

Rural issues - coping with stress

Farming families are under increasing pressure. Hardships such as financial strain, social isolation and long hours, as well as 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 and increasing debt. 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 is stressful too.

If you or someone you know is experiencing any of these difficulties, there is help available in the form of financial support, mental health professionals and other support services.

Rural work-related stress

Most people experience work-related stress, no matter what their occupation. However, farm families can experience higher levels of work-related stress and respond 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 or is something the family has aspired to have.
- 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 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 recreation and time off the farm, food, clothing, education, a holiday or entertainment for the family
- Less money spent on household maintenance
- Farm equipment not properly maintained, which increases the risk of breakdowns and accidents
- Loss of savings
- Taking loans from friends and relations
- Increased reliance on credit and larger farm and personal debt
- The need for one or more family members to leave the farm and find employment somewhere else
- Having to put off workers or being unable to hire workers
- If workers can't be hired, children, aged parents or people visiting the farm may have to perform jobs that they are possibly not suited to performing 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:

- Always feeling tired or depressed
- Substance abuse, such as misuse of alcohol
- Arguments or 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 misusing 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 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 hoped for 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 government policies.
- **Older couples** – after a lifetime of work, 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
- 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

- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- 24-hr Mensline Tel. 1300 78 99 78
- 24-hr Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 55 1800
- Parentline - Call 132 289 (For parents with children 0-18 years)
- [Beyond Blue](#) Tel. 1300 22 4636

- SuicideLine Victoria Tel. 1300 651 251 – for counselling, crisis intervention, information and referral (24 hours, 7 days)
- Department of Primary Industry, Sustainability and Environment, Customer Service Centre Tel. 136 186
- Australian Women in Agriculture
- Commonwealth Regional Information Service Tel. 1800 026 222
- Rural Women's Network
- Farmsafe Australia Tel. (02) 6752 8210

Things to remember

- The effects of hardships 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 often pride themselves on self-sufficiency and independence, so asking for assistance (like social security payments or food parcels from charities) can be hard to do.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

National Centre for Farmer Health

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