

HOW TO TALK TO 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.



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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:

- **Anxiety or depression** – become quieter than usual, show little enthusiasm or energy for the future, have trouble sleeping
- **Irritability** – become more frequently critical or agitated over small things, lack concentration, have trouble making decisions
- **Anger** – lash out more frequently or with greater severity than usual
- **Avoidance** – do not join pals for coffee; miss meetings with farm staff, suppliers or the banker
- **Neglect** – reduce care given to farm animals, machinery or fields, or themselves

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Other potential warning signs might include any change in routine behavior or appearance, injury or prolonged illness, increased drinking (or drug use) or violent behavior (Gardner, 2018). 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 drastic action, including suicide, to end the problems they face.

WAYS TO HELP

If you believe that a farmer is going through a difficult time and showing signs of extreme 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. Active listening is aided by the following techniques:

- Face the speaker; maintain eye contact. Be attentive, listen and watch closely.

WAYS TO HELP, CONTINUED

- Keep an open mind.
- Don't interrupt or impose your solutions.
- Listen to the speaker's words and try to picture what he or she is saying.
- Wait for the speaker to pause to ask questions.
- Ask open-ended questions and make open-ended statements. (See box on right.)
- Ask questions to ensure understanding.
- Try to feel what the speaker is feeling.
- Pay attention to what isn't said (body language, other family member's responses and behavior).

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

- I can see how the current situation might seem nearly impossible for you. What changes would you like to see that might help?
- I know you are going through some tough challenges. Tell me what I can do to help.
- I hear you saying___ (repeat back the main concerns the farmer is expressing).
- Every situation is a little different. **Help me** understand better.
- I know of several farms in similar situations. One thing they tried that helped was___.
- Have you thought about ___?
- I think that **we could work together** on a plan.
- This new product (or idea) might help. What do you think?
- Let's **write down** some of the pros and cons of trying this remedy.
- Let's work together on a game plan that addresses the main problem you've identified.

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 he or she has thoughts of suicide. Offending the farmer is less a concern than the potentially fatal consequences of not acting. Don't be sworn to secrecy.
- Take action. Call 911 if you think suicide is being seriously contemplated. Get help from family and friends. Don't 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-SUICIDE (2433) (connects you to nearest crisis center)
- 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

Gardner, C. (2018.). *Communicating with farmers overwhelmed by stress*. Harrisburg, PA: Center for Dairy Excellence. <http://centerfordairyexcellence.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/03-18-Stress-Handout.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