

Self-help groups Neighbor to Neighbor

Session 5—Managing stress

To get ready	Activities	Materials	Time
<p>Obtain the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Session 5 leader guide/discussion materials* (one per group member) 2. (Optional) Session 6 leader guide/discussion materials* (one for next leader) <p>This session will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. help people identify stressful changes they have experienced related to farm and family 2. help people become aware of stress symptoms they may have 3. help people discover ways of coping with problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greetings and settling in 		10 minutes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to session 	<i>Life events scale for farm families (5A)</i>	10 minutes
	Leader reads introduction out loud; then individuals complete check list.		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group discussion 	Questions, p. 4	15 minutes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activity 	<i>Stress exhaustion symptoms (5B)</i>	8 minutes
	Leader reads directions out loud; then individuals check the symptoms they have experienced.		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activity 	<i>Stress cards (5C)</i>	17 minutes
	(Prepare one set of stress card pages per person prior to the session. Photocopy pages 7–8 backed and pages 9–10 backed.)		
	Leader reads introduction out loud. Next, individuals cut out and arrange cards. Then the leader divides the group into pairs to discuss stress cards.		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leader discusses shield activity for home study 	<i>Stress buffer shield (5D)</i>	5 minutes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stretch time and refreshments 		5 minutes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured sharing time 		60 minutes
	Allow all group members a chance to speak by using a kitchen timer. Each person in turn sets the timer for approximately 5–10 minutes depending on the size of the group. Be flexible on those occasions when someone may need to take more than his or her share of the time.		
	Respond: Name the thing that works the best for you in managing stress. When do you use it?		

Approximate total = 2 hours, 10 minutes

* Also available on the World Wide Web:
<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/pubs>

Reviewed by Colleen Jolly, family life specialist, Iowa State University Extension.

... and justice for all

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Stanley R. Johnson, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.

File: Family life 3

This ISU Extension publication was formerly published as FE-F-270g.

Life events scale for farm families

Activity 5A

Introduction

Experts agree that people often feel stress when many changes occur in their lives. Of course, to live is to experience change and there is no way to avoid all stress. While some stress is inevitable and may even add zest to life, there is certainly a point beyond which more stress can be harmful. When too many changes take place too fast, people may feel more stress than they can handle.

Certain kinds of changes are more apt to produce problems. When a change occurs unexpectedly you do not have the chance to prepare yourself to deal with it. Also, when you have no control over the change happening, it's harder to handle. When the problem continues over a long period of time, you are worn down and may begin to feel like giving up.

Stressful events or changes can happen within the family or in the farm operation itself. You each have a checklist that lists changes or difficulties you may have experienced. Check the items you have experienced in the last year. Some experiences have to do with major changes in the farming operation or family, while others have to do with daily annoyances or hassles. For any item that has been unusually upsetting to you or your family, put down two checks. After you have checked all the items in each section that pertain to you, add up the number of checks in each section. Then add the total combined score.

Life events scale for farm families

(Activity 5A, continued)

Check the events that you have experienced in the past year. Put two checks next to events that were/are unusually stressful.

Family life events

- Family illness during critical time
- Major personal illness
- Family member has serious emotional problems
- Alcohol or other drug abuse by self or family member
- Self or family member with gambling problem
- Death of spouse
- Death of close family member
- Family starts receiving food stamps
- Major increase in arguments with spouse
- Aged parent committed to nursing home
- Too little cash for basic food/clothing needs
- Spouse starts work outside home
- Child has behavior problems
- Balancing work and family responsibility
- Aged parent becomes ill, needs special care
- Divorce or separation
- Separation/divorce of son or daughter
- Son or daughter leaves home
- Spouse takes second job
- Parent-child operating agreement
- Family member demands new privileges
- Trouble with in-laws or parents
- Pregnancy
- Marriage of son or daughter
- Unexpected guests

Total checks:

Farm work stress

- Disease outbreak
- Valuable animal dies
- High debt load
- Production loss due to disease, insects
- Poor cash flow to meet obligations
- Changes in government regulations
- Uncertain economic trends
- Sudden drop in commodities
- Investment with no return guarantee
- Machinery or facility purchase
- No control over weather
- Uncertainty about when to sell
- Size change in operation
- Failure to make cost-saving decision
- Operate partnership
- Retire from farming
- Meet with loan officer
- Compete for land
- Decreasing land value
- High interest rates
- Loss of leased land
- Having to sell land
- Bankruptcy
- Hold farm sale
- Have to quit farming
- Sell the family farm

Total checks:

Daily farm work hassles

- Day when nothing goes right
- Machinery breakdown
- Loss of help or no help when needed
- Weather caused delays
- Long work hours
- Livestock getting out of pens
- Unplanned interruptions
- Crop yield uncertainty
- Handling toxic pesticide
- Service problem with agribusiness
- Dealing with salespeople
- Farm odors or dirt in home
- Running errands
- Balancing farm/off-farm work

Total checks:

Family life events total: _____

Farm work stress total: _____

Daily farm work hassles total: _____

Combined total : _____

Life events scale for farm families

(Activity 5A, continued)

If your total overall score is higher than 10 or 15 points, you have experienced many difficulties recently and you may be feeling signs of stress. However, someone who has a lower score also may be feeling stress. Much depends on the individual's and family's difficulties in the past, and their present ability to cope with stress.

Group discussion questions

1. In which section do you have the most checks?
2. In which section did you mark the most double checks for things that were unusually upsetting?
3. Look through the list of daily farm work hassles. Are there any items that you could do something about so you don't have the problems or the problems are less upsetting in the future?
4. Try the above suggestion for the other two checklists.
5. What action have you already taken to deal with the problems you experienced in the agricultural stress lists?
6. What action have you already taken to deal with the problems you experienced in the family life events list?

Stress exhaustion symptoms**Activity 5B**

People react to the stress in their lives in many ways. The combination of what we've inherited from our parents, the environment we've grown up in, and our own outlook on life influence what we feel when changes or difficulties take place. Two people could experience the same life events, however, one person may feel that he or she is comfortable and in control, while another person may feel overwhelmed emotionally and physically.

The following checklist shows five kinds of symptoms. Probably no one will experience all the symptoms in any one list, but many people will have experienced some symptoms from each list. Looking at your own stress symptoms can help you see what's going on in your life. If you check a lot of symptoms it doesn't mean there's something "wrong with you." Instead it may just mean that you've had a lot of adjustments and difficulties to handle recently.

Check the symptoms of exhaustion you have noticed lately in yourself.

Physical

- appetite change
- headaches
- tension
- fatigue
- insomnia
- weight change
- colds
- muscle aches
- digestive upsets
- pounding heart
- accident prone
- teeth grinding
- rash
- restlessness
- foot-tapping
- finger-drumming
- increased alcohol, drug, tobacco use

Mental

- forgetfulness
- dull senses
- poor concentration
- low productivity
- negative attitude
- confusion
- lethargy
- whirling mind
- boredom
- spacing out
- negative self-talk

Emotional

- anxiety
- frustration
- the "blues"
- mood swings
- bad temper
- nightmares
- crying spells
- irritability
- "no one cares"
- depression
- nervous laugh
- worrying
- easily discouraged
- little joy

Relational

- isolation
- intolerance
- resentment
- loneliness
- lashing out
- hiding
- clamming up
- lowered sex drive
- nagging
- distrust
- fewer contacts with friends
- lack of intimacy
- using people

Spiritual

- emptiness
- loss of meaning
- doubt
- unforgiving
- martyrdom
- looking for magic
- loss of direction
- needing to "prove" self
- cynicism
- apathy

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Stress cards

Activity 5C

Introduction

So far you've checked all the difficult things that have happened to you and the symptoms you've experienced. If that's all there were to say about stress it would be pretty depressing. But the good news is that there are many ways to deal with stress. Talking about how to help ourselves can give us a way out.

The stress cards that you are receiving contain positive things you can do to feel better, and ways that your stress can get even worse.

- Each person should cut out the cards and sort them into two rows.
- In the top row put all the cards that make stress worse and in the bottom row put the cards that help out.
- Place the helping ideas that you already use into one pile.
- Then pick one card that has something you'd like to learn how to use. The back of each card explains the idea on the front in more detail.
- After you each put your cards in rows and choose positive ways to deal with stress, we'll break into pairs to discuss the stress cards.

Adapted from *Stress cards* (HE-MI-2531), developed by the Minnesota University Extension Service.

<p>“Not knowing is worse than knowing.”</p> <p>Uncertainty</p>	<p>“Accentuate the positive.”</p> <p>Personal and family strengths</p>	<p>“Burning the candle at both ends.”</p> <p>Burn-out</p>
<p>“Whose fault is it, anyway?”</p> <p>Blaming</p>	<p>“When the solution becomes a problem.”</p> <p>Negative coping</p>	<p>“After all that has gone wrong, one more thing might break the camel’s back.”</p> <p>Stress pile-up</p>

Burn-out

If you're a leader or an in-charge person in your family or workplace—watch out for “burn-out.” Not everything that goes wrong is your problem. It may be that you have to let some things or people go at the moment. Taking care of yourself helps you to take care of others.

Personal and family strengths

A family that works as a team is better able to solve problems. A family that is flexible about who does what can manage stress better. Men can help with child care and housework; women can help with earning money outside the home. Such teamwork and flexibility will help your family make it in spite of stress and trouble.

Uncertainty

We can cope with almost anything as long as we have the facts. This is true for losses in your work life as well as personal life. Get as many facts as you can about what happened to you, then face those facts head-on.

Stress pile-up

When you have a string of problems over time, watch out. Take care of yourself. Get support. With stress pile-up, you will be more vulnerable to crisis. When there's heavy traffic on a bridge, you need to increase the supports underneath. Talk with your family and friends about the pile-up and how you feel; reach out in the community, get information.

Negative coping

Coping with stresses and strains of life may lead toward behaviors or situations that make life even more stressful. Taking one drink may help you relax at the end of the day, but taking several drinks may only make the problem worse and get you into more trouble. Make sure that the coping you do is constructive and actually helps your situation. Learn ways of constructive coping.

Blaming

Blaming yourself or other people is not a constructive way to deal with a problem. A problem may be more stressful if you think it's your fault. Forgive yourself and move on. We're all human and can make mistakes. Get what help you need so you don't make the same mistake twice. If the problem is caused elsewhere, decide what you can do about it and what you can't. Face facts.

<p>“The trick is to know when to accept the situation the way it is and when to change it.”</p> <p>Acceptance</p>	<p>“What you see is what you get.”</p> <p>Definition of the situation</p>	<p>“I get by with a little help from my friends.”</p> <p>An expression of social-emotional support</p>
<p>“Loosen up and let go.”</p> <p>Tension reduction</p>	<p>“Nature’s way of managing stress.”</p> <p>Fitness and diet</p>	<p>“If I don’t think about it, maybe it will go away.”</p> <p>Denial</p>

An expression of social-emotional support

Having the support of other people at any time, but particularly in difficult times, is very important. It is the single most effective way of dealing with the stresses and strains of everyday life. Take the time to learn how to reach out—to family members, friends, neighbors, or clergy.

Definition of the situation

How you see the situation is important in affecting how much stress you feel. A loss for one person may be “dreadful,” for another it is seen only as a minor bother. Many things influence a person’s perceptions of a situation. Try to look at your perceptions and determine why some situations are stressful for you.

Acceptance

Knowing when to act and when to accept a situation is a key factor in stress management. Sometimes something happens that is unfortunate, but nothing can be done to change it. Even when you get the facts, there is no hope. Continuing to push for a solution will only add to your stress; but acceptance of the situation will lower the stress. In other situations, there is something you can do about the problem. If so, get to work.

Denial

Avoiding a situation, or the fact that it exists, is a way to delay moving through a difficult time. Not thinking about unpleasant things will not make them go away. Get more information and face the facts so that you can decide what to do.

Fitness and diet

Physical fitness and good nutrition help our bodies withstand the stresses and strains of life. It’s important to maintain both, especially during difficult times. Take some time to learn and think about fitness and nutrition in your life.

Tension reduction

The biggest favor you can do for yourself is to recognize signs of tension in yourself—e.g., backaches, stiff neck or shoulders, insomnia, irritability, shortness of breath, or increase in smoking or alcohol use. Be willing to face the signs and learn how to deal with them.

Stress buffer shield

Activity 5D

A stress buffer is a coping skill that helps people transform stress into a positive force and protects them from breaking down under pressure. For home study, fill in the sections of this stress shield to help you find ways to cope with stress.

The diagram is a shield shape divided into five sections. The top section is split into two equal halves. The middle section is split into two equal halves. The bottom section is a single wide section. Each section contains a prompt for reflection or action.

Life experiences that have strengthened me and taught me to manage	My support networks: people who nurture and console me
Attitudes/beliefs that help protect me or help me view it differently	Physical self-care habits that prepare me or help me release tension
Action skills I can use to change the situation	

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