

For many families a significant increase in additional stressors often results in an adjustment in roles, boundaries, and rules within the family system which often causes additional stress. Families can experience these strains over short or chronic periods depending on the severity of the stress they experience. Often families deal with more than one stressor at a time (Xu, 2007). Marotoz-Baden and Colvin (1986) reported that three types of stressors contribute to Pileup. First is the initial stress that leads a family into a state of crisis. Second are the normal life changes that the family experiences, such as the birth of a child or death of an elderly person, and the non-normative life changes, such as an unexpected drop in milk prices or sudden, unexpected increase in feed, fertilizer, or diesel costs. Third are those stressors associated with a family dealing with the hardship or crisis situation.

Resources

In response to a Pileup of stressors and strains, families use resources to help them deal with the demands and needs of the situation. Particularly helpful in stressful times are family resources such as personal resources like self-esteem, knowledge or skills, emotional health, personality characteristics, and financial well-being. Family researchers have found that family members with high self-esteem and self-efficacy are able to cope more effectively with stress than those with lower self-esteem (Xu, 2007). Self-efficacy is a person's assessment of their abilities to perform specific tasks in relation to their own goals and standards rather than in comparison with others' capabilities (Retrieved January 17, 2014 from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-efficacy>). Family resources also include

social support and family system resources. Social support refers to external resources such as friends, institutions, or outside networks that the family can draw upon during tough times (Lavee et al., 1985). Social support serves as a buffer and reduces strain. Families who were involved in their communities and who networked with friends were found to be better adjusted to major disruptions like relocating in the army (Lavee et al., 1985). Family system resources include internal characteristics such as family cohesion, adaptability, and open communication. Open communication, sense of mastery over events, and mutual support among family members are helpful family resources for families in a hardship or crisis situation (Xu, 2007). The more cohesive, flexible, and communicative a family is, especially with supportive messages, the better able to adjust to severe crises the family will be. The more they use both internal and external resources and the more they work together to solve problems, the more successful they will be.

Perception

Perception or family meaning refers to the meaning that the family attributes to the entire crisis situation, including the initial stressor, additional Pileup stressors, and family resources. A family's perception can pertain to their internal environment, such as their perceived interpersonal and familial strengths, as well as their external environment, including both positive and negative experiences pertaining to the family's ability to adapt (Lavee et al., 1985). Research suggests that families who reinterpret initial negative to more positive meanings of their overall crisis situation are more likely to be in control of their stressors, to find possible solutions to crisis situations, and to adapt well eventually to the crisis (Xu, 2007). This ultimately helps

the family to re-establish a state of equilibrium, balance, or homeostasis following the crisis.

Despite a commitment and bond one may feel to their community, there still is a social stigma, especially for men, in asking for help if it pertains to a private issue or a matter that brings up shame. This stigma and shame that a person may feel when dealing with a particular stress or crisis is often a barrier for a family trying to adapt well to a stressor, and it ultimately puts them at further risk for harm and additional stressor Pileup (Gorman et al., 2007). It is important to note that social stigmas and shame serve as a barrier for families to manage tough times well because sadly, suicide rates are high among farmers as compared to the general population (McLarren and Challis, 2009). Dairy producers who survive figure out how to make a call to a professional and see it as a good way to solve a problem.

Family Adaptation

Family adaptation is how a family adapts to the crisis and develops skills to re-balance the family to the crisis. Ultimately, experiencing a very high dosage of family strain and stress can lead a dairy farm family into a state of crisis. However, the better they manage their Pileup of stressors, the better they use their resources, and the better they reinterpret the meaning of their stressful event, the healthier they will be in the future. The ultimate goal is to adapt well to and to function more effectively following crisis. Families that are able to make positive meaning of their stressors and use effective coping strategies as well as internal and external resources are more likely to adapt well eventually (Xu, 2007).

Despite the high risk for mental health issues, such as depression and suicidal ideation that often results from very stressful

financial times, social isolation or loneliness, and limited access to mental health services; farm and ranch families can manage the Pileup, use resources, and reframe their perceptions of their tough times to manage stressors well and ultimately work to maximize profits. Whether farm and ranch families are dealing with similar or different stressors than other families, by accessing the resources available to them including personal characteristics and hardiness as well as social supports, and by viewing stressor events as challenges or opportunities for growth instead of as threats or crises; dairy, farm, and ranch families can make good decisions to manage stressor Pileup, cope effectively with tough financial times, increase business profitability, and bounce back resiliently from stressful times.

RESOURCES

For more trustworthy information on this and on related topics, Google <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/consumer/>.

- Managing Stress During Tough Times (no. 10.255)
- Making Decisions and Coping Well with Drought (no. 10.256)
- Farming and Ranching: Health Hazard or Opportunity? (no. 10.201)
- Ranching and Farming with Family Members (no. 10.217)
- Transitions and Changes: Who Copes Well? (no. 10.215)
- Transitions and Changes: Practical Strategies (no. 10.214)
- Coping with Natural Disasters (no. 10.257)
- Dealing with Our Anger (no. 10.236)

- Dealing with Others' Anger (no. 10.237)
- Dealing with Couples' Anger (no. 10.238)
- Manage Anger through Family Meetings (no. 10.249)

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APPENDIX

Farm and Ranch Family Stress and Depression: A Checklist and Guide for Making Referrals

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SIGNS OF FARM AND RANCH STRESS

The last few years have been difficult for farm and ranch families. Many are experiencing financial and emotional stress as a result. There are several signs or symptoms when a farm family may be in need of help. These are signs that can be observed by friends, extended family members, neighbors, milk haulers, veterinarians, clergy persons, school personnel or health and human service workers. These signs include:

- **Change in routines.** The rancher or ranch family stops attending church, drops out of 4-H, FFA, Homemakers or other groups, or no longer stops in at the local coffee shop or feed mill.
- **Care of livestock declines.** Cattle may not be cared for in the usual way; they may lose condition, appear gaunt or show signs of neglect or physical abuse.
- **Increase in illness.** Farmers or farm family members may experience more upper respiratory illnesses (colds, flu) or other chronic conditions (aches, pains, persistent cough).
- **Increase in farm or ranch accidents.** The risk of farm accidents increases due to fatigue or loss of ability to concentrate; children may be at risk if there isn't adequate childcare.
- **Appearance of farmstead declines.** The farm family no longer takes pride in the way farm buildings and grounds appear, or no longer has the time to do maintenance work.
- **Children show signs of stress.** Farm and ranch children may act out, decline in academic performance or be increasingly absent from school; they may also show signs of physical abuse or neglect.

SIGNS OF CHRONIC, PROLONGED STRESS

When farm and ranch families are stressed out for long periods of time – chronic, prolonged stress – they may experience a number of signs and symptoms. Watch for the following effects in farm families you see on a day-to-day basis:

Physical

- ☐ Headaches
- ☐ Ulcers
- ☐ Backaches
- ☐ Eating Irregularities
- ☐ Sleep Disturbances
- ☐ Frequent Sickness
- ☐ Exhaustion

Emotional

- ☐ Sadness
- ☐ Depression
- ☐ Bitterness
- ☐ Anger
- ☐ Anxiety
- ☐ Loss of Spirit
- ☐ Loss of Humor

Behavioral

- ☐ Irritability
- ☐ Backbiting
- ☐ Acting Out
- ☐ Withdrawal
- ☐ Passive-Aggressiveness
- ☐ Alcoholism
- ☐ Violence

Cognitive

- ☐ Memory Loss
- ☐ Lack of Concentration
- ☐ Inability to Make Decisions

Self-Esteem

- ☐ "I'm a failure."
- ☐ "I blew it."
- ☐ "Why can't I...?"

SIGNS OF DEPRESSION OR SUICIDAL INTENT

The greater the number of signs or symptoms a ranch or farm family is experiencing, the greater your concern should be. In addition, if family members are exhibiting the following signs of depression or suicidal intent, it is important that you connect them with professional help as soon as possible. All cries for help should be taken seriously.

Signs of Depression

- ☐ **Appearance:** Sad face, slow movements, unkempt look.
- ☐ **Unhappy feelings:** Feeling sad, hopeless, discouraged, and listless.
- ☐ **Negative thoughts:** "I'm a failure," "I'm no good," "No one cares."
- ☐ **Reduced activity and pleasure in usual activities:** "Doing anything is just too much of an effort."
- ☐ **People problems:** "I don't want anyone to see me," "I feel so lonely."
- ☐ **Physical problems:** Sleeping problems, decreased sexual interest, headaches.
- ☐ **Guilt and low self esteem:** "It's all my fault," "I should be punished."

Signs of Suicidal Intent

- ☐ **Anxiety or depression:** Severe, intense feelings of anxiety or depression.
- ☐ **Withdrawal or isolation:** Withdrawn, alone, lack of friends and supports.
- ☐ **Helpless and hopeless:** Sense of complete powerlessness, a hopeless feeling.
- ☐ **Alcohol abuse:** There is often a link between alcoholism and suicide.
- ☐ **Previous suicidal attempts:** May have been previous attempts of low to high lethality.
- ☐ **Suicidal plan:** Frequent or constant thoughts with a specific plan in mind.
- ☐ **Cries for help:** Making a will, giving possessions away, making statements such as "I'm calling it quits," or "Maybe my family would be better off without me."

HOW TO REFER A PERSON FOR HELP

1. Be aware of the agencies and resources available in your community – what services they offer and what their limitations are.
2. Listen for signs and symptoms that the person or family needs help which you can't provide, i.e., financial, legal or personal counseling.
3. Assess what agency or community resources would be most appropriate to address the person's (or family's) problems.
4. Discuss the referral with the person or family (It sounds/looks like you are feeling _____. I think _____ could help you deal with your situation.)
5. Explore the individual's or family's willingness to initiate contact with the community resource ("How do you feel about seeking help from this person/agency?").
6. Where the person or family is unwilling to take the initiative or where there is some danger if action is not taken, you should take the initiative:
 - a. Call the agency and ask to speak to the intake worker (if there is one).
 - b. Identify yourself and your relationship with the person or family.
 - c. State what you think the person's or family's needs are (needs immediate protection from suicidal acts, needs an appointment for counseling, needs financial or legal advice).
 - d. Provide the agency with background information (name, address and phone; age and gender; nature of current problem or crisis; any past history you're aware of; further information as called for).
 - e. Ask the agency what follow-up action they will take:
 - *When will they act on the referral?
 - *Who will be the person for you to contact later if necessary?
 - *What will be the cost of the service (flat fee/sliding scale)?
 - *Do you need to do anything else to complete the referral?
7. Make sure the person or family and the referral agency connect and get together. Make one or more follow-up contacts with the agency if called for by the situation.