

Mental Health and Stress In Rural Areas

Unpredictable weather, falling net farm income, spotty health care services and a host of other factors can make for incredible stress on farms and in rural communities. Many of the factors causing sleepless nights are beyond an individual's control, yet there are often ways to manage the stress, according to North Dakota State University family science specialist Sean Brotherson.

"People will power through even if they don't feel well," Brotherson, speaking at a recent K-State Research and Extension workshop in Manhattan. "There's a cost to that. You can't put your health or relationships on the back end for long without consequences."

The most important asset of any agricultural operation is the health and wellness of the farm operator, said Brotherson. "Sustainable farming includes sustaining the farmer," he said.

Farming and ranching ranks in the top 10 of the most stressful occupations. That stress can lead to depression, anger, health concerns, failed marriages, loss of friendships or relationships with family members, alcohol or substance abuse or worse.

"When we talk about farm safety, we often talk about accident prevention but we tend to neglect talk about mental and emotional health," Brotherson said, adding that's a mistake.

He knows about the topic firsthand. His own family went through a decision to sell their part of the family ranch to an uncle and cousins after his father became ill. It made financial sense, he said, but having his side of the family give up their role in the business was in some ways giving up part of their identity and their role in the family farm legacy.

The way we think about and approach stressors makes up 40 to 50 percent of our stress, Brotherson said, noting that if people believe there will be a rough road ahead from an economic standpoint, the thought of what might be coming can produce anxiety.

Current obvious cause of stress have been drought conditions this year, expectations that crop prices will continue to stay relatively low, the potential for trade disruptions linked to tariffs, and upticks in interest rates.

Despite the overall U.S. economy booming, the farm economy has been in a slump the past several years: "This great economic condition is not translating into a

good farm economy. Many farmers are very good at what they do, yet some still find themselves in situations that they can't control," Brotherson said.

Net farm income, a broad measure of profits, is forecast to decrease \$9.8 billion (13.0 percent) from 2017 to \$65.7 billion in 2018, after increasing \$13.9 billion (22.5 percent) in 2017, according to an August report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service.

Net cash farm income is forecast to decrease \$12.4 billion (12.0 percent) to \$91.5 billion. In inflation-adjusted 2018 dollars, net farm income is forecast to decline \$11.4 billion (14.8 percent) from 2017 after increasing \$13.0 billion (20.3 percent) in 2017.

If realized, inflation-adjusted net farm income would be just slightly above its level in 2016, which was its lowest level since 2002.

The situation is taking a toll, Brotherson said. Some feel extra pressure because their farm has been in the family for generations and they don't want to be the one to lose it.

"Stress signals are like the warning lights blinking on your truck's dashboard," Brotherson said. "We often want to ignore them but at some point there is a price to pay—a heart attack, broken relationships, depression or worse. You maintain your car to keep it running properly. You have to maintain your health, too."

So what to do: coping strategies include things that help you unwind, Brotherson said. Listen to music at least some of the time, rather than farm news, political ads, or other news. Take a walk, garden, meditate, watch a movie, or schedule regular social time with friends. One participant shared that her brother who farms has for years gone into town to play basketball several times a week.

Other suggestions include:

***Exercise at least 20 minutes a day—walk, bicycle or swim.**

***Get at least seven to eight hours of sleep.**

***Take time every day to reflect on good things in your life.**

***Write your thoughts in a journal.**

***Spend 30 minutes doing something with your hands.**

***Learn something new or restart a hobby or activity that you once enjoyed.**

***Reach out to someone for support or help—a friend, a counselor, a loved one.**

***Volunteer to help with a cause that's important to you.**

***Do random acts of kindness.**

K-State Research and Extension has teamed with NDSU's Brotherson to share resources linked to farm stress management including a tip sheet (<https://www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/MF3421.pdf>). In addition, K-State programs such as the Farm Analyst program (<https://www.agmanager.info/programs/ksu-farm-analyst-program>), Kansas Agricultural Mediation Service (<https://www.k-state.edu/kams/>) and Kansas Farm Management Association (<https://www.agmanager.info/kfma>) are available to work with rural enterprises. K-State Research and Extension offices (</about/stateandareamaps.html>) in counties and districts across the state can help link individuals with these and other resources.