



# **Mental Health First Aid in Farming**

**Sean Brotherson, Ph.D.,** Extension Family Science Specialist

**Monica McConkey, LPC,** Rural Mental Health Specialist

**Crop Adviser Workshop, February 11, 2020**

**NDSU** EXTENSION  
SERVICE

# Learning Objectives

- Increase awareness of rural stress issues and warning signs of stress challenges
- Explore key aspects of responding to individuals under stress, including suicide risk, and supporting others
- Identify and apply useful coping methods for responding to stress and improving wellness
- Identify and access available resources and sources of support

# Which Matters More? Tractor Maintenance vs. Farmer Maintenance



"THEY MAINTAIN THEIR TRACTORS, THEY  
MAINTAIN THEIR PUMPS AND EVERYTHING  
BUT THEY DON'T MAINTAIN THEMSELVES."

Harry, male farmer on farmer's mental health  
in Judd, et al, 2006

#ElevateTheConvo  
Photo Credit Derek Gavey

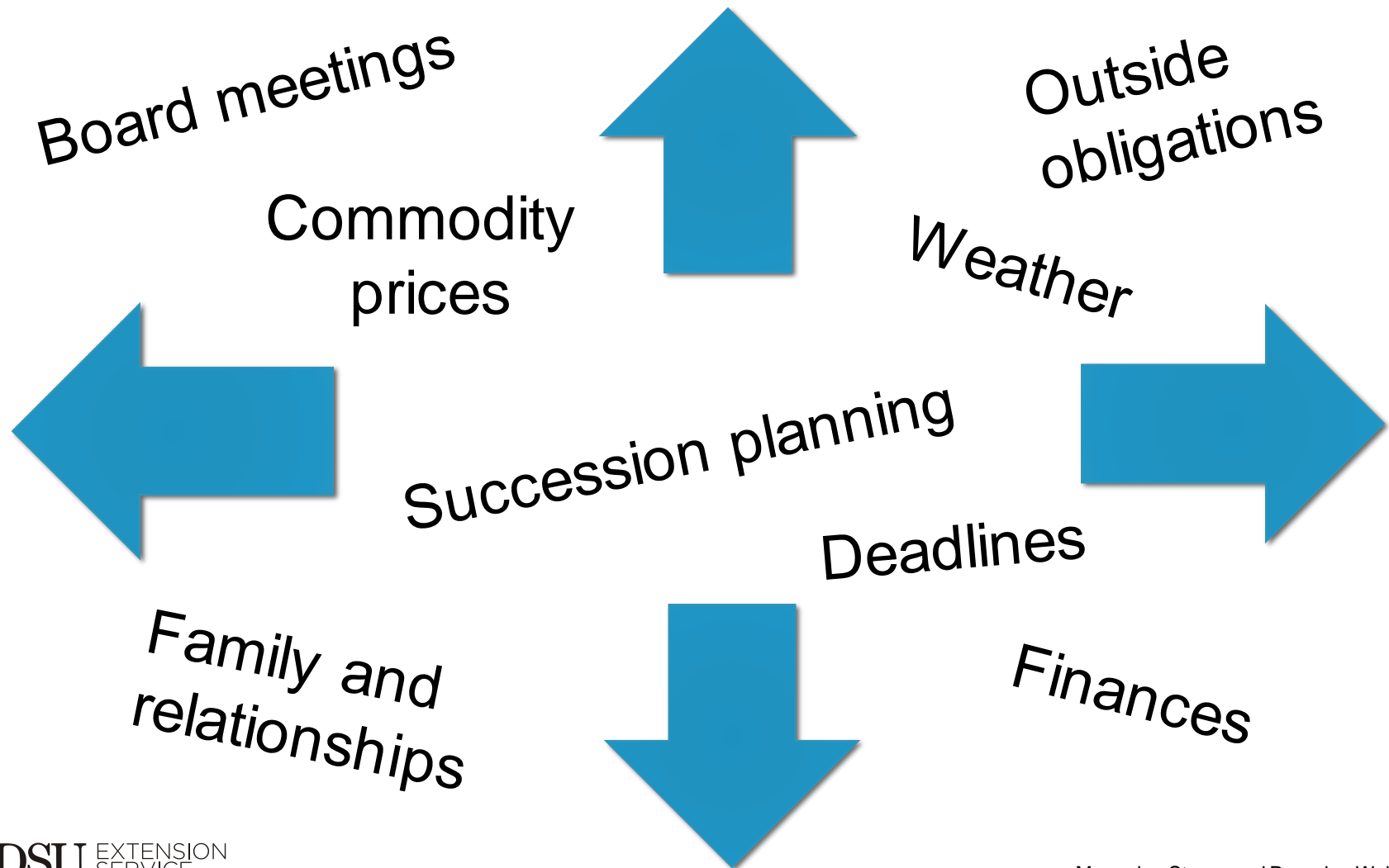


# **Farming** ranks in the **top ten most stressful occupations** in the United States.

---



# Farm / Ranch Pressures



# Why So Much Stress?

---

- ❖ King Kong-size Sources of rural stress
- ❖ Weather – drought
- ❖ Prices – crop prices drop by a third to half





# Why is Rural Stress Hard on Individuals?

---

- ❖ Individual levels of stress are linked to how a person perceives the source of stress - their orientation to the stressor.
- ❖ Many persons see it not as a change of job, but as a loss of self.
- ❖ Many practice the 11th Commandment orientation - **“Thou shalt farm!”**



# Key Messages on Rural Stress

---

- Your health is your most important asset as a farmer, rancher or agricultural worker.
- Farmer and farmworker health and safety is the most important priority in managing any farm or ranch operation.  
Good stress management is good farm management!



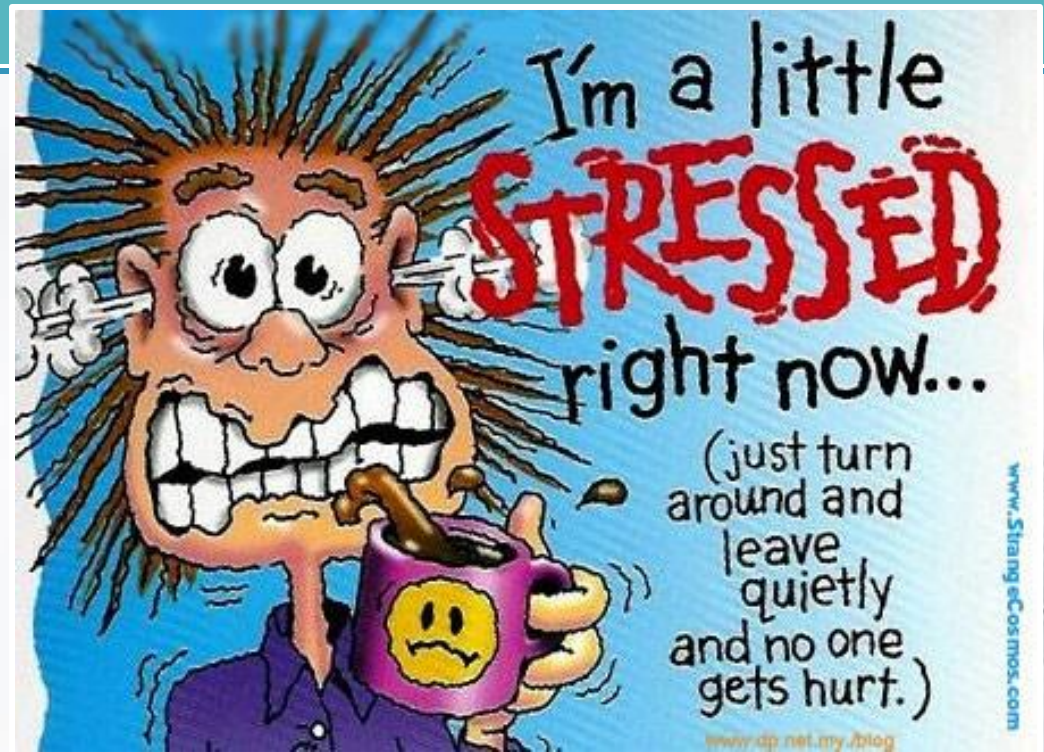
# Your Health = Your Horsepower



# What is Stress?

## **Stress definition:**

A state of physical, mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from difficult or demanding circumstances

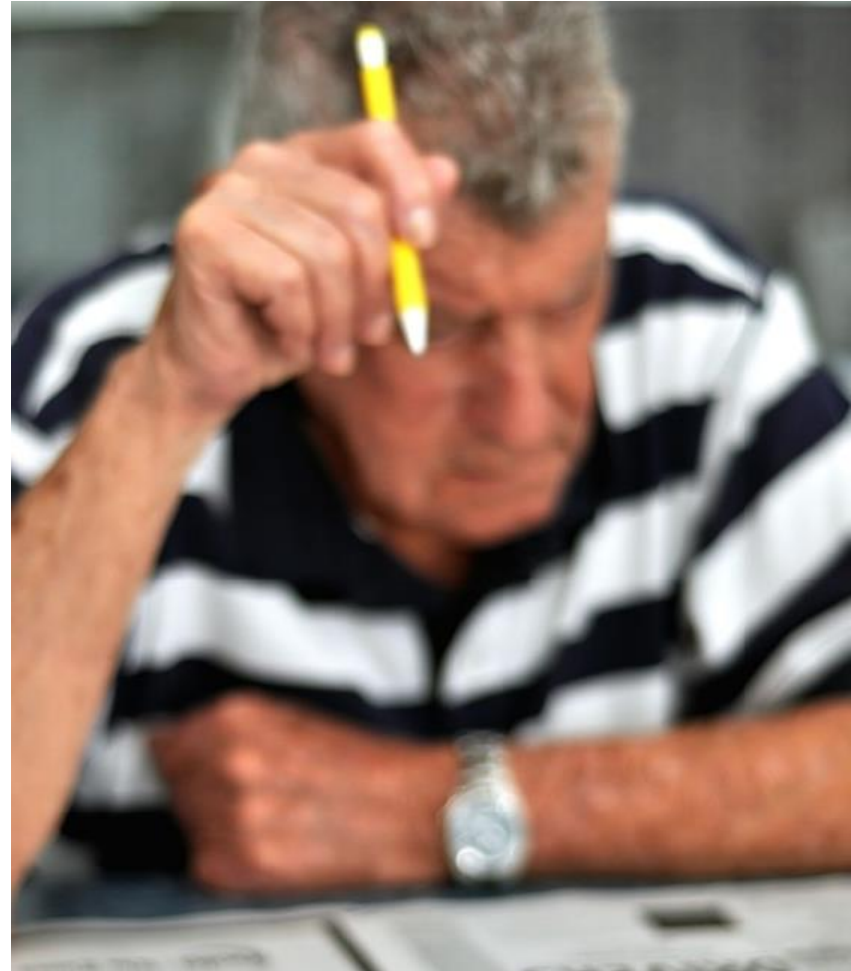


## **Discussion Question**

- How do you know you are feeling stressed?
- Physical, mental, emotional, social signs

# Key Sources of Rural Stress – Farm Financial Situation

- Net farm/ranch income decline
- Debt/asset ratio – meeting debt payments
- Cash flow on the operation
- Arranging financing
- Complicated or strained decision making – tendency to make worse decisions under stress





# Key Sources of Rural Stress – Family Financial Situation



- Ability to meet family living expenses
- Long hours, two or three jobs, balancing work and family
- Sense of inadequacy due to economic difficulties
- Facing the challenge of having to leave the farm (generational legacy)

# Rural Stress and Individual / Family Wellness



# Chronic Stress

---

- Natural stress response
- Consequences of overuse
- Fight/Flight/Freeze

-Mayo Clinic, Healthy Lifestyle,  
March 2019







# Working with Stressed Out Farmers

---

- Listen
- Be clear and concise
- Write it down
- Check in
- Have resources

# Warning Signs of Stress

Stress signs are **warning signals** to slow down and focus on wellness.



# Stress Signals – Physical and Emotional / Mental

## Physical Signs of Stress

- Head/Back aching
- Tension in the body
- Stomach upset, Ulcers
- Breathing short, labored
- Sweating, Shaking
- Body fatigue, tiredness
- Numbness

## Emotional Signs of Stress

- Irritable about little things
- Sense of frustration, anger
- Impatient, restless
- Feeling discouraged, hopeless
- Withdrawal from others, isolation
- Anxiety, panic feelings
- Difficulty concentrating



# Stress Signals – Behavioral and Relationship

## Behavioral Signs of Stress

- Difficulties with sleep
- Inability to relax, concentrate
- Getting angry easily
- Trouble making decisions
- Increased use of alcohol or other drugs
- Difficulty being flexible
- Overeating or loss of appetite

## Relationship Signs of Stress

- Communication difficulties
- Picking fights
- Lack of satisfaction
- Verbal or physical outbursts, abuse
- Avoiding others
- Lack of time with spouse, children, others
- Withdrawal and Isolation

# Farmers and Suicide Risk – Key Issue

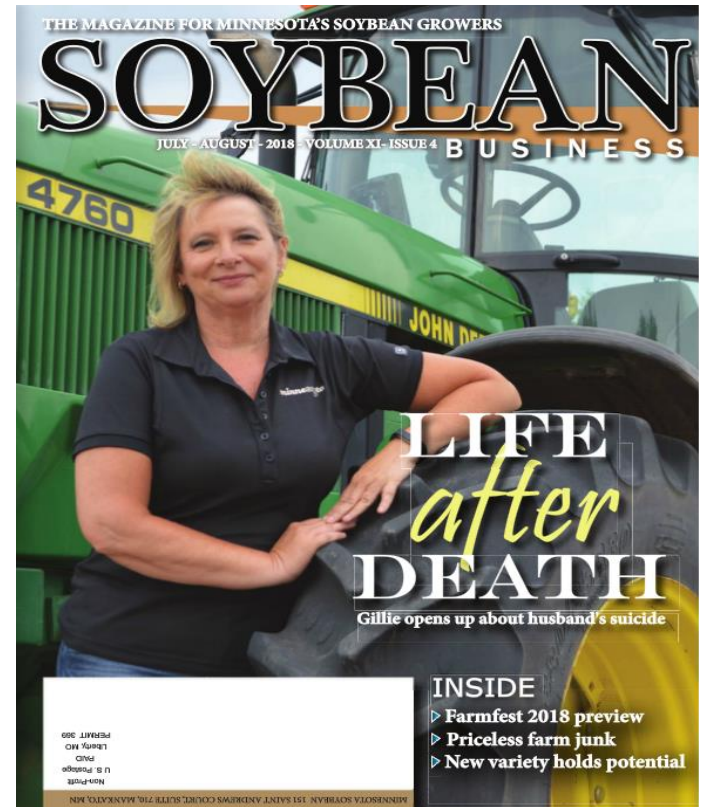
Increased attention to the issue of **farm stress and suicide rates** among farmers

Suicide rate of **farmers high among occupational groups**

“Preventing Farmer Suicide: Collaboration and Communication”  
(5 minutes)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPDlyVAkeEo>

(RHIHub – UND)



# Coping Methods for Stress – Negative or Less Effective Methods

**What are some negative coping methods?**

Eating binge

Spending money

Drinking alcohol

Gossiping

Other?

Avoiding,  
withdrawing

?



# Coping Methods for Stress – Positive or More Effective Methods

## What helps you relax?

Exercise

Play in the  
garden

Go for a drive

Call a friend

Watch a movie

Family  
conversation

Stretch

# Coping and Building Resiliency

---

- **BUILD PROTECTIVE FACTORS**
- **PRACTICE RELAXATION STRATEGIES**
- **WORK ON HELPFUL THINKING**
- **USE MINDFULNESS TECHNIQUES**
- **REACH OUT**



# Managing Stress – What NOT to do...

- Deny or ignore the issue
- Catastrophizing
- Procrastinate
- Bottle it up
- Withdraw / isolate
- Push people away
- Double down
- Self medicate

# Asking for Help – How to Make It Easier

- Build rapport – people are more likely to ask for help from someone they trust and perceive as warm, empathetic, and genuine.
- Confidentiality is key.
- Avoid labels or minimizing the situation.
- Know your resources and **be prepared to refer**.
- **Always follow up**.



# Resources for Responding to Farm/Ranch Stress

---

- ❖ Hotline Numbers, Healthcare Visit
- ❖ Thematic Resource Pages Online on Farm Stress & Related Issues
- ❖ Educational Resources & Publications – brochures; fact sheets; etc.
- ❖ Variety of Farm Stress Resources

# Key Resources – Mental and Emotional Health

- **Call 2-1-1** – Statewide 24-hour helpline, health and human services information and referral (FirstLink)
- **Refer to a local health-care provider or mental health professional.** If you or someone you know needs help, contact and connect with a local professional such as a clergy member, medical professional, law enforcement, school counselor or social worker.
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:**  
1-800-273-8255 (TALK)

# Links to Further Information Online

---

- NDSU Extension – Related Websites
  - Farm/Ranch Stress
    - <https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/farmranchstress>
- ND Human Services Resource – Website
  - <http://www.nd.gov/dhs/info/pubs/docs/human-services-resources-for-farmers-ranchers-and-others.pdf>
- MN Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Stress
  - <https://www.mda.state.mn.us/about/mnfarmerstress>

# Educational Publications and Resources on Farm/Ranch Stress

- “Stress Management Series for Farm/Ranch Families” (FS282, FS283, FS284, FS285, FS286, FS287)
- “Farming and Ranching in Tough Times” (FS1804)
- “Responding to Distressed People” (FS1805)
- “Working With Distressed Clientele” (FS1789)
- Links:

<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/farmranchstress>



FS1804

# Farming and Ranching in Tough Times

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D.  
Family Science Specialist

**NDSU** EXTENSION  
SERVICE  
North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota

June 2016

FS283 (Revised)

**FARM STRESS**  
FACT SHEETS

# Stress Symptoms

Reviewed by

Sean Brotherson  
Family Science Specialist  
NDSU Extension Service

*Recognizing the early symptoms of stress – such as rising blood pressure, rapidly beating heart, clenched teeth, aching neck and shoulders, sweating hands and feet, churning stomach, excessive fatigue or dropping sexual interest is helpful. You and your family can take steps to reduce stress and to regain health and self-esteem by noting and managing stress symptoms.*

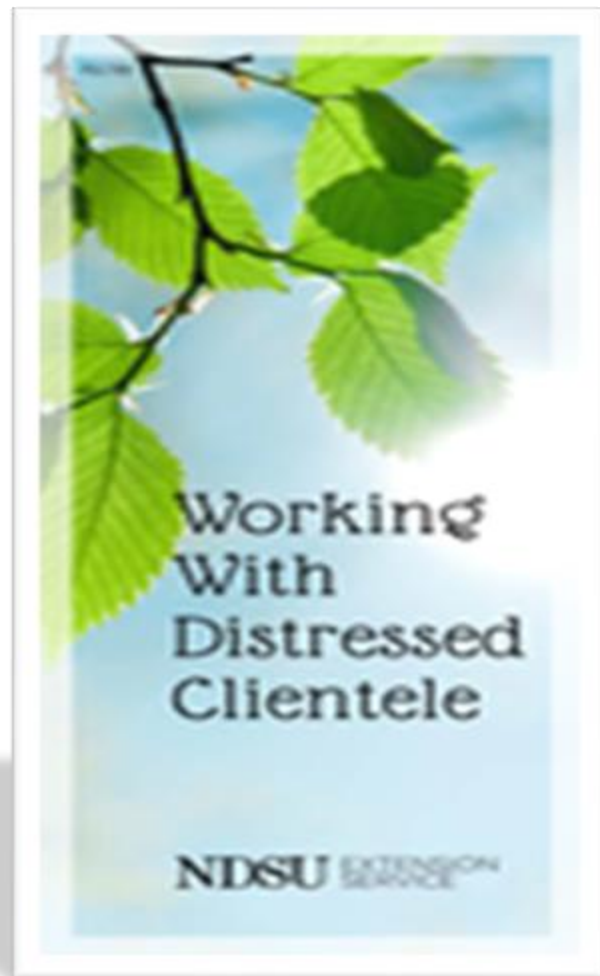
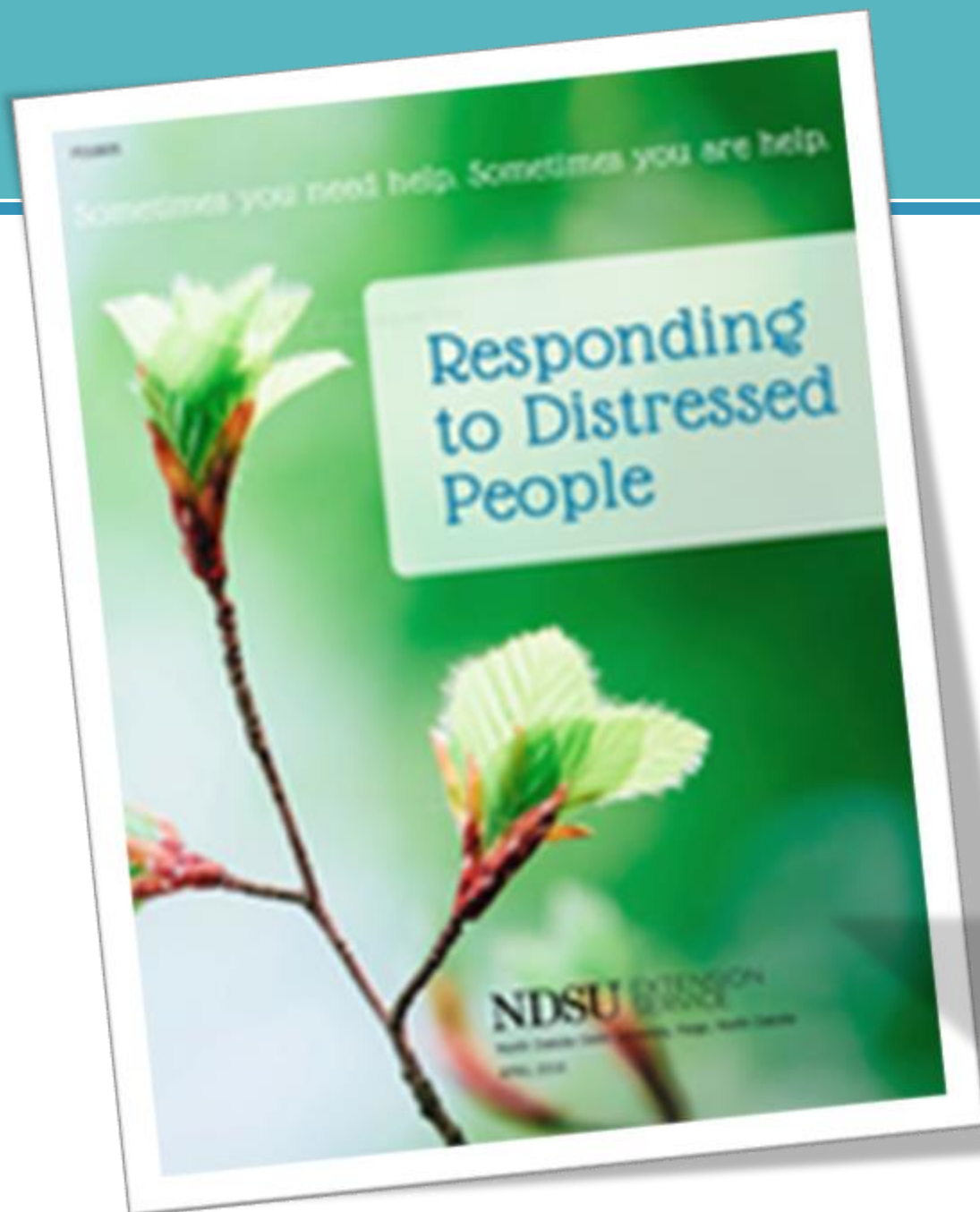
Before farm/ranch families can do much about managing stress, they have to know when they are experiencing it. Much of the time, people do not know or give attention to what is going on in their bodies and in their relationships with others.

Many people learn to screen out unpleasant circumstances. For example, they deny their problems. One farmer insisted, "Everything is fine – just fine." The truth is his net income had dropped 20 percent that year and 15 percent the year before. He was denying reality. Sometimes we blame others. One farmer who was feeling totally helpless because of an upcoming loan payment blew up at his wife for suggesting they take a vacation: "There you go again talking about ways to waste money." At other times, people try to escape reality through eating binges, spending sprees, or using alcohol and other drugs.

Through such avoidance efforts, you attempt to screen out any unpleasant, uncomfortable stress alarms. But early warning signs are like a flashing red light on the dashboard of your car when the engine is overheating. If you ignore it long enough, the engine will blow. Rising blood pressure, rapidly beating heart, clenched teeth, aching neck and shoulders, sweating hands and feet, churning stomach, dropping sexual interest – these are all red lights flashing on your body's dashboard and warning you that trouble could lie ahead. If you ignore your body's physical signals of stress and strain too long, you invite real problems – hypertension, declining health, accident proneness, depression or other mental health issues, or heart disease.

So it is important that you recognize early warning signals of stress in your body, your actions, your emotional life, and your relationships with others.

**NDSU** EXTENSION  
SERVICE  
February 2016



# “Bootstrap” Wallet Handout & Table Tent

---

- Wearing out your bootstraps?
  - You don't have to go it alone.
  - Where to get help
- LSS-ND, NDSU  
Extension, Other





# Start A Wellness Toolbox

- Start your Wellness Commitment – select 3 and start today.
- Pick a wellness partner
- Link: <https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/publications/kids-family/12-tools-for-your-wellness-toolbox-in-times-of-farm-stress>





# Handouts

- 12 Tools for Your Wellness Toolbox in Times of Farm Stress

## 12 Tools for Your Wellness Toolbox in Times of Farm Stress

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D., Family Science Specialist

<b>1</b> <b>Exercise</b> 20 minutes or more daily (walk, swim, ride a bike, etc.). Physical activity enhances feeling good.	Physical	<b>2</b> <b>Get a medical checkup</b> with a local health-care provider. Stress can cause or add to physical challenges.	<b>3</b> <b>Spend 10 minutes to plan your day and priorities.</b> A few minutes of planning reduces stress and helps you stay focused.	Mental	<b>4</b> <b>Take regular five- to 10-minute breaks</b> in your day to relax and recharge. Doing this multiple times a day renews your energy.
<b>5</b> <b>Write down three things that you are grateful for daily.</b> Conscious gratitude calms your mood.		Emotional/Spiritual	<b>6</b> <b>Share concerns with a counselor or other professional.</b> A listening ear helps lift your burdens.		Personal/Relational
<b>8</b> <b>Get involved or stay connected with a friend or group of friends.</b> Doing this multiple times a day renews your energy.	Work/Professional		<b>9</b> <b>Discuss needs of the farm operation but do not let them occupy all other aspects of life.</b> Plan other daily work tasks to shift your focus.	Financial/Practical	
<b>11</b> <b>Create a family budget and seek to live within your means.</b> This helps give you a sense of financial control.		<b>12</b> <b>Select three healthy habits you will try to practice daily. Start today!</b>			

### My Wellness Commitment

Circle or list at least three wellness tools you can begin doing today and post this in your home, office or vehicle as a reminder.

- 1 \_\_\_\_\_
- 2 \_\_\_\_\_
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_

For more information on wellness tools and farm stress, visit our NDSU Extension website at [www.ag.ndsu.edu/drought/stress-resources](http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/drought/stress-resources)

**NDSU** EXTENSION SERVICE

SEPTEMBER 2017  
 County commissions, North Dakota State University and U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. NDSU does not discriminate in its programs and activities on the basis of age, race, gender, religion, ethnicity, genetic information, marital status, national origin, participation in lawful off-campus activity, sexual orientation, disability, pregnancy, marital, parental status, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, or other status. Direct inquiries to Vice President for Title IX/ADA Coordinator, 501 Main 201, NDSU Main Campus, 581-7770, [ndsuhesd@ndsu.edu](mailto:ndsuhesd@ndsu.edu). This publication will be made available in alternative formats for people with disabilities upon request. 702-021-7700

# Video and Audio Resources

---

- Online Farm Stress Management Course – MSU – “Weathering the Storm” - To find out more details or to register for a class, visit [www.msue.msu.edu/onlinefarmstress](http://www.msue.msu.edu/onlinefarmstress).
- NDSU Extension – Farm Stress Videos (10-15 minutes) – show on phone; tablet; kitchen table; send link –
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M266Fd1vlfM&list=PLnn8HanJ32l7KMkfgSJbS7lKqzpfYQleM> (YouTube playlist)
  - <https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/farmranchstress> (NDSU Ext Web page)
- TransFormation Podcast series – U of MN Ag Dept; Red River Valley Farm Network –
  - <https://www.rrfn.com/transformation/>
- New Zealand – Farm Strong Initiative
  - <https://farmstrong.co.nz/>

# Connect with Others via Their Stories – TransFormation Podcast

The TransFormation Podcast series – by MN Dept.  
of Agriculture; Red River Valley Farm Network

<https://www.rrfn.com/transformation/>



# Watch a Movie . . . or Two

Farms.com – Dr. Val Farmer, “Mind Over Matter” video series (10 videos) –

[www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL89017F264C488BC5](http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL89017F264C488BC5)

National Institute for Mental Health – “Real Men, Real Depression” video series

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/men-and-mental-health/men-and-depression/index.shtml>



# Join the FarmStrong Initiative

New Zealand FarmStrong Initiative –  
focus on living well in agriculture

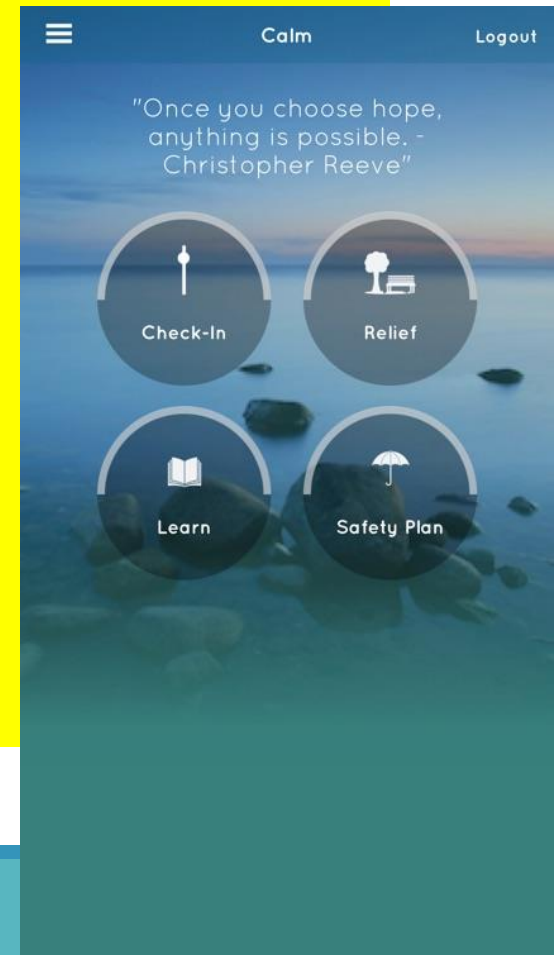
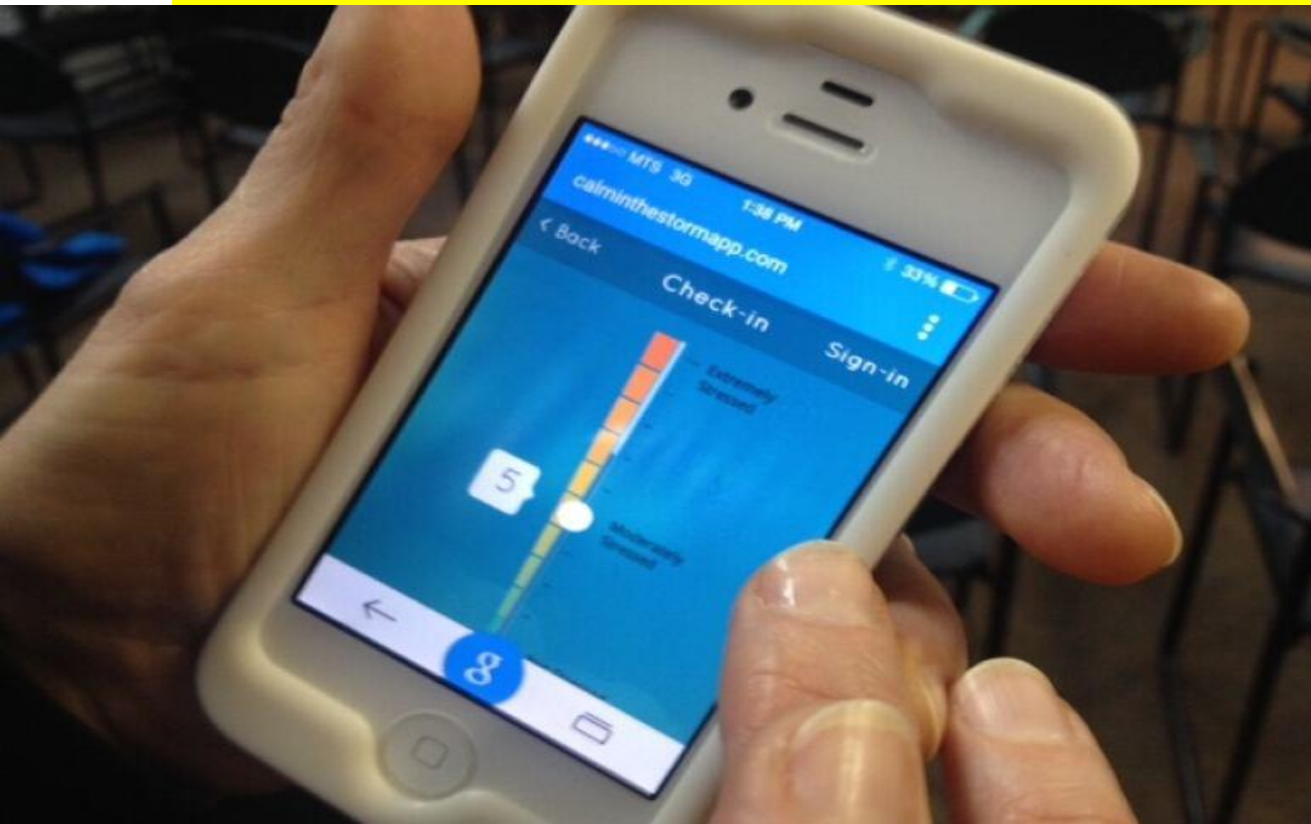
<https://farmstrong.co.nz/>




# There's An App for That . . .

## Calm in the Storm – Mobile Stress app

<http://calminthestormapp.com/>







*My grandfather used to say  
that once in your life  
you need a doctor, a lawyer,  
a policeman and a preacher  
but every day, three times  
a day, you need a farmer.*

*- Brenda Schoepp*



Food and Agriculture Organization  
of the United Nations

# More Information on Farm Stress Resources

---

Search for us online at:

“NDSU” and “Farm Stress”

The logo for North Dakota State University (NDSU) features the letters "NDSU" in a large, bold, yellow serif font. The letters are set against a solid green rectangular background.

NORTH DAKOTA  
STATE UNIVERSITY  
EXTENSION

# Coping Priority 1 – Rest and Renew Yourself

- You can't care for your farm or family well if you don't **care for yourself**.
- **Explore sources of personal renewal** that you value (faith, nature, hobby, etc.).
- Build in “**rest breaks**” daily, weekly (“Thrive with 5”).
- **Connect with others** who give you strength, support.



**“Sustainable farming includes sustaining the farmer.”**



# Coping Priority 2 – Healthy Communication

- **Be willing to share** your stresses or concerns with others
- **Talk and share with others** who understand or who you can trust
- **Listen** to one another
- **Avoid withdrawal or anger** as your primary mode of communication



**How to Have Better Communication  
with Farm Employees**

- Seeds of Encouragement from Elaine Froese -

# Coping Priority 3 – Focus on Relationships

- **Reassure family members** of love and commitment
- **Work through conflicts** that may occur
- **Follow consistent family routines** that give security, such as family meals together
- **Take time away together** as a couple or family



**“The most important part of a healthy farm is a healthy family.”**

# Our Response to Farm & Ranch Families Under Stress



Sean Brotherson, Ph.D., Extension  
Family Life Specialist

- Email:  
sean.brotherson@ndsu.edu
- 702.231.6143

Monica McConkey, LPC  
Rural Mental Health Specialist

- Email:  
monicamariekm@yahoo.com
- 218-280-7785

