

Rural issues - coping with stress

Farming families are under increasing pressure. Financial hardship and other difficulties can lead to stress, depression, relationship breakdown, substance abuse, increased risk of farm accidents and, in some cases, suicide.

Many farm families respond to hard times by tightening the household budget and spending less on food, clothes and maintenance of equipment. They may also rely more on credit. The effort of trying to provide for the family and keep the farm going can be intensely stressful. For a farm family in dire straits, the options may seem bleak - to struggle on is stressful, but to sell the farm and leave the industry would be highly distressing too.

A different kind of work-related stress

Most people experience work-related stress, no matter what their occupation. However, farm families can sometimes respond to work-related stress in different ways to other people. Some of the issues faced by farmers include:

- Most farmers could never imagine doing anything else for a living, since farming is part of their identity.
- The farm is not only the workplace, but the home too.
- The welfare of the family depends directly on the fortunes of the farm.
- Family tradition is strong, since the farm may have been in the family for generations.
- The farm may be the only real investment the family has and the sole legacy for the children.
- Selling the farm would feel like a terrible betrayal of past and future generations.
- People who farm the land tend to pride themselves on self-sufficiency and independence, so asking for help can be hard to do.

Impact of hard times

Some of the consequences of hard times on farm families can include:

- Less money spent on food, clothing, education and entertainment for the family.
- Less money spent on household maintenance.
- Farm equipment isn't properly maintained, which increases the risk of accidents.
- Loss of savings.
- Taking loans from friends and relations.
- Increased reliance on credit.
- The need for one or more family members to leave the farm and find employment somewhere else.
- Having to fire workers or being unable to hire workers.
- If workers can't be hired, children may have to perform jobs and, sometimes, a child could be too young to perform a job safely.
- Safe work practices may be skipped in an attempt to save time or labour.

Hazards of chronic stress

Some of the common hazards of ongoing stress on farm families include:

- Depression.
- Substance abuse, such as heavy drinking.
- Arguments.
- Domestic violence.
- Relationship breakdown.
- Rational decisions are harder to make when under stress.
- People who are stressed are often distracted, which increases the risk of accidents.

- People who are abusing substances, such as alcohol, are more likely to injure themselves while working on the farm.
- Suicide.

Stress and family members

Generally, family members respond to hard times in slightly different ways, depending on their age and role in the family. The issues may include:

- **Young children** - children of all ages are sensitive to family dynamics. Young children may have more temper tantrums, or may experience separation anxiety or bedwetting in response to stress.
- **Adult children** - they may feel despair and helplessness that their livelihood or inheritance may be taken away from them.
- **Partners** - guilt is common, because the farmers may worry that poor management decisions, not external forces like drought, were the cause of their troubles. They may feel angry at the marketplace or betrayed by government policies.
- **Older couples** - after a lifetime of hard work, many older couples may fear that their dreams of a financially independent retirement will not come true.

Warning signs of stress

Some of the warning signs of chronic stress can include:

- A constant feeling of sadness
- Feelings of guilt and hopelessness
- Problems with concentration or memory
- Lack of energy and motivation
- Lack of interest in once-pleasurable activities, such as socialising or sex
- Sleeping problems such as insomnia, early waking or oversleeping
- Changes to appetite, such as eating very little or too much
- Mood changes, such as irritability
- Physical problems, such as constant headaches or stomach aches
- Heart palpitations and breathlessness
- Persistent thoughts of suicide.

Try to get help if you feel stressed

Research has found that many farm families don't see stress as a health problem, but as a farm problem. This means that people are less likely to seek professional help from doctors or counsellors. There also seems to be a general feeling in rural communities that only mentally ill people go to psychologists and psychiatrists, which means that these services are not often used. Farm families pride themselves on being self-sufficient and independent, so asking for welfare (like social security payments or food parcels from charities) can be hard to do. For your own and your family's welfare, it's worthwhile to use the services that are there to help you.

Where to get help

- Department of Primary Industry, Sustainability and Environment, Customer Service Centre Tel. 136 186
- Bush Crisis Line 24-hour service Tel. 1800 805 391
- Lifeline Tel. 131 114
- Australian Women in Agriculture Tel. (03) 5437 3274
- Commonwealth Regional Information Service Tel. 1800 026 222
- Rural Women's Network Tel. (03) 9637 8801
- Farmsafe Australia Tel. (02) 6752 8210

Things to remember

- The effects of financial hardship on farm families can include stress, relationship breakdown, farming accidents and suicide.
- When money is tight, farm equipment may not be properly maintained, which increases the risk of work-related accidents.
- Farm families pride themselves on self-sufficiency and independence, so asking for welfare (like social security payments or food parcels from charities) can be hard to do.

Want to know more?

Go to More information for support groups, related links and references.

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