

Stress Management for Couples

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Working together under pressure, changing sex roles, and holding down more than one job add up to one thing — high stress levels for farm couples. But by being sensitive, communicating and relaxing together, a husband and wife can ease pressures.

One of the unique aspects of farming/ranching is that husbands and wives often work closely together. Consequently, farm/ranch operations and family life are tightly interwoven. Farm/ranch decisions are more likely to affect the entire family than are job decisions of workers in other occupations. For example, a decision to buy a new tractor is likely to affect plans for purchasing a new refrigerator. Especially during the harvest when one stressful event piles up on top of another and tensions run high, working closely together can lead to high levels of stress for the entire family.

Another source of tension for some farm/ranch couples is related to changing roles. Fifty years ago our society more clearly defined the differences between activities of husbands and wives. But today, with increasing farm/ranch costs, more and more farm/ranch wives hold two or more jobs (farm/ranch partner, mother-homemaker and off-farm/ranch employee). Some men who are accustomed to more traditional sexual roles may have difficulty accepting women working off the farm/ranch or making important decisions.

So, stress between a farm/ranch couple is not unusual considering the close working relationship and societal pressures. To relieve the strain, there are several things you can do.

- **Plan ahead.**

Set measurable goals together for your lifetime, five years from now, and a year from now. Decide how long the two of you want to stay in farming/ranching; then get busy enjoying what you have decided to do.

- **Communicate realistic expectations clearly.** Use "I statements" more often than "you statements." "You're always wanting to buy something else!" will probably not get your spouse to change. Try using an I statement instead: "I get worried and angry when I hear you wanting to buy a new . . . What I'd like is for the two of us to sit down and decide together which major purchases we can afford." Then, especially on serious matters, listen well so that you can repeat back to your partners satisfaction what she or he says and feels.

- **Be flexible in your roles and attitudes.**

Letting others do things you usually do and relaxing your high standards can reduce pressures.

- **Negotiate.**

When problems arise, schedule time for the two of you to brainstorm. Weigh the costs and benefits of each solution. Arrive at a plan that enables both of you to get something you want.

- **Check in daily.**

Take a moment to inquire how your spouse is feeling. Look for and reflect early indications of stress—a furrowed brow, a tense voice.

- **Promote self-esteem.** "One thing I really appreciate about you today is . . ."

- **Schedule an evening a week to play together.**

To keep your marriage growing, take a break from the work and the children. If it helps, make it a rule to talk about only yourselves as a couple.

- **Ask for, or volunteer, a rubdown.**

Through a gentle neckrub, backrub, footrub, head scratch or massage, you can ease sore muscles and give your spouse the gift of a restful night's sleep.

- **Get in touch.**

Hold hands; hug each other; show your affection. Physical contact can be one of the best stress relievers of all.

- **Take a relaxing warm bath to sleep well.** Ask your spouse to pat you dry with a soft, fuzzy towel.
- **Laugh at yourselves.** Remember, always being serious is crazy.
- **Celebrate** your anniversary, birthday, the arrival of a new foal, getting the field planted before the rain.
- **Take time to relax and dream together.**

Your life as a farm/ranch couple will never be totally free from stress. But through daily practice you can recognize the early warning signs of stress and make it a habit to do what works best for you to ease pressures. You may find that your work is more enjoyable and your marriage more exciting.

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