

A “PRIMER” on Farm Stress Resiliency *by Larry Tranel, Psy. D., Dairy Sp.*

“Dealing with Farm and Family Stress” *ISU Extension and Outreach*



Farming is dangerous and stressful, no doubt. Farmers have varying degrees of resiliency to deal with the physical and mental dangers of farming, leading to varying stress levels. The integrated blend of family, farming and nature can cause unique situations of stress in farm families.

Stress is normal and can be healthy as it might push us to do things that can promote growth in us. But, too much acute stress or piled up chronic stress makes it difficult to:

- Concentrate, remember and process information.
- Organize, calculate and make decisions
- Sleep, relax and breathe properly
- Communicate, share and bond as a family.

Stress can become a source of conflict but can also help families grow together as many farm families are strong **because** they had gone through a tough time together. Too much stress can lead to anxiety, doubt, depression and hopelessness. Overcoming stress overload by developing skills can help families have more resiliency to farm stress.

Chronic farm stress can weaken a person’s spirit, appetite, physical stamina, focus, relationships, decision-making ability and dampen happiness and satisfaction in time. Life skills can help deal with it.

Resiliency can be a learned, life skill. It is a person’s ability to deal with stress, using skills, to better cope and possibly even overcome the root causes or maybe just its effects. Since stress reduction techniques are a learned skill, the aim of this paper is to assist farmers and those working with them with a “PRIMER” acronym tool to better deal with farm stress. The tool is a six step process outlined below. The “PRIMER” Tool will then be detailed along with skills and goals that pertain to each step.

Perception – Our Thoughts under Stress
Reality – Our Environment in Stress
Identify – Our Emotions with Stress
Manage – Our Reaction to Stress
Extend – Our Communication of Stress
Resources – Our Support for Stress

Perception is heavily related to the image or picture we have in our minds of whatever situation, coupled with any meaning or attitude attached to that image or picture. An occurrence might happen to two people and one might very positively perceive it and the other very negatively with a wide range of other “perceptions” in between.

A farm family’s perception can pertain to their internal environment, such as perceived interpersonal and familial strengths, as well as their external environment, including 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 situations, 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). The problem is not that there are problems or stress, the problem is expecting otherwise and thinking that having a problem is a problem.

Seeing stress as normal and a means of growth is a great tool. Accepting that life is difficult at times and that it is in the process of overcoming difficulty that gives life some of its meaning by helping us to grow is often an attitude that can assist more positive perception of stressful situations.

Reality is a sum of a person’s internal capacity and external environment to understand the situation surrounding stress or crisis event. Some situations take families by surprise or are beyond their control. If life events come too soon, are delayed or fail to materialize, the health, happiness, and well-being may be affected (Schlossberg, et. al., 1996). Intensified emotionality and/or behavioral disorganization in families and their members are likely to occur as a result (Toberto, 1991). Another crucial variable in dealing with the unexpected is family development and environmental fit (Eccles et. al., 1993).

Ambiguous loss is often a reality and a most difficult stress to deal with as something is being lost, but not knowing what is happening; what might happen; or even what can be done to prevent the loss due to circumstances beyond control (Boss). So, the reality of farm and family stress can be normal living or it can cause many physical, mental, personal and family ailments. The goal is to understand the reality of the stress environment and seek remedy.

*A Goal that Really Needs to be **Stressed** when under Stress:*

*The **Most Important Thing** is to **Keep the Most Important Thing**, the **Most Important Thing!!***

Identify emotions of stress related circumstances. Emotions are often so intertwined and often mangled that identifying the underlying causes or emotion is not easy. For instance, an exhibit of anger, a secondary emotion, often is expressed due to another emotion. Anxiety and depression often have a root cause. Once we realize our perception and the reality of the situation, we look inward to identify causes so as not to transfer negative emotions to or onto others. When angry, it might be easiest to transfer the cause to the person closest to us, a spouse for instance, since they were part of the environment when the situation occurred, though they were not the source.

Thus, the identification of emotions and causes of stress is important so as not to wrongly blame or transfer negative emotions to someone who may just be an innocent bystander. Know that facts are much easier to untangle than emotions coming from a multitude of experiences.

The goal is positive emotions regarding stressful and other situations. Situations exhibit chemical reactions in our bodies that trigger our emotions. Our brains label the experience as good, bad, happy or sad, etc. It's a mind over matter deal as positive thoughts are a precursor to positive emotions. So, the skill to learn is how to identify emotions that have occurred while thinking positive thoughts. Thus, we are about as happy as we make up our minds to be. Choose happy and return there even when life gets us down, though granted, easier said than done.

Manage through stress knowing all situations have some hope, alternatives or options. Identify what can be controlled and accept what is beyond control without blaming oneself. Understand that lack of clarity of future can induce stress as it brings worry, confusion, conflict and even shame (Boss). Assess stress symptoms--heart rate, shallow breathing, headaches, anxiety, outbursts, lack of focus and hope to name a few—to know stress levels.

Use “**BEE SET**”—**B**reathe, **E**xercise, **E**at, **S**ublimate, **E**xpress and **T**alk to manage stress. When stressed, shallow breathing becomes norm. **Breathe** deep using stomach breathing, slow and draw out, to get more oxygen to the brain for better decision-making. **Exercise** to heart pumping levels to increase blood and oxygen flow to brain.

Eat healthy to feel better. **Sublimate**, or trade pain, using visual thinking of happy times and places to relax mindset and change thoughts for a while. **Express** acceptance of the reality of the situation to help focus on a response or solution instead of the problem. **Talk** yourself through felt emotions with a positive “I can do this” attitude, coupled with breathing, exercise, and sublimating activities.



Extend oneself to others as social isolation and loneliness can further add to stress. Those in family environments are best helped by family members, but introverted males often do not extend their thoughts and feelings readily to allow for healthy family support. Guilt, shame and social stigma often inhibit extending to others for help, as well.

Feeling close to others increases oxytocin in the blood. Doing things for others increases happiness and reduces focus on self and personal problems—a sublimating tactic! Force oneself to find things to smile and laugh about—laughter being the best medicine is more than a metaphor!

Seek advice from others as many have experience with stress and difficulty as it is a common part of life, so realize one is not alone. Verbalizing or writing concerns often helps clarify thoughts and organize action plans. Lack of social support, on the other hand, can be a cause of future depression and loss of hope. The goal is to become more intertwined in other's lives as stressed people are often better helped by family and friends who care than even by trained counselors. When extending to others, we often find new perspectives and mindsets, not to mention better feelings of stressful situations at hand. Lastly, by extending oneself to others for help, consolation, or comradery, we often experience a basic human need of compassion that helps humans realize we are not alone in our issues of life.

Resources are important in life. 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 as well (Xu, 2007). This applies to individuals, too! Internal resources and coping strategies were shared in previous sections. External resource needs tend to focus on things that help develop skills in:

1) Interpersonal Communication—everyone has their own beliefs, feelings, needs and agenda to be shared. Knowing healthy/ideal versus unhealthy/common behaviors can separate success and failure in overcoming stress/conflict.

2) Family and Community Support—immediate and intergenerational families, and intertwined communities can be a source of both stress and strength—attend to self-help and other resources, and other people's needs as family and community support is a two way street.

3) Problem Solving Techniques—use processes to: define the problem/stress; consider pros and cons to alternatives; select a plan; take action steps; identify resources; and use group/family meetings. Be “proactive” in problem solving.

4) Goal Setting—Make them **SMART**—**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic and **T**ime-Based. Smart goals are a very smart way to become smarter at life.

☺ Use the “**BEE SET**” tool to take the **STING** out of stress.☺

And, Always Remember: The Best Place to “BEE” is Together so “SET” Your Stress Straight!