Managing Farm and Family Stress

With this year's wild weather ride in some areas of Iowa and current low crop and livestock prices, many farm families are feeling significant financial and emotional stress.

If you are part of a farm family, stress has always been part of your job description. But if you or others in your family are experiencing sleepless nights, short tempers, or constant worry, it could be a sign that stress is taking a dangerous toll on your health and relationships. Recognizing stress overload early can help you take steps to minimize its harmful effects.

Because your farm business and family are unique, the way you experience and react to stress will differ from the way your neighbor will experience stress. Even if your operation can withstand major financial fluctuations, your family may still have to adjust expectations, dreams, and goals to fit new realities.

One of life's biggest stresses – change – can come both from within families and from sources outside the family or farm boundaries. As economic challenges necessitate new ways of working together, comfortable routines are altered and a family member's sense of order and security can be threatened.

While a certain amount of stress is unavoidable and usually manageable, too much stress can hurt both physical and mental health.

Symptoms of stress
It helps to be aware of symptoms of stress in yourself, a friend or a family member. You might notice an increase in physical signs such as headaches, lingering fatigue, disrupted sleep patterns, and more frequent illness.

Although you might think a family member just has a problem getting along with people, his or her frequent anger and irritability could be emotional symptoms of excessive stress. Inability to relax, discouragement, and a sense of futility also commonly result from prolonged stress.

It's important to separate the original problems or causes of stress from the resulting symptoms. Over time, stress can result in low productivity, increased use of drugs or alcohol, forgetfulness, marital or other relationship problems, loneliness and resentment.

Managing stress
Once individuals recognize symptoms of stress overload, how should they manage it? It's unrealistic to think you can eliminate stress, but there are ways to reduce the impacts. These tactics have been helpful to many people during particularly stressful times:

- Do something about one small piece of a bigger problem.
- Ask for help from family, friends, or community resources.
- Use exercise to reduce symptoms of stress.
- Do something enjoyable each day.
- Protect physical health by eating well and avoiding alcohol or drugs.
- Work on accepting change as a natural part of life.

Barriers to managing stress
Unfortunately, reactions to stress overload can make it difficult to take steps that might help. Too much responsibility can make it seem almost impossible to take charge. Some barriers that can block change include:
• Trying to solve too many problems at once.
• Blaming others or not recognizing the degree of control we do have.
• Letting stress affect our judgment.
• Using drugs or alcohol as substitutes for solving the problems.
• Having a negative outlook.

**Strengthen relationships**
To help yourself take action during stressful times, strengthen personal and family relationships by:

• Increasing the time spent with supportive family and friends, who are important buffers in times of stress.
• Practicing positive communication with loved ones by listening and expressing appreciation.
• Making personal health a priority (because it is essential for coping with stress).
• Strengthening spiritual resources.
• Being mindful of what is most important to oneself and one's family.
• Remaining aware of ongoing changes that contribute to stress, and postponing new commitments if they will add stress.
• Enhancing money and time management skills.
• Reaching out to people in the community (being there for others strengthens one's own circle of support).