

Being Healthy

RESOURCES FOR MENTAL HEALTH FOR FARMERS



**BEING HEALTHY:
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The stereotype of the ruggedly independent, bootstrapping, self-starting, self-reliant farmer is not wrong. But sometimes that image doesn't serve farmers very well. Everyone needs a little help sometimes, and sometimes people need a lot of help. That makes farmers just like the rest of the population.

And there are the things about farming that are unique, and that can add to the stress and desperation felt by some.

Being at the mercy of the weather and the markets; the intensity of the competition, the ever-changing technology and the growing knowledge-base needed to succeed in farming.

The good news is that another thing that's increasing is the availability of mental health resources that can address these problems, both the unique ones and the common ones. If you are suffering, don't suffer alone. If you see someone suffering, help them reach out to these life lines.

FARM STRESS CHALLENGES MENTAL HEALTH

BY PAULA MOHR

Depression affects one out of five farmers. Let's recognize that whole health begins with mental health, say medical practitioners.

Low commodity prices, debt load, family disagreements, negative weather events — the list of challenges that stress farm business owners can go on and on.

So it's not surprising that farming — in recent years, and depending on the survey — has ranked in the top 10 most stressful occupations in the United States. Accordingly, about 20% of farmers may suffer from depression, and some statistics have indicated high suicide rates. Men on farms today commit suicide nearly twice as often as other men in the general population.

According to a 2016 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report, rates of suicide by occupation were third-highest in farming, fishing and forestry in 2012. Specific to farming, the report's authors noted that farmers' chronic exposure to pesticides might affect the neurologic system and contribute to depressive symptoms. Other factors they noted that might contribute to suicide among farmers include social isolation, potential for financial losses, barriers to and unwillingness to seek mental health services, and access to lethal means.

Depression is a common mood disorder that many, if not all, people experience at some time in their lives. For busy farming folks, it can be one of those stressed feelings that gets tamped down and ignored, because there is too much to do. However, depression interferes with being mentally healthy, and it also can affect your physical health.

"Whole health begins with mental health," says Cynthia Christensen, a therapist who farms near Rushford, Minn. When we talk about mental health, we are

simply referring to the state of psychological or emotional well-being, she says. A healthy psychological state is the ability to successfully cope with the ups and downs in life, and to have a hopeful outlook.

“When we are physically ill, there are a set of symptoms that define our illness. The same is true of mental illness,” Christensen adds. “There are a specific set of symptoms that define a diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety, bipolar disorder or dementia.”

THE STIGMA

For a farmer to admit that he or she may be struggling with depression is tough. Those feelings of helplessness do not align with the traditional image of farmer stoicism and independence.

“Unfortunately, there continues to be significant stigma on those with mental health challenges,” Christensen says. “The emotion that goes with the stigma is often shame — believing that there is something wrong with me, that I can’t cope like other people are coping.” People who are struggling emotionally get good at emotional masking — which is hiding your true emotions and pretending that everything is fine when it’s not.

Yet, those who have the courage to seek treatment and mental health healing often worry about what they will tell their neighbors, co-workers and fellow parishioners about “where they’ve been” if they are hospitalized for mental health issues. Christensen says she thinks the stigma continues because of fear and misunderstanding. People are uncomfortable, and do not know how to react or support someone wrestling with mental health issues. They don’t know what to say, so they say nothing.

“On several occasions, clients and patients have told me ‘Nobody brings you a casserole or sends you a card when you are hospitalized in the psychiatric unit,’” she adds.

WHEN TO SEEK HELP

Specific to depression, if someone has been “out of sorts” for more than a few weeks, it would be beneficial to seek professional help. Attempts at self-diagnosis — mental or physical — are tricky, because you can misinterpret or distort your own thoughts, Christensen points out.

“When I was in nursing school, I often would worry that I had the disease that we were studying that week. With some imagination, I could convince myself that I had most of the signs and symptoms,” she says. “However, with mental



health issues, I see almost the opposite effect — a disbelief and minimizing of symptoms, so as not to be labeled as mentally ill. Unfortunately, this often causes people to suffer with symptoms, sometimes for years, when they could be receiving treatment. Often, people tell me that they wish they had sought help earlier, rather than suffering.”

Medical professionals make a diagnosis of clinical depression when a person has been in a depressed mood or has had a loss of interest or pleasure in daily activities for more than two weeks. Specific symptoms include irritability, feelings of sadness or emptiness, decreased interest or pleasure in most activities, significant weight change or change in appetite, change in sleep (insomnia or hypersomnia), fatigue or loss of energy, feelings of guilt or worthlessness, diminished ability to think or concentrate, or thoughts of suicide.

If you have had several of the above symptoms for some time, Christensen urges you to seek out a mental health professional trained in diagnosing and treating mental illness.

“An accurate, honest description of symptoms is very important in making the diagnosis because, unlike medical conditions, there is no X-ray or lab test used to diagnose. It is a conversation,” she says.

RECOGNIZE THE SYMPTOMS OF DANGEROUS STRESS

BY SUZANNE PISH AND ADAM J. KANTROVICH

It is important to identify common stressors, recognize the symptoms and manage the strain.

Farming ranks in the top 10 most stressful occupations in the United States and an estimated 20% of farmers may suffer from depression. Male farmers kill themselves nearly twice as often as males in the general population; however, suicide rates can be unclear as it is sometimes unknown if the cause of death was a suicide or a farming accident.

Full-time farmers, whose families rely on farming income to provide for their family living, have a significant amount of challenges that they face in any given

year. Farmers are reliant on fluctuating market prices for the products they raise, and therefore do not get to figure in the costs they have into raising their product and cannot always price their product accordingly. A vast number of events can affect a farm's income, such as low commodity prices, geopolitical events, weather and diseases. According to the USDA's Economic Research Services, farm income has continued to drop since 2013 and is down 50% from that year.

This year alone in Michigan and around the country, a variety of events occurred nationally — all of which is added on top of the stress of owning and managing a multi-generational family farm:

- Weather events have wiped out some fruit crops.
- Commodity prices for corn, soybeans, milk and other livestock commodities have dropped dramatically.
- Labor shortages are leaving farms unable to find the necessary workers to milk cows and harvest fresh fruit and vegetables

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health recently examined 130 occupations and found laborers and farm owners had the highest rate of deaths due to stress-related conditions like heart and artery disease, hypertension, ulcers and nervous disorder. It is important to know how to manage stress levels and to reduce the effects of unwanted stress. Too much stress can make a person more accident-prone. This is why it is important to identify common stressors, recognize the symptoms of stress and manage stress. By doing these three things, farmers can make their workplace safer.

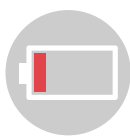
The Michigan State University Extension RELAX: Alternative to Anger program states that stress is a normal emotional response to the demands of life. Everyone experiences it, and the results vary in intensity from being in a

foul mood to more complicated illnesses. Family Development Resources Inc. estimates that 75 to 90% of all illnesses are stress-related.

DEPRESSION SYMPTOMS



ISOLATION



NO ENERGY



NO CONCENTRATION



SADNESS



NO APPETITE



ANGER



ALCOHOL AND DRUG ABUSE



SLEEP PROBLEM



THOUGHTS OF DEATH



GUILT

TREATMENT

SUFFERING FROM DEPRESSION?

Are you or someone you know in the farming industry? Below is a list of signs and symptoms of depression and the warning signs of suicide:

- Signs of depression — change in routine, more colds or chronic physical conditions, farm or livestock not taken care for, more injuries due to fatigue or lack of concentration
- Symptoms of depression — decreased concentration, memory and ability to make decisions; feelings of sadness, anxiousness, emptiness and restlessness; feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness and

hopelessness; fatigue and lack of energy; angry outbursts and irritability; issues with sleep and eating; unexplained physical symptoms, such as persistent aches and pains; loss of interest or pleasure in activities or hobbies; thoughts of death, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts.

WARNING SIGNS OF SUICIDE

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention offers the following insights:

- Talk — being a burden to others, feeling trapped, experiencing unbearable pain, having no reason to live.
- Behavior — increased use of alcohol or drugs, looking for a way to kill themselves (e.g. searching online for materials or means), acting recklessly, withdrawing from activities, isolating from family and friends, sleeping too much or too little, visiting or calling people to say goodbye, giving away prized possessions
- Mood — depression, loss of interest, rage, irritability, humiliation, anxiety

Pish and Kantrovich are MSU Extension educators.

HELP FOR PEOPLE WHO MAY HURT THEMSELVES

BY LON TONNESSON

If you or someone you know is having suicidal thoughts, please call the National Suicide Helpline Center at 800-273-8255.

I recently received an email from a farmer I interviewed several years ago. She asked me about preventing farmer suicides and the importance of talking to people instead of “holding it all in.”

“Do you know any ag counselors?” she asked. “I have had three different people ask me if I knew any ag counselors . . . This stuff is getting real, real fast in our area!”

“This stuff” is the financial situation some farmers and ranchers are facing. Profit margins are small — even negative — for some. Those who suffered through the drought last year probably have already sold off all the livestock they could and used up any feed they could scrape together. No one knows for sure whether the spring will be wet or dry.

SOBERING STATISTICS

Take the possibility of suicide seriously. The Centers for Disease Control recently reported that the suicide rate for agriculture, fishing and forestry professionals is third-highest. In 2012, the year that CDC studied the issue, it was 80 to 90 per 100,000 people.

Help makes all the difference. Reach out to someone for help now since, as the farmer said in her email to me, “this stuff is getting real, real fast.”

TO GET HELP:

- Reach out to a loved one to talk about how you are feeling

- Talk to your friends, clergy, or medical provider
- Remove whatever can harm you now. (e.g., firearms, knives, pills)
- Realize that you will die if you believe the lie. The lie is that suicide will solve all of your problems. You CAN find healthy ways to deal with the challenges.
- Turn to other activities to divert your mind.

The National Suicide Helpline Center at 800-273-8255 is a 24-hour hotline. The service is free and confidential.

If it isn't a crisis situation, you may want seek other help from any of the following resources listed.

STRESS MANAGEMENT

If stress management is the issue, mental health counseling is available.

For starters, to find a therapist or counselor close to you to talk to, contact your doctor or pastor, or call 2-1-1. It's a national hotline that can provide information and a referral on local services in your area.

If possible, find someone who understands farming and ranching, suggests Mark Rosman, a Harlan, Iowa, counselor who writes frequently about the topic. He once led an effort to set up a national network of counselors for farmers and ranchers, but the program never made it into the farm bill.

A therapist who doesn't know agriculture may suggest you take a vacation, but doesn't realize that your cows need to be fed every day, he says.

Your best bet is to find a counselor who serves a rural area.

IT'S A TOUCHY QUESTION THAT, MAYBE, SHOULD BE ASKED MORE

BY BRAD HAIRE

She asked us to turn and face the person nearest to us in the room and ask the question. Things got real quiet for a second.

The exercise elicited the predictable reaction from the small gathering: Nervous laughter mixed with awkward smiles. But the gravity of the enquiry was not a matter to take lightly.

Dr. Rebekka Dudensing, an Extension economist with Texas A&M University, stood before the Southern Ag Outlook Conference and proposed a question to the group. She asked us to turn and face the person nearest to us in the room and ask the same question.

“Have you ever thought of committing suicide?”

Things got real quiet for a second.

The outlook conference, as the name implies, is the annual gathering of Extension economists and a few lender representatives from throughout the South, from Texas to Kentucky to Georgia up to Virginia. Minus the farm reporter who crashes the conference, you'd be hard pressed to find a more learned crowd, especially on the financial stresses many farmers face today and have faced for going on six years.

The economists come together for two days to deliver and receive presentations on commodity outlooks and special topics, generously overlaid with hardy discourse with peers, sharing recent and on-going studies and observations

from their sides of the field. It also comes with a good dose of fellowship among familiar colleagues and friends.

The outlook's general 2018/2019 economic memo, in short, was that row crop prices will likely stand pat and good ol' global supply and demand won't likely shift for the better any time soon; tariffs are not helping right now; things aren't as bad as the 1980s farm economy yet; managing financial risk with dogged marketing matters; the farm bill is facing significant political birthing pangs; and things will eventually get better.

Dudensing's topic for the group was 'Human Risk: Emotional Health in Farm Populations'.

I knew the economist nearest me, and we dutifully did as she instructed and asked each other the question about suicidal feelings. We laughed like two teenagers attempting a lewd punchline. Much of the same was happening



around us, and Dudensing said the reaction was predictable and not the point of the exercise.

Asking the question out loud in a group to a friendly face is a feat, but it takes poised courage to spit it out in a real-life situation. That said, I'd wager there are more people walking around who regret not asking such a thing when they thought they should than people who regret asking such a thing to someone they cared about.

Farming is one of the world's most-hazardous jobs. Add to that farmers are five times as likely to commit suicide as the general population, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A farmer or not, it can be hard to see the light in a tough spot.

Dudensing reminded the group that asking a person if they are contemplating suicide doesn't cause the person to consider suicide if the person wasn't already thinking about it, and if the person was thinking about it, it has not been shown to make the person follow through on an attempt.

This is a topic most of us prefer to let slide rather than talk about; keep it out of the kitchen so to speak, but it's one we'd do well to have the courage to grab barehanded and place on the stove's front burner as needed.

WARNING SIGNS FOR SUICIDE:

- Anxiety;
- Depression;
- Withdrawal from friends and activities;
- Alcohol and/or drug abuse;
- Refusing to take or hoarding medication;
- Aggressive behavior or irritability;
- Making a will or final arrangements;
- Giving away possessions;
- Talking of or hinting at suicide;
- Suggesting people would be better off without him/her;
- Frequent thoughts of suicide with a plan in mind.

If you need help, it wouldn't hurt to find some. And if you know someone who needs some help, it wouldn't hurt (or not hurt much) to help the person find some help.

THROTTLE BACK ON STRESS

BY JOHN SHUTSKE

Commentary: Fighting off stress during difficult times takes physical energy.

When I was a little boy, I was intrigued by trucks, tractors and machines like any farm kid. I understood what the gas pedal was in my mom's car and my dad's pickup. But it took me a while to understand exactly what the throttle did on the steering column of our John Deere 4020 and how it controlled fuel flow.

Understanding stress is similar — and for our health and the well-being of our loved ones and relationships, learning where to find the levers to “throttle down” the chemicals that fuel high levels of stress is crucial.

All people feel short-term stress when something frightening happens: a fire in a building, a letter informing you of an increase in your operating loan interest rate, unexpected medical news. When we encounter acute events or “stressors” like these, the information we channel through one or more of our five senses triggers a chain of responses that start in the brain.

Your brain tells your pituitary gland to release small amounts of hormones that tell your body to yank down the throttle to add fuel to the stress response. These hormones flow through your bloodstream and quickly turn on a bigger release of neurotransmitter and steroid hormones (mainly adrenaline and cortisol) that have immediate effects we all recognize.

These hormones speed up your heart rate. Blood pressure increases. Stress hormones cause your spleen to release more red blood cells to supply oxygen so you can act quickly. Lots of other things happen — blood sugar increases, our digestive and reproductive systems go on a temporary vacation, and the front part of the brain that is responsible for deep thinking, careful decision-making and productive communication becomes less effective.



UNDERSTANDING STRESS

In short-term stress situations, the response of “fight or flight” is helpful. We are prepared to fight a threat (like calling 911 and grabbing an extinguisher to fight a fire), or we can run away from the situation. In scary situations, sometimes this release of hormones is so overwhelming that we “freeze up.” Humans have developed this acute stress response over thousands of years. It helps ensure our survival.

The problem is that during prolonged challenging and stressful times, over months or years, this stress response repeats itself over and over. The brain has thermostat mechanisms that keep these chemical releases in check, and these mechanisms become less effective, or they simply begin to wear out. The result becomes long-term, chronic stress that often leads to physical and mental health problems (cardiovascular disease, diabetes, infection, depression), injury (because of constant distraction while working) and deteriorating relationships.

The constant presence of high levels of this stress fuel (adrenaline and cortisol) can make it more difficult to make smart and focused long-term financial decisions. Chronic, unresolved stress sometimes leads to substance abuse, addiction and even suicide.

So, the question is: Where is this “throttle” that we can pull back on or release to slow the flow of the hormones that fuel chronic stress?

There are many answers to this question, and I recommend you explore the publications cited at the end of this article for more information. But here are some specific suggestions. There are many stress throttle levers. We need to pay some attention to all of them if we want to cut back on the stress-inducing fuel supply.

- Check in with your primary health-care provider. Fighting off stress in difficult times takes physical energy. If you are dealing with underlying health problems or conditions, it’s important to seek good medical advice and follow the directions of your local physician or other health professional whom you trust.
- Give your body the quality fuel that it deserves. Coping with stress, difficult financial decisions and an uncertain future requires that you eat well and provide the high-quality energy your body needs. Our brains are relatively small (about 3 pounds). Yet the brain burns 20% of the energy our body uses. No farmer would dream of heading out to harvest an 80-acre field in a \$300,000 chopper or combine filled with lousy-grade, dirty fuel. The crop won’t get harvested, and the machine will break down when it’s most needed. But sometimes that’s how we treat our bodies in stressful times. Eat breakfast. Eat often. Eat healthy, well-balanced meals. And stay hydrated.

- Find time to quietly power down. Increasingly, research points to the value of short (10- to 15-minute) opportunities to quiet our minds and purposely relax our bodies and brains. In my teaching, I’ve had people tell me they’d never care to learn how to meditate or practice “mindfulness.” But some of these same people wait all year, craving the quiet moments and opportunities like sitting in a silent deer stand for hours at a time during hunting season while watching snow flurries dust the landscape. Or quietly working in the garden on a warm summer evening while basking in the glow of a sunset. Powering down can include a quiet walk in the woods, where you purposely pause to reflect on the things you are grateful for in life while you enjoy the sights, sounds and smells of nature. These actions help rebuild our brain’s “thermostat” and capacity to throttle back chronic stress. A little bit of exercise has also been shown to increase the size of the parts of the brain that keep stress in check.

- Take control in areas where possible. There are some things you simply cannot control — the weather, global market conditions and others. Yet, research in both people and animals suggests that having some sense of control — where it is possible — is the most important stress fuel throttle! Work with trusted advisers, experts, friends and family members to look at options and develop plans. It’s hard if chronic stress has partially shut down that front part of your brain that functions like a mental scratch pad. But push through that urge to shut down. Enlist help and seek advice — first steps are always the hardest. Write down ideas. Set goals. Be specific. Identify next steps and actions that are measurable and realistic. Give yourself time, but also set deadlines for next steps and decisions. Again, when stress gets the best of you and you feel like you want to shut down,

there are others out there who will help. Stay connected to your community (including church, school activities, etc.), and ask lots of questions.

Farming is truly a stressful occupation. But there are ways to find and then use the throttles that control that flow of hormones and chemicals that fuels chronic stress. Find those throttles and put them to use. The world depends on you and appreciates what you do.

VISIT THESE LINKS FOR MORE INFORMATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Detailed discussion of the importance of diet, exercise, mindfulness, planning and connecting with others.
<https://uwmadison.app.box.com/v/FarmStressShutske>
- Case study showing the direct impacts of chronic stress on farm families (for discussion and conversation).
<https://uwmadison.app.box.com/v/FarmStressCaseShutske>
- List of 10 recommendations for ag professionals who work closely with farmers and their families.
<https://uwmadison.app.box.com/v/FarmStress10Shutske>

Shutske is a University of Wisconsin-Madison and Extension agricultural safety and health specialist.



TURN OFF THAT INTERNAL NEGATIVE VOICE: TAKE SMALL STEPS TO GET MOVING

BY CYNTHIE CHRISTENSEN

Practice positive thoughts to help yourself face the day.

For many farmers, winter is a season of inactivity — a time of rest. However, less physical work can often lead to a busier mind. Spending too much time in your head thinking about the “what ifs” usually isn’t a good thing. The “what ifs” aren’t usually about positive things — imagining a bumper crop and how you are going to spend all the money, a bean field with no aphids or white mold, all your calves being born alive and healthy, no downtime for equipment repairs. Plus, you’ve probably been listening to market reports, legislative sessions and talking to other farmers.

Let’s face it, the news is challenging and can shift the negative thinking into overdrive.

We have an internal voice that provides constant chatter inside our minds. For most people, the chatter is full of self-doubt about being not good enough, a loser, worthless, being behind, stupid, fat, awkward, shy, clumsy, etc. It’s also the voice of judgment — almost instant judgment about something being “good or bad.” It is only quiet when you are sleeping, yet it is the voice that wakes you at 3 a.m.

Have you ever thought that if you met your internal chatter as a person, you would not want to be friends or even spend an evening with him or her? You wouldn’t be able to stand the negativity and harsh judgement. Yet, when you hear this stuff in your own mind about yourself, you believe it hook, line and sinker!

These negative thoughts trigger feelings of anxiety and the physical symptoms that go with it — rapid heartbeat, sweatiness, feeling like you can't breathe, dizziness or lightheadedness, tingling in your hands or feet, etc. These physical sensations can create increased anxiety, which makes the physical sensations stronger. If this spiral continues, you can have a panic attack or wonder if you're having a heart attack.

MOVE, REFLECT

The trick to getting out of this downward spiral is to catch yourself in it. Recognize these are JUST THOUGHTS. Take a deep breath and focus on what's in front of you. Take a walk, play with your kids, call somebody, pet your dog — just DO something.

If you are feeling overwhelmed and unmotivated, you might remind yourself why you went into farming. What inspires you to keep going? When you think of old farmers, who did you look up to, and what did you admire about them? What did you learn about farming from them? What words of advice would they have for you? What do you want your reputation as a farmer to be? What would make farming less stressful and more enjoyable for you? Motivation comes from doing something that you value and believe in.

If you feel overwhelmed by the amount of work ahead of you, break it down into small steps. Tackle the most important thing early in the day, and get on a positive roll. This is easier said than done. However, at some point, you have to focus on a small step — and then just do it.

PRACTICE POSITIVITY

And practice. What we practice, we get good at. What are you practicing? If you practice worrying, then you are going to get very good at worrying and will

worry about stuff that isn't even real. If you practice negative thinking, you are going to get very good at negativity. So, what do you want to practice? How do you want to feel?

Typically, as a farmer, you scout for trouble. Our ancestors survived because they asked the “what-if” questions. This line of thinking can prepare us to think through something that we don't have to experience in real life. It is risk management. But like most things, everything in moderation. If you can reel in the negative thinking and avoidance to focus on what you are working on, you will be more likely to notice the sick calf or the rock ahead of you, and take action to avoid trouble.

Farming is all about good years, challenging years and sustainability.

Farming is an endurance race of resilience, and you are going to get through it. Just take it one step at a time!

SET SMALL REALISTIC GOALS, TALK POSITIVE AND FOCUS ON NOW.

BY CYNTHIE CHRISTENSEN

Years ago, I spotted a billboard in California that read: “Worry is misuse of your imagination.”

Isn't that the truth? The mind is very good at imagining all kinds of negative things ahead — what if commodity prices stay low, what if we don't get the crop out before it snows, what if this knee pain gets worse and I have to have surgery, what if I lose my job, what if I can't afford a nice Christmas, and so on. These negative thoughts feel threatening.

Naturally, we try to get away from threatening situations. However, these are imagined threats. All these what-ifs aren't real, and they may never be real. Still, we begin to worry and feel anxious when we imagine all the different ways we might handle these situations in the future.

When thinking about a potential challenging situation, we tend to overestimate how bad it is going to get. Also, we tend to underestimate our ability to handle it successfully. Automatic negative self-talk may start, and you begin to tell yourself things such as, "I'm not good enough; I'm stupid; I'm a loser."

Typically, this triggers stronger feelings of anxiety and panic. Anxiety also triggers physical symptoms of a racing heart, muscle tension, sweating, butterflies in the stomach, tightness in the chest, numbness or tingling, nausea and difficulty breathing. To cope with it all, we might try to do things perfectly or try to handle it our own. We become critical of ourselves, we worry, we avoid or we go overboard trying to please others and put their needs above our own. It becomes a vicious cycle.

One of the biggest coping strategies is avoidance. Sometimes you can get busy with all kinds of little tasks that help you avoid doing the one thing you should be doing — the most important thing.

We can avoid by isolating, pretending everything is OK, being irritable, using alcohol or marijuana, or acting in other ways. As you can imagine, avoidance doesn't help the situation. In fact, it may make it worse.

Worry can become a habit. We all know people who are "worriers." I remember a neighbor being described as a "Nervous Nellie." Rather than being criticized for it, it was just accepted. Unfortunately, worriers often miss out on the daily moments of their lives because they are so focused on the future. Your thoughts

are too far forward and you are trying to predict what will happen rather than focusing on living in the present moment.

Practice mindfulness to cope with stress

Mindfulness is a great coping strategy for anxiety. Mindfulness is a fancy way of saying "pay attention to the experience of now." It really is the only moment you have. Usually, we handle what's in the moment without thinking that it's good or bad, it just is reality. After the moment has passed, we judge whether it was good or bad.

How else can you manage anxiety? Probably one of the most important things is to recognize that you are anxious and stressed. Try to figure out what you are worrying about. If you are unaware of what you are doing, there is no chance to do something different.

One strategy is to set realistic goals for a situation. As an example, if you get overwhelmed by the holidays, take some time to think about what you and your family value about Christmas and simplify.

Instead of trying to do everything, do what is important. Make a realistic plan, break it down into smaller goals, and use your resources. You don't have to do everything by yourself. Talk positively about yourself, and remember past success.

If you find yourself avoiding things you need to be doing, if your thoughts are racing ahead, and/or you have butterflies in your stomach or a tightening in your chest, recognize that you might be misusing your imagination. Take a deep breath and focus on right now.

You can handle "right now."

Christensen is a licensed professional clinical counselor and has her own therapy practice, Oak Ridge Teletherapy. She is also credentialed as a distance counselor, which prepares her to work with clients via the internet. She has worked as an acute psychiatric nurse at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., for the past 18 years. Email her at oakridgeteletherapy@gmail.com.

RURAL RESILIENCE: HOW TO GO WITH FLOW WHEN PRICES ARE LOW

BY CYNTHIE CHRISTENSEN

Recognize that you can 'get up' again, even if you take just small steps.

Life gives you ups and downs, especially on the farm.

Everyone knows that farming is challenging. It can seem that way almost every day. Machinery breaks down, tires go flat, livestock get sick and maybe die, pipes freeze. It rains too much or too little. Prices go down, etc., etc. Many of these things are out of your control.

Most of the time, farmers just take these challenges in stride. They either fix them or accept them. However, when too many things pile up at once, it can get you down. When you start feeling down, it's easy to start worrying and thinking negatively.

When I think of farmers, I think about resilience. By definition, resilience is the ability to become strong, healthy or successful again after something bad happens. Resilience is not a personality trait that you either have or don't have. It involves thoughts, behaviors, and actions — and can be learned, practiced and developed in anyone.



FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO RESILIENCE ARE:

- supportive relationships
- the ability to make realistic plans and take the necessary steps to carry them out
- confidence in yourself and your abilities
- the ability to communicate and problem-solve
- the ability to manage strong feelings and impulses

GET UP AND OUT

There is some truth that misery loves company, especially when commodity prices are low. During tough times, isolating is one of the worst things you can do. Stay connected with your spouse, parents, siblings, friends, pastor, church community, and/or neighbors. Make a quick phone call, suggest meeting for a

meal or a cup of coffee, go to church, visit someone who can't get out, stop by the local elevator or coffee klatch, play cards, or just go to the store for an errand. Volunteer to serve on a board — perhaps church, township or commodity.

If you start to feel like staying home, push yourself to get off the farm or out of the house. If that seems insurmountable, break it down into small steps. If you are really struggling with severe depression and find it hard to get out of bed, then just sit up at the edge of the bed, decide to take a shower and get dressed. Even these small steps are leading you in the right direction.

Sometimes the phone feels like it weighs a ton, yet calling a friend and making a commitment to go someplace might be the extra encouragement you need to socialize. Typically, the effort to get out of the house and connect with people will make you feel better and staying home and being isolated will make you just feel worse. Isolation is one of the most common symptoms of depression.

REACH OUT

On the other hand, you may notice that someone is absent. Make a mental note of that. For example, if a neighbor typically attends church and he or she starts to miss, that may be a warning sign. Please have the courage to reach out to this person. Imagine how much worse you would feel if you stopped going to church and no one noticed. Just saying, "I noticed you weren't in church and wondered if you were OK" could be life-altering.

TAP RESILIENCE HISTORY

Try to avoid making a situation a catastrophe. For example, if you have worries about not being able to pay your mortgage or operating line of credit, your mind can pretty quickly come to the conclusion that the bank is going to take your farm, and you won't be able to farm next season. How much truth is there in that story? It is mentally healthier to make an appointment with your banker and find out the options rather than worry. The situation is what it is, but

worrying doesn't help anything. Recognize that you can't change what has happened, yet you can change how you accept and respond to what has happened.

What you tell yourself about a situation is powerful. Others may tell you that "It's going to be OK," or "You'll get through this." However, if you don't believe it, you are going to ignore what they say. Take a step back and think about similar difficult situations that you've gotten through. Did your family get through the 1980s farm crisis?

Almost every farm operation has seen tough times and gotten through them. Just hearing these old stories can be a good reminder of the resilience of previous generations. How did they handle it? What did you learn? Also, think about future circumstances and plan for what you can do differently.

SET A GOAL

Another piece of building resistance is goal-setting. When things are going well, it can be easy to not set goals or have a business plan, and just go along day by day or season by season. However, when things get tough, it's a chance to really think about your business and why you're doing what you're doing.

Good goal-setting can be helpful to focus on your own business rather than be concerned about what your neighbor is doing. Comparisons can create more stress, because you believe that you're not doing as well as others.

You can spend the day being "busy" with less important issues, which can create more stress at the end of the day. In other words, face your fears. We all know stories about farmers who came close to losing it all — only to transition to a more successful and gratifying farming operation. You can do it!

Christensen is a licensed professional clinical counselor and has her own therapy practice, Oak Ridge Teletherapy. She is also credentialed as a distance

counselor which prepares her to work with clients via the Internet. She has worked as an acute psychiatric nurse at Mayo Clinic in Rochester for the past 18 years.



PAYING ATTENTION TO MENTAL HEALTH DURING DISASTER RECOVERY

LEILANA MCKINDRA

“We know from previous natural disasters, including last year’s wildfire season, that there’s a need for mental health awareness and support...”

After losing so much, families affected by natural disaster may be feeling emotionally overwhelmed, which raises the need to pay attention to potential mental health concerns.

“We know from previous natural disasters, including last year’s wildfire season, that there’s a need for mental health awareness and support for affected families,” said Matt Brosi, Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension marriage and family specialist.

Mental Health First Aid USA recommends a short mental health assessment with the acronym ALGEE, which stands for Assess for risk of suicide, Listen nonjudgmentally, Give reassurance and information, Encourage appropriate professional help and Encourage self-help and other support strategies.

When assessing someone for the risk of suicide or harm, it is okay to ask the person if he/she is having thoughts about harming himself/herself or ending his/her life. You want to know if they have an active plan, so you also can ask them if they have decided how and when they would do so.

“Asking how someone feels does not create suicidal thoughts,” said Brosi, who also is a licensed marital and family therapist and director of the OSU Marriage and Family Therapy program.

OTHER WARNING SIGNS OF SUICIDE INCLUDE:

- Talking about unbearable pain
- Having no reason to live or feeling trapped
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Engaging in reckless behavior
- Withdrawing from normal pleasurable activities or isolating from family and friends
- Lack of feeling good or bad
- Irritability and anxiety

DEPRESSION

Listening nonjudgmentally involves providing a safe environment for someone to express their distress. Creating that safe space for freedom of expression can ultimately help save a person's life.

“Letting the person know you're concerned and willing to help is crucial,” Brosi said. “The acute risk for suicide is often time limited. Helping someone survive the immediate crisis goes a long way toward promoting a positive outcome.”

In giving reassurance and information, try to normalize a person's stressful experience and offer hope for recovery by using supportive statements such as “Given the situation, of course you're feeling overwhelmed.”

Take care to avoid minimizing someone's feelings by saying things like “This too shall pass” or using sarcasm as a deflecting tool to “lighten the mood.”

Finally, encourage distressed family members and friends to seek appropriate professional help as well as to engage in self-help and other strategies.

Speaking to a doctor, counselor, therapist or other medical professional with experience in mental health as well as connecting with family, friends, pastors and other social networks can be hugely helpful.

Exercising, trying relaxation strategies and seeking peer support groups are other good options to combat mental health struggles in general.

Finally, individuals also can call the resources listed below:

RESOURCES FOR MENTAL HEALTH

NATIONAL RESOURCES:

Call 2-1-1, a national hotline that can provide information and a referral on local services in your area.

National Suicide Helpline Center at 800-273-8255.

RESOURCES IN IOWA:

Iowa Extension Service hotline, 800-447-1985

Mark Rosman, a Harlan, Iowa, counselor who writes frequently about the topic.

RESOURCES IN MICHIGAN:

Michigan Association for Suicide Prevention (734-624-8328)

Michigan State University Extension has been providing programs around the state on how to communicate with farmers and farm families in these times of stress. Contact your local Michigan State University Extension office for available programs or to request a program. The MSU Extension Farm Information Resource Management (FIRM) Team also works with farms to assist in financial analysis and options for the farm facing financial difficult times.

Website and material can be found online. Financial decision tools and resources along with contact information can be found at the FIRM Team website.

RESOURCES IN MINNESOTA:

- National Alliance on Mental Illness, St. Paul office, 888-626-4435. Many cities have local chapters.
- Crisis Response for Southeast Minnesota (staffed 24/7), 844-274-7472
- University of Minnesota Extension Mental Health and Well-Being
- Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Farmer Assistance Network; or call toll-free at 877-898-MFAN (6326) or in the Twin Cities at 651-201-6327. The website also lists a farm and rural help line, 833-600-2670.

Cynthia Christensen is a licensed professional clinical counselor and has her own therapy practice, Oak Ridge Teletherapy. She is also credentialed as a distance counselor, which prepares her to work with clients via the Internet. She has worked as an acute psychiatric nurse at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., for the past 18 years. You can also contact her at oakridgeteletherapy@gmail.com.

RESOURCES IN SOUTH DAKOTA

To find counselors in South Dakota, see bit.ly/2Df8rA5.

Credit Counseling:

Julie McClelland, mediation specialist, at 605-773-4181.

Farm and ranch business management instructors

The South Dakota Center for Farm/Ranch Management at Mitchell Tech. Phone 800-684-1969, ext. 7191, or visit sdcfm.com.

RESOURCES IN NORTH DAKOTA

- Prairie St. John's — prairie-stjohns.com, phone 877-333-9565
- FirstLink — myfirstlink.org, phone 701-235-7335
- Regional Human Service Centers — nd.gov/dhs/locations/regionalhsc/index.html, phone 800-472-2622
- Lutheran Social Services — lssnd.org, phone 701-235-7341
- Sanford Behavioral Health — sanfordhealth.org

Credit counseling:

Jessie Pfaff, administration, mediation service, 701-328-1496.

Farm and ranch business management instructors

In North Dakota, call 701-328-3179, or visit ndfarmmanagement.com

RESOURCES IN WISCONSIN

- Contact your local County Extension office for advice and programming close to you
- University of Wisconsin Extension Service Health and Well-Being program
- Detailed discussion of the importance of diet, exercise, mindfulness, planning and connecting with others
<https://uwmadison.app.box.com/v/FarmStressShutske>
- Case study showing the direct impacts of chronic stress on farm families (for discussion and conversation)
<https://uwmadison.app.box.com/v/FarmStressCaseShutske>

- List of 10 recommendations for ag professionals who work closely with farmers and their families

<https://uwmadison.app.box.com/v/FarmStress10Shutske>