Stress and Depression in Farm or Ranch Families
By Roger T. Williams

The current drought and ongoing financial stress is not confined to the ranch or farm. As with many family run businesses, stress from the business gradually spills over into the home and affects the entire family. “In times like this, it is important for friends, members of extended families, neighbors and others to be aware of the signs that a family may be under severe stress and in need of assistance,” says Roger T. Williams, University of Wisconsin –Madison/Extension Emeritus Professor.

What are some signs or symptoms of stress?

• Change in routines. The farmer or rancher and their family members stop attending church, drop out of 4-H or other groups, or no longer stop in at the local coffee shop or feed mill.

• Increase in illness. Farmers or ranchers and their family members may experience more colds or routine illnesses or have other chronic conditions such as aches, pains or a persistent cough.

• Appearance of the farm or ranch declines. The family no longer takes pride in the way the ranch or farmstead look or fails to keep up with maintenance work.

• Care of livestock declines. Animals may not be cared for in the usual way; they may lose condition, appear gaunt or show signs of neglect.

• Increase in injuries. The risk of farm or ranch injury can increase due to fatigue or loss of ability to concentrate. Children may be at risk if there isn’t adequate childcare as a result of finances or other conditions.

• Children show signs of stress. Farm or ranch family children may act out, decline in academic performance or be increasingly absent from school. They may also show signs of physical or verbal abuse or neglect.

What are signs of chronic, prolonged stress?

When a person is stressed out for long periods of time – chronic, prolonged stress – they may experience a number of signs and symptoms.

• Physical
  - Headaches
  - Backaches
  - Ulcers
  - 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...?”

What can I do to help?

Friends, neighbors, and business associates can help by putting the stressed family in touch with professionals who are trained to provide assistance. People who are concerned about a stressed person or family can do the following:

Listen for signs and symptoms that the person or family needs help-financial, legal or personal counseling. Be aware of the agencies and resources available in your community. Find out what services they offer and what their limitations are. Determine which agency or community resource would be most appropriate to address the problem. Do staff in these agencies have an understanding of the lifestyle and stressors facing ranchers and farmers?

Discuss the referral with the person or family (“It looks like you are feeling frustrated with your financial problems. I think this person or agency could help you deal with your situation.”) Explore the individual’s or family’s willingness to initiate contact with the community resource. Ask: “How do you feel about seeking help from this person or agency?”

If the person or family is unwilling to take the initiative or if there is some danger if action is not taken, you, as concerned friend should take the initiative. Ask for permission to contact the agency; then call that agency, share your concern and discuss how the agency will respond to this referral.

What should I do if the situation seems urgent?

If it’s an emergency situation and the agency can’t act quickly, you may need to take other actions. You can call 911 for local emergency services. In rare situations where a person is suicidal, it’s important to stay with that person until help arrives or until you can get the person to someone who can help—a family physician, clergy person or hospital emergency room.

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