

## Rural Stress

### What is it? What can we do about it?

*"Things have gotten real bad around here. My husband and I fight all the time, he can't sleep, he complains about headaches, stomachaches. The kids are cranky and yesterday I almost hit my youngest for fighting with his sister. We're behind in our payments and we have a meeting that involves our creditors in two weeks. I don't know how we're going to make it. Talk about stress, we're up to our eyeballs in it."*

*Saskatchewan farmer*

#### WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is our response to anything that threatens our survival. That survival can be physical, emotional, financial, or any kind of survival that's important to us. But not all stress is bad. When we are excited about something the anticipation we feel, our mental and physical readiness for the task is called eustress. Eustress energizes us. It's what keeps us going during seeding or harvesting. But when we suffer from too much stress or for too long, it is called distress. Distress, over long periods of time, can result in severe physical and/or emotional problems. Some physicians' say that 80% of patient visits in rural Saskatchewan are due to stress related illnesses.

#### WHAT CAUSES RURAL STRESS?

Many things. By the very nature of farm work, a lot of our daily lives are not under our control. For instance we have no control over the weather, market prices or interest rates. The equipment can break down at any time. For those who live in town, stress is caused by the loss of business, and the migration of people from rural to urban environments. As people leave the rural areas, schools close and children have to be bussed greater distances to attend school. This is stressful for them and for their parents. All of these things are called stressors. For a questionnaire about stressors, see below. It is important to sort out which stressors you have control over and which you do not. It is sometimes helpful to sit down and make two columns on a piece of paper. On one side put "Stressors I have control over" and on the other side put "Stressors I have no control over". This simple exercise can be very important in helping you sort out the two.

Sometimes people have to make choices between two things that are equally good or bad. For instance, for a farmer, planting lentils can be good because it gets a better market price than wheat, but it is more susceptible to problems than wheat and so it is more risky to grow. Wheat usually doesn't fetch the same market price as lentils but is a more secure crop. Either choice has advantages and disadvantages. This is stressful. Contrarily, when a farmer faces financial difficulties, he or she may have to choose between selling land or transferring land back to the creditor. Each of these choices is usually negative and serves as another example of a stressor.

Things that are out of our control and which last a long period of time create the most stress.

A portion of James and Lilly Walker's "Farming Stress Inventory" follows, giving an idea of the myriad of stressors, which may occur in the farming business. The complete "Farming Stress Inventory" (with scoring interpretation) is included in their publication. In some studies, the following stressors were identified as being common for farm people. Use this inventory to help you become aware of your stressors. The Walkers suggest you then categorize those in the 4 to 5 range according to the following headings:

1. financial
2. weather
3. work overload
4. social
5. hassles
6. worry

Then prioritize which ones you want to work on first and with whom. Discuss your results with your partner and/or family.

Degree of Stress:

- 1 = Low Stress
- 3 = Moderate Stress
- 5 = High Stress

1	<b>Sudden and significant increase in debt load</b>	1 2 3 4 5	33	<b>Use of hazardous chemicals on the farm</b>	1 2 3 4 5
2	<b>Significant production loss due to disease or pests</b>	1 2 3 4 5	34	<b>Dealing with salespeople</b>	1 2 3 4 5
3	<b>Insufficient regular cash flow to meet financial obligations or for daily necessities</b>	1 2 3 4 5	35	<b>Long work hours</b>	1 2 3 4 5

4	Delay in planting or harvesting due to weather	12 34 5		36	Few vacations away from the farm	12 34 5
5	Media distortions of the farm situation	12 34 5		37	Concerns or worries about the unpredictability	12 34 5
6	Low commodity prices	12 34 5		38	Feeling isolated on the farm	12 34 5
7	Significant changes in type or size of farming operation	12 34 5		39	Having to travel long distances for services, shopping and health care	12 34 5
8	Meeting with a loan officer for an additional loan	12 34 5		40	Pressures in having too much to do in too little time	12 34 5
9	Purchase of major machinery, facility, land or livestock	12 34 5		41	Keeping up with new technology and products	12 34 5
10	Not being considered as part of the farm business by others	12 34 5		42	Worrying about market conditions	12 34 5
11	Taking an off-the-farm job to meet expenses	12 34 5		43	Having to make decisions without all the necessary information	12 34 5
12	Prolonged bad weather	12 34 5		44	Being expected to work on the farm as well as manage the house and family	12 34 5
13	Problems with weeds or insects	12 34 5		45	Worrying about owing money	12 34 5
14	Machinery breakdown at a critical time	12 34 5		46	Worrying about keeping the farm in the family	12 34 5
15	Not enough time to spend with spouse	12 34 5		47	Not seeing enough people	12 34 5
16	Crop loss due to weather, hail, not enough rain, excessive rain, frost, etc	12 34 5		48	Not having enough money or time for entertainment and recreation	12 34 5
17	Personal illness during planting or harvesting	12 34 5		49	Death of a parent or member of immediate family	12 34 5
18	Deciding when to sell	12 34 5		50	Death of a friend	12 34 5
19	Rising expenses	12 34 5		51	Problems in balancing work and family responsibilities	12 34 5

20	<b>Government policies and regulations</b>	1 2 3 4 5		52	<b>Problems in farm operating</b>	1 2 3 4 5
21	<b>Concerns about the continued financial viability of the farm</b>	1 2 3 4 5		53	<b>Divorce or marital separation</b>	1 2 3 4 5
22	<b>Having a loan request turned down</b>	1 2 3 4 5		54	<b>Problems with a partnership</b>	1 2 3 4 5
23	<b>Farming-related accident</b>	1 2 3 4 5		55	<b>Daughter or son leaving home</b>	1 2 3 4 5
24	<b>Government "free trade" policies</b>	1 2 3 4 5		56	<b>Trouble with parents or in-laws</b>	1 2 3 4 5
25	<b>Government "cheap food" policies</b>	1 2 3 4 5		57	<b>Conflict with spouse over spending priorities</b>	1 2 3 4 5
26	<b>Metric conversion</b>	1 2 3 4 5		58	<b>Major decisions being made without my knowledge or input</b>	1 2 3 4 5
27	<b>Breeding or reproductive difficulties with livestock</b>	1 2 3 4 5		59	<b>Having to wear too many hats (e.g. farmer, spouse, father, mother, housekeeper, business person, etc)</b>	1 2 3 4 5
28	<b>No farm help or loss of help when needed</b>	1 2 3 4 5		60	<b>Surface-rights negotiations</b>	1 2 3 4 5
29	<b>Need to learn and adjust to new government regulations and policies</b>	1 2 3 4 5		61	<b>Other recent events which have had an impact on your life. List and rate</b>	1 2 3 4 5

**DISCUSSION NOTES:**

## Acceptance skills

### 1. Keep it in perspective

*When worries and fears are causing you a lot of stress, ask yourself:*

- *Has this happened before? What did I learn from that experience?*
- *What's the worst possible outcome?*
- *What else can I do?*
- *What advice would I give a friend in this situation?*
- *Five years from now, how important will this seem?*

### 2. Use positive self-talk

*Many people find that repeating a saying helps them accept what they can't change. Some examples are listed below. Choose (or invent) one as a "secret weapon" against bad times.*

- *We/I can gain strength from this.*
- *We/I have skills, abilities and talents that go beyond this farm.*
- *We have each other, our family and friends.*
- *There is more to life than this farm.*

### 3. Keep a positive attitude

*It's hard to smile when things are going wrong. There are times when you need to blow off steam or express your resentment. But letting negative emotions take over completely only makes the situation worse. If you focus on the positive side, you're more likely to find a way out. A positive attitude can become contagious, making it easier to live and work with others.*

### 4. Develop a stress-resistant personality

*Some people create stress for themselves and others. Type A personalities have these traits in common:*

- *Unrealistically high expectations*
- *Inability to relax*
- *Constant dissatisfaction*
- *Always in a hurry*

*If you recognize these traits in yourself, be aware they can make you more prone to stress-related disease. Try to accept the fact that reality often falls short of expectations. People who are always rushing and pushing often accomplish less than people who take time to think through the problem. Getting regular, non-competitive exercise is a good way to temper a Type A personality. Another way to develop stress resistance is to consider problems as challenges. Look for possibilities and creative solutions. Commitment to family, friends, religion and community activities also helps buffer stress and put problems in perspective. Being "connected" to others can provide strength and meaning.*

### 5. Get counselling

*Sometimes the only way to deal with stressful events is to get professional help. Seeking counselling is not a sign of weakness; it takes strength to recognize when you can't go it alone. Learn to make use of, not avoid, expert resources. If you feel completely alone, overwhelmed or hopeless, seek professional help.*

## Coping skills

### 1. Physical fitness

You can literally run away from stress - or bike, walk, dance or lift weights away from stress! Physical fitness helps fight stress in two ways:

- A physically fit body is better able to withstand the effects of stress. A balanced lifestyle that includes regular exercise, healthy meals and adequate sleep gives you energy and endurance to handle whatever comes your way.
- Exercise has a calming effect that lasts long after the exercise session itself is over. Repetitive exercises like running or cross-country skiing can produce a mental state like meditation. Aerobic exercise that gets your heart pounding for at least 20 minutes releases chemicals in the brain called "endorphins" that reduce depression and stress.

### 2. Relaxation

Do you know how to relax? Many of the ways we think we relax - drinking, smoking, watching TV, eating - do nothing to reverse the physical effects of stress. True relaxation is a skill that you can learn and use when you need it. Stress tenses your muscles, makes your breathing shallow, raises your blood pressure, makes your heart pound and clouds your judgment. Relaxation skills can reverse those effects to make you feel better, think better and perform better.

- Choose a time when you're not extremely stressed to learn the skills. Once you've learned and practised them a few times, you'll find they help when you need them.
- Go to a quiet place. Sit or lie in a comfortable position, and try the following. Scan your body, looking for tension by focussing on each part. Start with your feet and work up through your legs, buttocks, torso, arms, shoulders, head and neck. Let your jaw drop. Allow your eyelids to be heavy and relaxed. At each place that you feel tension, take a deep, full breath and imagine the tightness "melting" as you breathe out. You can also tighten each area for a count of five, and then allow it to relax. Try squeezing the muscles in your face, arms, legs and buttocks. Feel the difference as you let them melt.
- Allow your thoughts to pass through your mind without paying attention to them. Repeat the following to yourself:

*"I am relaxed and warm."*

*"My hands are heavy and warm."*

*"My heartbeat is slow and regular."*

*"I feel peaceful and still."*

*Continue to breathe slowly and regularly.*

- Best of all, once you feel relaxed, enjoy it. Imagine you are in a beautiful place, sitting in front of a campfire on a starry night, or drifting in a boat on a calm lake - your favourite place. Remain in this relaxed state for 5 to 10 minutes before getting up.

### 3. Set "S-M-A-R-T" goals

*It's important to get a picture of what you, ideally, would like to have happen in your life. Use the relaxation exercise described in the section, "Coping Skills". Visualize all parts of your life - home, work and recreational settings. Then picture your ideal situation - three months, six months, one year, five years from today. What will you be doing? How will you look? What will you be feeling? Which people will be a part of your life, and what will be the quality of your relationships with them?*

*Now the trick is to identify those skills that can help you reach your goals. Awareness skills can help you understand what's happening, within yourself, your family and your community. Acceptance skills can change your attitude. Action skills such as time management and communication can increase your effectiveness. You can use coping skills to handle the strain of increased workloads. Choosing "S-M-A-R-T" goals can turn stress into personal satisfaction and productivity.*

**Specific.** *Set a concrete goal that addresses behaviour and results, not emotions.*

*Example: "For the next month, when I feel stressed, I will use exercise or relaxation to cope." When a goal isn't do-able, revise it.*

**Measurable.** *You must be able to tell when you arrive, and to set milestones along the way.*

*Example: "My goal is to reduce the times when I feel stressed to fewer than one a day."*

**Agreed upon.** *Don't be the Lone Ranger; ask others to support and help you.*

*Example: "My spouse knows that stress management is important, and will be supportive when I need to exercise or relax."*

**Rewarding.** *Behaviour change should be as much fun as possible. Decide how you will reward yourself, both for achieving your main goal and passing milestones along the way.*

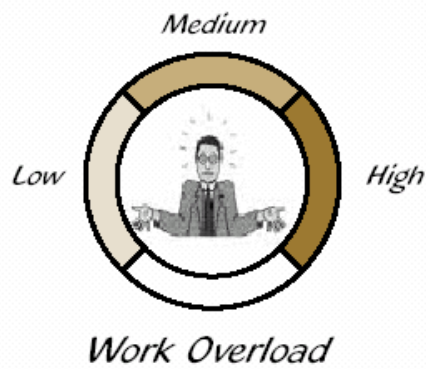
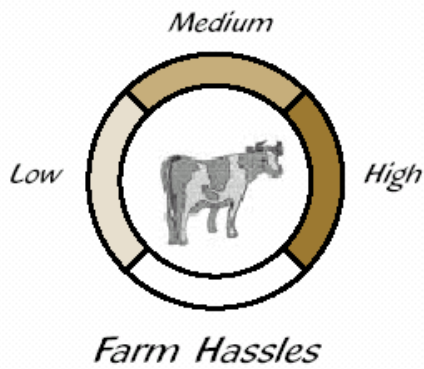
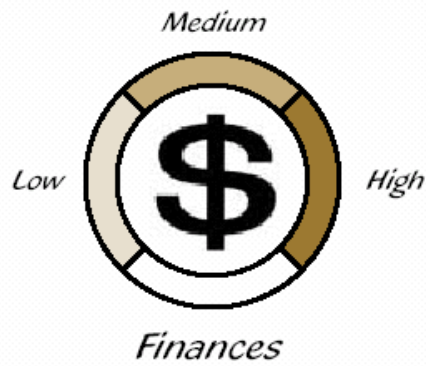
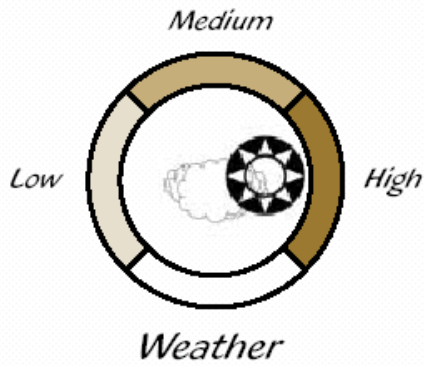
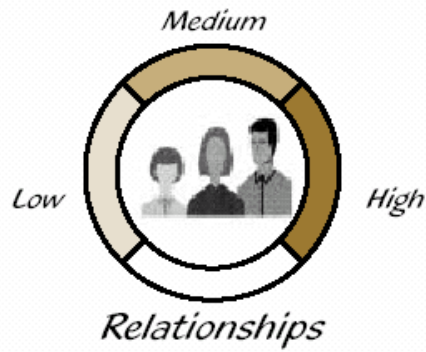
*Example: "For each week that I meet my stress management goal, I will reward myself with one evening, doing what I want to do."*

**Trackable.** *Keep track of your progress in a visible way. This helps keep you from getting discouraged by showing your day-to-day improvement.*

*Example: "I will keep a daily stress log, listing stressors, how I reacted and how I handled it."*



# PRESSURE POINTS WHERE ARE YOURS?



## *Basic stress prevention*

- 1. Exercise regularly*  
*A fast walk, slow jog or any activity that gets your heart rate up into the 120's and 130's and keeps it there for 20 minutes or more three times a week will improve your endurance and soak up tension.*
- 2. Relax*  
*Learn techniques of deep breathing, meditation and muscle relaxation. Practice them daily and at times when you feel uptight.*
- 3. Set priorities*  
*Determine what you value the most in your life and make sure you are spending time, money and energy on them rather than on those things others value.*
- 4. Choose your response*  
*Develop your "bag of tricks." You can run away (from confrontation), you can fight, or you can compromise, bargain, negotiate or cooperate. Don't get caught in responses that are destructive for you.*
- 5. Solve the problem*  
*None of the above is more than a quick fix until you determine what's bugging you and move to change, neutralize or otherwise deal with the situation.*
- 6. Avoid the chemical haze*  
*Booze, tranquilizers, eating, cigarettes, coffee - any or all of them may help for a short period but all of them have negative side effects and make stress worse over the long haul.*
- 7. Listen to your body*  
*Pay attention to muscle aches, indigestion, tooth grinding, fist clenching and the like. Your body is trying to tell you to use one of the above ways of dealing with stress.*
- 8. Reach out*  
*Share your concerns with family, self-help groups and organizations working on farm income issues. You will gain and give strength to others.*



# Where to get Help:

## Ontario: The Farm Line 1-888-451-2903

*The **Farm Stress Line** is a support line of farmers, men and women from rural communities who are trained to assist people in crisis. They handle all calls in confidence and have access to a computerized database of services. They provide information on programs and services related to personal and family matters, farm financial crisis and other issues affecting the farm operation.*

## OTHER SOURCES OF HELP:

Agency	Telephone Number
Farm Credit Corporation Canada	1-800-387-3232
Farm Consultation Services (Pro-active business planning)	1-888-777-9309
Kid's Help Phone Line (24 hours)	1-800-668-6868
RCMP (24-hour Operational Communication Centre)	1-519-640-7267 or 9-1-1
Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse	(613) 235-4048
Alcoholics Anonymous	(519) 633-0430
Mental Health Services Toll-free (within Ontario)	1-800-875-6213
Sexual Assault Crisis Line- London	(519) 438-2272
Social Services	(519) 631-1570
Gambling Helpline (toll-free; 24 hours)	1-888-230-3505
Victim Support Line (Toll Free)	1-888-579-2888
Clergyman/Priest:	
Family Doctor:	
Lawyer:	
Accountant:	

**IF YOU ARE EXPERIENCING MEDIUM OR HIGH STRESS, CALL FOR HELP NOW.**

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