

FARMING/RANCHING— Stressful Occupations

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Farmers/ranchers experience pressure from all directions. While all of us must contend with inflation and recession or the death of a family member, farmers have added uncertainties like weather and commodity prices that directly influence their livelihoods.

Farm/ranch stress stirs up many images — racing to town to buy spare parts (and finding they have to be ordered) . . . listening to the radio and hearing the market drop daily (and your bin stands filled with last year's crop) . . . rushing to get the hay baled before a storm . . . watching a hail storm wipe out a year's labor . . . working late into the night on bone-jarring equipment . . . getting more and more frustrated, irritated and tired of the whole mess. Still you dare not let on as you meet again with the loan officer.

Farm/ranch families experience pressure, conflict and uncertainty especially during harvesting and planting. As feelings of frustration and helplessness build up, they can lead to intense family problems involving your spouse, children, parents and other relatives. If left unresolved, these feelings can lead to costly accidents and deaths.

How stressful is farming/ranching?

Farming/ranching has become one of the most stressful and dangerous occupations. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health recently examined 130 occupations and found laborers and farm/ranch owners had the highest rate of deaths due to stress-related conditions like heart and artery disease, hypertension, ulcers, and nervous disorders. Farming/ranching is also dangerous. According to the National Safety Council, agriculture and mining are the two most hazardous occupations in the country. In 1996, 21 accidental deaths occurred per 100,000 agricultural workers, compared with a national average of 4 deaths per 100,000 workers for all industries. A recent survey of 2,000 Kentucky farmers found that each year one of every eight farm families experiences an accident requiring medical attention. Yet farmers are the most underinsured group of workers around, especially with regard to health and disability insurance.

Contributing to the stress level of the occupation are changes that have taken place. Farming/ranching has undergone rapid change from being largely a physical occupation to one that requires more and more mental input. Farmers/ranchers have become managers of large sums of money, and they are continually pressured by technological advances in machinery, and production and management advances regarding livestock and crops.

Farm/ranch families face the same stressful events that non-farm/ranch families do like inflation-recession, threat of nuclear war, death of a spouse or divorce. They also confront stressful conditions associated with agriculture like machinery breakdowns, death of a valuable animal, uncontrollable weather, variable crop yield, fluctuating commodity prices, and handling toxic pesticides.

What is stress?

In the engineering field, stress means the capacity to withstand strain. Structures have a measurable strength and resistance to strain according to the type and size of material. If overloading occurs, the structure distorts and breaks.

When applied to people, stress is more complex. Everyone takes in energy (strength) from the sun, air and food. When people remain relaxed and balanced as they go about their daily tasks, this energy flows in and out of their bodies in a healthy, harmonious way. But when they tie themselves up in knots, breathe with short breaths, and tense their stomachs, shoulders or necks, they experience stress. So, stress is energy in a blocked or chaotic state.

When you put your body in passing gear to work as fast as possible to bale that hay before the storm comes, you experience stress. You feel the effects of powerful hormones being released into the body. Your blood pressure rises, your heart rate quickens, and your breathing and blood flow accelerate.

If you adjust to the stressful event, you move on into the relaxation response in which blood pressure goes down to a normal, healthy rate. While occasional operation in passing gear in an emergency situation does little if any harm, it is dangerous for you to keep yourself under heavy strain over lengthy periods of time or to experience too many stressful events at one time. Just like a boiler that bursts under too much pressure, your body breaks down and your health suffers.

You always have two choices — the stress response or the reaction response. If, at the first warning signs of stress, you just take a moment to relax and breathe deeply, you will find that you have more energy, can concentrate better, and can actually get more done in less time. How to do that is explained in the rest of this series.

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