

HOW TO TALK WITH FARMERS UNDER STRESS

Farmers face multiple issues that can cause acute or chronic stress on a daily basis.

Problems with machinery, weather, labor, animal or plant diseases, commodity prices and economics, and even consumer opinions are all issues farmers have little control over. You can provide support and help to farmers who are going through times of extreme stress, but it's important to *be prepared*. By keeping an open eye for the warning signs of stress, practicing active listening and empathizing with farmers, you may be able to help them and their families avert a more serious situation.

WARNING SIGNS OF STRESS

Warning signs people show when under stress vary by the individual. Consider their demeanor, words and behavior in the context of what is normal for them. Signs commonly observed in farmers under stress include:

- **Changes in emotions** – show little enthusiasm or energy for the future, anxiety, loss of spirit, depression, loss of humor
- **Changes in attitudes and cognitive skills** – become more frequently critical or agitated over small things, lack concentration, have trouble making decisions
- **Changes in behavior** – become quieter than usual, have trouble sleeping, do not join friends for coffee; miss meetings with farm staff, suppliers or the banker
- **Changes on the farm or ranch** – reduce care given to farm animals, machinery or fields, or themselves, increase in accidents

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Other potential warning signs might include any change in routine behavior or appearance, injury or prolonged illness or increased drinking (or drug use) (Fetsch, 2012). Farmers may also express negative thoughts about themselves (“I’m a failure,” “It’s impossible to make it in this business climate”) and even disclose they are considering including suicide to end the problems they face.



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WAYS TO HELP

If you believe that a farmer is going through a difficult time and showing signs of stress, you can help by taking the following actions:

PRACTICE ACTIVE LISTENING

Just being there and listening are the first and most useful forms of help you can provide. There are several ways to listen, but in this case, it's important that you practice active listening. Active listening requires using your ears and eyes while encouraging the person you are interacting with to reveal more about their thoughts and feelings than they may at first be willing to share.

WAYS TO HELP, CONTINUED

Questions and statements that might be helpful to use when talking to a farmer under stress:

- I hear you saying ____ (repeat back the main concerns the farmer is expressing).
- This sounds like a lot to manage. How are you coping with this? (or, What are you doing to take care of yourself?)
- It sounds like the current situation is very difficult. What can I do to support you?
- These are some tough challenges. How can I help?
- Would it be helpful if we work together on an action plan for how to manage your concerns?
- Every situation is different. In a similar situation on another farm, they tried _____. What do you think about that?
- Are there other people who have been helpful or supportive when times have been tough in the past? Are any of those people able to help now?

SHOW EMPATHY RATHER THAN SYMPATHY

Often, when we hear about someone else's difficult situation, we feel compassion or pity for them, and we let them know by offering our *sympathy*. In most cases, however, sympathy is not helpful for the person receiving it. When we make a sincere effort to understand what the other person is going through, think about the feelings they are experiencing, then offer constructive ideas for addressing the challenging situation or feelings they are experiencing, we are showing *empathy*. For example, if a

farmer tells you that he is worried, sad or ashamed because he needs to sell part of his farm, a *sympathetic* response would be: "I'm sorry, it's devastating that you have to sell the farm." That is not helpful to the farmer. A more helpful and *empathetic* approach would be to tell the farmer that: "Being in this type of situation is incredibly challenging, and every farm's situation is unique. But I know about a few other farmers that experienced somewhat similar challenges and were able to work their way through them by (taking some specific actions)." Then, share what those successful actions were (see box on right for specific examples of constructive actions farmers might take). Sharing the emotions that someone else is feeling, showing that you understand the challenging situation leading to them and helping them formulate a game plan to address the challenge is not easy. However, showing empathy rather than sympathy can go a long way to help farmers realize they are not facing the challenge alone. Developing a game plan that calls for specific, time-tested actions is a constructive alternative to self-defeating, self-destructive behavior.



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Examples of specific actions that could be suggested to farmers in times of farm-related causes of stress:

- Suggest working with the farmer in a way that involves your area of expertise.
- Contact your state Extension office to schedule a visit by farm or species-appropriate agribusiness program managers to develop a near- and long-term plan for addressing the specific business-related issues confronting the farm.
- Contact your local commodity-specific agribusiness resource center to find out if they have resources available that may be useful to the farmer.

Don't end your meeting with a farmer who is under extreme stress without agreeing to some type of game plan or next action going forward, however simple. This helps him understand that there are constructive options available to him, and that there are people who both care and are qualified to provide useful assistance.

WAYS TO HELP, CONTINUED

BE PREPARED TO DEAL WITH CONFLICT

Whether you are meeting with a stressed farmer for the specific purpose of helping him or her through a crisis or just doing your job, you might encounter conflict. People under stress may be prone to show angry, occasionally violent, behavior. If you work for a company that the farmer believes has been unfair or caused him harm, he might confront you solely on the basis of your association with that company. Think about, and have in mind, an approach and some specific, constructive goals for your conversation. In this process, take steps to preserve your relationship with the farmer, create and maintain safety, and work with the farmer to resolve the conflict as efficiently as possible (Wichtner-Zoia, Peterson, & Vandenberg, 2016). Be prepared to communicate through conflict using the following tips:

- Use active listening techniques.
- Describe the facts and impacts on yourself and others without judgment or blame.
- Explain the outcome needed.
- Ask often for the other person's views.
- Ask for clarification whenever in doubt.
- Restate: Is this what you said or meant?
- Paraphrase what you are hearing.
- Reframe the situation with a mutual purpose.
- Brainstorm to come up with an accurate assessment of what is needed; develop an action plan.
- Summarize what you mutually agree on.

After your meeting with a farmer under stress, make the commitment to stay in the dialogue. **Always** follow up soon after the meeting whether you said you would or not.

STEPS TO TAKE IF YOU THINK A NEAR-TERM CRISIS IS LIKELY



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- Make time to listen actively to the farmer. Ask open-ended questions to find out what's going on at the farm. Show that you care. Don't promise things you can't deliver.
- Ask directly if they have thoughts of suicide. Offending the farmer is less a concern than the potentially fatal consequences of not acting. Do not promise to keep someone's thoughts or plans of suicide a secret.
- Take action. Call 911 if you think suicide is being seriously contemplated. Get help from family and friends. Do not leave the person alone.

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To learn more, visit msue.msu.edu/managingfarmstress.

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Places to contact at first signs of a crisis:

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- State Helpline: Most states have a toll-free 24-hour helpline; in Michigan, it's 734-624-8328.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Mental Health Services Locator: <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help>

REFERENCES

Fetsch, R.J. (2012). *Managing stress during tough times*. Fort Collins, CO: Colorado State University Extension. <http://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/consumer/10255.pdf>

Wichtner-Zoia, B., Peterson, G., & Vandenberg, L. (2016). *Communicating through conflict*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Extension. http://msue.anr.msu.edu/uploads/234/94068/2017_LSLI_Materials/Zoia_Communicating_Through_Conflict.pdf