A RURAL STRESS TOOLBOOK

RURAL HEALTH EXTENSION PROGRAM
“Things have gotten real bad around here. My husband and I fight all the time, he can’t sleep, he complains about headaches and stomach aches. The kids are cranky and yesterday I almost hit my youngest for fighting with her sister. We’re behind in our payments and we have a meeting that involves our creditors in two weeks. I don’t know how we’re going to make it. Talk about stress, we’re up to our eyeballs in it.”

Saskatchewan farmer
What is stress?

Stress is your reaction to any change you perceive as a challenge or threat. Stress isn’t all in your head but that’s where it starts.

Events don’t cause stress; it’s how you interpret and react to them that does. Adrenalin and other chemicals are pumped into your bloodstream. Your heart rate and breathing become faster, muscles tense up and the body prepares for action. This “fight or flight response” makes you stronger and more alert in the short term. It can help you meet challenges and accomplish goals. In a crisis, it can help you do things you didn’t know were possible.

But when you experience ongoing stress over months or years, your body is all geared up with no place to go. High levels of adrenalin and other chemicals, meant to be a short term response, are harmful when they continue indefinitely. The results can include high blood pressure, heart disease, changes in your body’s ability to fight off infection, depression and other diseases. Some authorities believe up to three-quarters of disease is stress-related.

What causes rural stress?

Things that are beyond your control and that last for a long time create the most stress. Weather, market prices, equipment breakdown, interest rates, and government policy are just some of the stressors beyond the control of farmers.

Rural town-dwellers can’t control the loss of business and services due to depopulation. Families and communities can’t control the closure of schools and health care facilities, the increased driving distances that result, and the loss of friends and family who move to the city.

Does everyone react the same way to stress?

No. Perceptions of stress and reactions to stress are individual. Some people will be severely stressed in response to an incident or set of circumstances and others will think it is nothing. However you react is OK. If your partner is stressed because of something and you’re not, neither of you is “right.” The two of you just react differently. People experience a wide variety of symptoms when they are stressed. Here are some examples:
Dealing with stress

Stress can’t be cured but it can be managed. Learning to manage stress is a three-part process. First you identify the symptoms and the causes. Then you learn the skills to manage it; and thirdly, you learn how to use those skills.

How you deal with stress depends on the source. If it’s caused by something beyond your control, your only alternative may be to learn acceptance. At other times, coping skills may help you adapt to the stress or alter the situation. When stress is caused by something you can control, you can take action to change the situation.

Just as people differ in the way they perceive and react to stress, people differ in how well they manage stress. The ability to cope with stress depends partly on temperament or inherited disposition, partly on previous experience dealing with stress, and partly on the availability of support systems. Anyone can learn skills to help them manage stress more effectively. Four types of skills are required:

- Awareness skills
- Acceptance skills
- Coping skills
- Action skills
Awareness Skills

How well do you currently manage stress? Can you list all the stressors in your life? To answer questions like these, you need awareness skills. The following four exercises will help you develop them.

Exercise 1: Quiz: How well do you manage stress?

YES  NO

Awareness
❑❑ Can you name three recent situations that have caused stress in your life?
❑❑ Can you list three symptoms (physical, emotional or behavioural) that you suffer when you are under stress?

Acceptance
❑❑ Can you maintain a positive or neutral attitude during tough times and keep from getting upset over little things?
❑❑ Can you sometimes talk yourself out of feeling stressed?

Coping
❑❑ Do you know (and use) relaxation techniques like deep breathing and meditation?
❑❑ When you feel stressed, do you ever use exercise to get rid of the feeling?

Action
❑❑ Do you make a list and prioritize tasks to keep yourself from feeling overwhelmed by all there is to do?
❑❑ Can you express your feelings and communicate with others effectively when conflict arises?

___ ___ Total

Count the “yes’s.” How did you do? If you scored fewer than seven, you can definitely improve your ability to recognize and deal with stress. Even if you answered “yes” to most of the questions, be aware that there can be a big difference between knowing what to do and doing it.
Exercise 2: Keep a stress log

The first step in managing stress is to recognize it. Then, you decide how to deal with it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What happened?</th>
<th>How I reacted (thoughts, feelings, behaviour)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exercise 3: Farming stress inventory

Rate your stressors on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = low stress, 5 = high stress).

1. Sudden and significant increase in debt load
2. Significant production loss due to disease or pests
3. Insufficient regular cash flow to meet financial obligations or for daily necessities
4. Delay in planting or harvesting due to weather
5. Media distortions of farm situation
6. Low commodity prices
7. Significant changes in type or size of farming operation
8. Meeting with loan officer for additional loan
9. Purchase of major machinery, facility or livestock
10. Not being considered part of the farm business by others
11. Taking an off-the-farm job to meet expenses
12. Prolonged bad weather
13. Problems with weeds or insects
14. Machinery breakdown at a critical time
15. Not enough time to spend with spouse
16. Crop loss due to weather
17. Illness during planting/harvesting
18. Deciding when to sell
19. Rising expenses
20. Government policies and regulations
21. Concerns about the continued financial viability of the farm
22. Having a loan request turned down
23. Farming-related accident
24. Government trade policies
25. Government “cheap food” policies
26. Metric conversion
27. Breeding or reproductive difficulties with livestock
28. No farm help or loss of help when needed
29. Need to learn/adjust to new government regulations and policies
30. Spouse doesn’t have enough time for child-rearing
31. Increased workload at peak times
32. Unplanned interruptions
33. Use of hazardous chemicals on the farm
34. Dealing with salespeople
35. Long work hours
36. Pressure of having too much to do in too little time
37. Feeling isolated on the farm
38. Few vacations away from the farm
39. Having to travel long distances for services, repairs, shopping and health care
40. Keeping up with new technology and products
41. Worrying about market conditions
42. Having to make decisions without all the necessary information
43. Being expected to work on the farm as well as manage the house
44. Worrying about owing money
45. Worrying about keeping the farm in the family
46. Not seeing enough people
47. Not having enough money or time for entertainment and recreation
48. Death of a parent or member of the immediate family
49. Death of a friend
50. Daughter or son leaving home
51. Problems balancing work and family responsibilities
52. Divorce or marital separation
53. Problems with a partnership
54. Trouble with parents or in-laws
55. Conflict with spouse over spending priorities
56. Major decisions being made without my knowledge or input
57. Having to wear too many hats, eg. farmer, spouse, father, son etc.
58. Surface rights negotiations
59. Problems with relatives in farm operating agreement
60. Elder care
61. Retirement and farm transfer to next generation
62. Other recent events which have had an impact on your life:

________________________________________
________________________________________
________________________________________
Exercise 4: Where to start?

Do you ever spend ten dollars worth of energy worrying about a ten-cent problem? Or focus so much on things you can’t change that you neglect to take charge where you can make a difference? This exercise will help you set priorities. For each stressor identified in the Farming Stress Inventory, ask yourself two questions: “How important is it?” and “Can I control this event?” Put the stressors in the appropriate box.

IMPORTANT, CONTROLLABLE STRESSORS (Use Action Skills)
IMPORTANT, UNCONTROLLABLE STRESSORS (Use Acceptance and Coping Skills)
UNIMPORTANT, CONTROLLABLE STRESSORS
(Use Action Skills or Acceptance Skills)
UNIMPORTANT, UNCONTROLLABLE STRESSORS (Use Acceptance Skills)
Acceptance skills

1. **Keep it in perspective**
   
   When worries and fears are causing you a lot of stress, ask yourself:
   
   - Has this happened before? What did I learn from that experience?
   - What’s the worst possible outcome?
   - What else can I do?
   - What advice would I give a friend in this situation?
   - Five years from now, how important will this seem?

2. **Use positive self-talk**
   
   Many people find that repeating a saying helps them accept what they can’t change. Some examples are listed below. Choose (or invent) one as a “secret weapon” against bad times.
   
   - We/I can gain strength from this.
   - We/I have skills, abilities and talents that go beyond this farm.
   - We have each other, our family and friends.
   - There is more to life than this farm.

3. **Keep a positive attitude**
   
   It’s hard to smile when things are going wrong. There are times when you need to blow off steam or express your resentment. But letting negative emotions take over completely only makes the situation worse. If you focus on the positive side, you’re more likely to find a way out. A positive attitude can become contagious, making it easier to live and work with others.

4. **Develop a stress-resistant personality**
   
   Some people create stress for themselves and others. Type A personalities have these traits in common:
   
   - Unrealistically high expectations
   - Inability to relax
   - Constant dissatisfaction
   - Always in a hurry
   
   If you recognize these traits in yourself, be aware they can make you more prone to stress-related disease. Try to accept the fact that reality often falls short of expectations. People who are always rushing and pushing often accomplish less than people who take time to think through the problem. Getting regular, non-competitive exercise is a good way to temper a Type A personality. Another way to develop stress resistance is to consider problems as challenges. Look for possibilities and creative solutions. Commitment to family, friends, religion and community activities also helps buffer stress and put problems in perspective. Being “connected” to others can provide strength and meaning.

5. **Get counselling**
   
   Sometimes the only way to deal with stressful events is to get professional help. Seeking counselling is not a sign of weakness; it takes strength to recognize when you can’t go it alone. Learn to make use of, not avoid, expert resources. If you feel completely alone, overwhelmed or hopeless, seek professional help.
Coping skills

1. Physical fitness
You can literally run away from stress - or bike, walk, dance or lift weights away from stress! Physical fitness helps fight stress in two ways:

- A physically fit body is better able to withstand the effects of stress. A balanced lifestyle that includes regular exercise, healthy meals and adequate sleep gives you energy and endurance to handle whatever comes your way.
- Exercise has a calming effect that lasts long after the exercise session itself is over. Repetitive exercises like running or cross-country skiing can produce a mental state like meditation. Aerobic exercise that gets your heart pounding for at least 20 minutes releases chemicals in the brain called “endorphins” that reduce depression and stress.

2. Relaxation
Do you know how to relax? Many of the ways we think we relax - drinking, smoking, watching TV, eating - do nothing to reverse the physical effects of stress. True relaxation is a skill that you can learn and use when you need it. Stress tenses your muscles, makes your breathing shallow, raises your blood pressure, makes your heart pound and clouds your judgment. Relaxation skills can reverse those effects to make you feel better, think better and perform better.

- Choose a time when you’re not extremely stressed to learn the skills. Once you’ve learned and practised them a few times, you’ll find they help when you need them.
- Go to a quiet place. Sit or lie in a comfortable position, and try the following. Scan your body, looking for tension by focusing on each part. Start with your feet and work up through your legs, buttocks, torso, arms, shoulders, head and neck. Let your jaw drop. Allow your eyelids to be heavy and relaxed. At each place that you feel tension, take a deep, full breath and imagine the tightness “melting” as you breathe out. You can also tighten each area for a count of five, and then allow it to relax. Try squeezing the muscles in your face, arms, legs and buttocks. Feel the difference as you let them melt.
- Allow your thoughts to pass through your mind without paying attention to them. Repeat the following to yourself:

  "I am relaxed and warm."
  "My hands are heavy and warm."
  "My heartbeat is slow and regular."
  "I feel peaceful and still."

  Continue to breathe slowly and regularly.
- Best of all, once you feel relaxed, enjoy it. Imagine you are in a beautiful place, sitting in front of a campfire on a starry night, or drifting in a boat on a calm lake - your favourite place. Remain in this relaxed state for 5 to 10 minutes before getting up.


Action skills

1. Communicate

Successful communication requires at least two people: a sender and a receiver. Some people are good at saying what they mean, but not so good at listening. Others listen well but don’t send clear messages. Studies have shown rural women withstand the stress of low income and long hours of work provided that they have a supportive spousal relationship.

No one can cope with the stress of the farm income crisis alone and stay healthy. Find others who share your concerns and losses. Talking about the tough realities is the start of a cooperative stress-busting effort.

2. Manage your time

If you’re feeling tense because of too much to do, time management skills can help you get things under control.

1. Make a list of everything you want to do today.

2. Prioritize tasks and do the important ones when your energy is high and resources are available.


4. Consolidate similar trips and tasks.

5. Delegate as much as possible. Can your kids or spouse take over some tasks? Can you barter skills with a neighbour?

6. Reduce paperwork by handling each piece of paper only once.

7. Avoid time-wasters. When you’re interrupted, let them know you can’t spend time now, and arrange to call or visit them soon.

8. Homemade isn’t always better. It’s spending the evening with friends, not what you serve them, that counts. A simple card with a photo can take the place of a gift.

9. Be prepared. Mentally rehearse a stressful situation so you’ll have several alternatives when the time comes. Gather any resources you’ll need.

10. Ask for help. Admit when you’ve got too many priorities.
3. **Set “S-M-A-R-T” goals**

It’s important to get a picture of what you, ideally, would like to have happen in your life. Use the relaxation exercise described in the section, “Coping Skills”. Visualize all parts of your life - home, work and recreational settings. Then picture your ideal situation - three months, six months, one year, five years from today. What will you be doing? How will you look? What will you be feeling? Which people will be a part of your life, and what will be the quality of your relationships with them?

Now the trick is to identify those skills that can help you reach your goals. Awareness skills can help you understand what’s happening, within yourself, your family and your community. Acceptance skills can change your attitude. Action skills such as time management and communication can increase your effectiveness. You can use coping skills to handle the strain of increased workloads. Choosing “S-M-A-R-T” goals can turn stress into personal satisfaction and productivity.

**Specific.** Set a concrete goal that addresses behaviour and results, not emotions.
Example: “For the next month, when I feel stressed, I will use exercise or relaxation to cope.” When a goal isn’t do-able, revise it.

**Measurable.** You must be able to tell when you arrive, and to set milestones along the way.
Example: “My goal is to reduce the times when I feel stressed to fewer than one a day.”

**Agreed upon.** Don’t be the Lone Ranger; ask others to support and help you.
Example: “My spouse knows that stress management is important, and will be supportive when I need to exercise or relax.”

**Rewarding.** Behaviour change should be as much fun as possible. Decide how you will reward yourself, both for achieving your main goal and passing milestones along the way.
Example: “For each week that I meet my stress management goal, I will reward myself with one evening, doing what I want to do.”

**Trackable.** Keep track of your progress in a visible way. This helps keep you from getting discouraged by showing your day-to-day improvement.
Example: “I will keep a daily stress log, listing stressors, how I reacted and how I handled it.”
PRESSURE POINTS
WHERE ARE YOURS?

Health
Medium
Low
High

Relationships
Medium
Low
High

Weather
Medium
Low
High

Finances
Medium
Low
High

Farm Hassles
Medium
Low
High

Work Overload
Medium
Low
High
Basic stress prevention

1. Exercise regularly
   A fast walk, slow jog or any activity that gets your heart rate up into the 120’s and 130’s and keeps it there for 20 minutes or more three times a week will improve your endurance and soak up tension.

2. Relax
   Learn techniques of deep breathing, meditation and muscle relaxation. Practice them daily and at times when you feel uptight.

3. Set priorities
   Determine what you value the most in your life and make sure you are spending time, money and energy on them rather than on those things others value.

4. Choose your response
   Develop your “bag of tricks.” You can run away (from confrontation), you can fight, or you can compromise, bargain, negotiate or cooperate. Don’t get caught in responses that are destructive for you.

5. Solve the problem
   None of the above is more than a quick fix until you determine what’s bugging you and move to change, neutralize or otherwise deal with the situation.

6. Avoid the chemical haze
   Booze, tranquilizers, eating, cigarettes, coffee - any or all of them may help for a short period but all of them have negative side effects and make stress worse over the long haul.

7. Listen to your body
   Pay attention to muscle aches, indigestion, tooth grinding, fist clenching and the like. Your body is trying to tell you to use one of the above ways of dealing with stress.

8. Reach out
   Share your concerns with family, self-help groups and organizations working on farm income issues. You will gain and give strength to others.
Gerrard, N. (1991). Fact sheet no. 4, Rural Stress: What is it? What can we do about it? Centre for Agricultural Medicine, University of Saskatchewan: Saskatoon, SK.
Haverstock, L. (1999). Rural Mental Health Support: an Unpublished Report to the Centre for Agricultural Medicine. Centre for Agricultural Medicine, University of Saskatchewan: Saskatoon, SK.
Northern Telecom. (No date). Stress Management, an employee wellness booklet from the “Taking Charge” series.

Although every care has been taken in providing this information, the authors accept no responsibility or liability for any consequences arising from the use of such information.
Where to get help

**FARM STRESS LINE** 1-800-667-4442

Farmers, men and women from rural communities, are trained to assist people in crisis. They handle calls in confidence. With access to a computerized database of services, they provide information on programs and services related to personal and family matters, farm financial crisis and other issues affecting the farm operation. A Livestock Care Service assists commercial livestock producers when livestock are endangered.

8:00 am to 9:00 pm, Monday to Saturday and holidays

**OTHER SOURCES OF HELP**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tel. No’s.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountant local no.___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addictions local no.___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcoholics Anonymous local no.___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bankruptcy Information (306) 780-5391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling (Tel. Dir. yellow pages: “Counselling”) local no.___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Abuse 9-1-1 local no.___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Abuse local no.___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clergyman/Priest local no.___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Doctor local no.___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm Consultation Services (pro-active business planning) 1-888-777-9309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Gambling Help Line (24 hrs) 1-800-306-6789</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kid’s Help Phone Line (24 hrs) 1-800-668-6868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyer local no.___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediation Services (Tel. Dir. blue pages: “Mediation Services”) local no.___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health local no.___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcotics Anonymous (Tel. Dir. white pages: Narcotics Anonymous) local no.___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCMP (24 hrs) (Police emergencies only) 310-7267 or 9-1-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Service Centre/Extension Agrologist local no.___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Assault Crisis Line (Tel. Dir. white pages: Sexual Assault) local no.___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Services (Tel. Dir. blue pages: “Social Services”) local no.___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide (24 hrs) (Tel. Dir. blue pages: “Mobile Crisis Service”) 9-1-1 local no.___________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you are experiencing medium or high stress, call for help now.
Partners:

The Agricultural Health and Safety Network at the Centre for Agricultural Medicine, University of Saskatchewan
Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities (SARM)
Canadian Coalition for Agricultural Safety and Rural Health
Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada
Where to get help

FARM STRESS LINE
Call your Rural Service Centre or your telephone company’s Directory Assistance Service to inquire about a Farm Stress Line in your area. Where a Farm Stress Line exists, men and women from rural communities are trained to assist people in crisis. They handle calls in confidence. With access to a computerized database of services, they provide information on programs and services related to personal and family matters, farm financial crisis and other issues affecting the farm operation.

OTHER SOURCES OF HELP
Consult your telephone directory or call your telephone company’s Directory Assistance Service to check the local telephone numbers for these services.

Tel. No’s.

Accountant ____________
Addictions ____________
(Tel. Dir. white pages, Local Health District/Authority, “Addiction Services”)
Alcoholics Anonymous ____________
(Tel. Dir. white pages: AA Alcoholics Anonymous)
Bankruptcy Information ____________
(Provincial Government: Superintendent of Bankruptcy)
Counselling (Tel. Dir. yellow pages: “Counselling”) ____________
Domestic Abuse 9-1-1 ____________
(Tel. Dir. blue pages: “Social Services: Family Support Centre, Domestic Abuse Program”)
Child Abuse ____________
(Tel. Dir. blue pages: “Social Services, Emergency Child Abuse Intake Crisis Line”)
Clergyman/Priest ____________
Family Doctor ____________
Farm Consultation Services (pro-active business planning) ____________
Problem Gambling Help Line (24 hrs) ____________
Kid’s Help Phone Line (24 hrs) 1-800-668-6868
Lawyer ____________
Mediation Services (Tel. Dir. blue pages: “Mediation Services”) ____________
Mental Health ____________
(Tel. Dir. white pages, Local Health District/Authority, “Mental Health Services”)
Narcotics Anonymous (Tel. Dir. white pages: Narcotics Anonymous) ____________
RCMP (24 hrs) (Police emergencies only) ____________
Rural Service Centre/Extension Agrologist ____________
(Tel. Dir. blue pages: “Agriculture and Food”)
Sexual Assault Crisis Line (Tel. Dir. white pages: Sexual Assault) ____________
Social Services (Tel. Dir. blue pages: “Social Services”) ____________
Suicide (24 hrs) (Tel. Dir. blue pages: “Mobile Crisis Service”) 9-1-1 ____________

If you are experiencing medium or high stress, call for help now.
Partners:

The Agricultural Health and Safety Network at the Centre for Agricultural Medicine, University of Saskatchewan
Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities (SARM)
Canadian Coalition for Agricultural Safety and Rural Health
Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada

Your Local Contact