



UC Small Farm Program Publication



Stress Management for Women Farmers & Ranchers

Kristin Reynolds, Program Representative, University of California Small Farm Program

There is much information written about stress, and most people are generally familiar with everyday stressors, or sources of stress. The focus of this article is the common set of stressors experienced by farmers and ranchers, with an emphasis on women and stress management.

Defining Stress

Stress is something that everyone has experienced, and may need no further explanation in terms of what stress *is*. However, there are different types of stress, and each can affect daily life in different ways.

Stress can be physical, psychological, or social, and can stem from virtually any circumstance, depending on the person. Stress can even be beneficial. Many medical and behavioral theories suggest that humans need a certain amount of stress that essentially translates into motivation. Positive stress is referred to as *eustress*, which often gives us our competitive edge in performance-related activities, such as succeeding at a new production method, or connecting with a new marketing outlet. Eustress is stress that the body can chemically dissipate without physiological damage—helpful in moving individuals toward achievement.

On the other hand, *distress* is negative stress, such as constant worry, that can be physically or psychologically harmful if ignored. Distress is what people aim to manage through use of coping strategies.

Stress on the Farm or Ranch

Studies have shown that there are differences in the ways that farmers experience stress. For example, the National Agricultural Safety Database cites the following statistics:

- Younger farmers, especially those younger than 50, report more stress than older farmers.
- Farmers in dairy or mixed, (for example, grain and livestock), operations report higher stress than those in grain only [or single-product] operations.
- Farmers employed in off-farm jobs report more stress than full-time farm operators.
- Farm women may experience additional stressors. Besides working as a full partner in the farm business, many farm women have full responsibility for home and family matters. A farm woman with an off-farm job faces very difficult demands in addition to being the traditional nurturer for the rest of the family.
(Moolgaard and Miller, 1996)

In addition to the differences between how various operators experience stress, there are also common stressors that may be felt solely or more acutely by farm and ranch operators than by other segments of society. These pertain to the nature of agricultural work, as well as the fact that farming and ranching are lifestyles, in addition to being professions. Common stressors in agriculture include:

- Lack of control over environment/crop and animal health
Weather and crop or livestock pests, illnesses and disease are fundamental risks in agriculture. Therefore, it is advisable to take steps to avoid negative consequences, and have a plan deal with weather-related set-backs when they occur.

- Ambiguity of production output and sales/income
Small-scale farmers are often uncertain about how much of their product they will be able to sell. Further, there is always the risk of crop failure due to weather events or animal loss due to disease or predators. This uncertainty can add a measure of stress to farming and ranching, yet this does not have to be insurmountable, if it has been anticipated in advance.

- Regular 'urgent' situations
Agriculture involves a degree of "excitement" or unexpected but urgent events that many indoor or controlled-environment jobs do not. Examples of this include: pest outbreaks requiring immediate action; animal injuries, births, and deaths; or bursts in irrigation pipes. These stresses are quite simply parts of agriculture that farmers and ranchers must accept and be prepared to deal with. Familiarity with effective stress management techniques can enable individuals to handle likely stressors more efficiently and with fewer negative outcomes.

- Physical stress
Farming and ranching is physically taxing. Whether harvesting, caring for animals, or fixing irrigation, agriculture is hard work—And, more often than not, this work still needs to get done when one is tired, injured, or ill. Neglecting to use practices and habits to preserve one's health can lead to repetitive or cumulative health problems, such as repetitive stress injuries, or a weakened immune system. Illness can be stressful for anyone, but given that farmers' and ranchers' livelihoods are likely to be somewhat

dependent on the physical well-being of themselves or their families, physical stress may be doubly so. Taking care of one's physical well-being is vital to personal sustainability in agriculture.

- Too much to do

Agriculture is not only physically, (and at times emotionally), demanding; it is also time-intensive. There is never a shortage of tasks to complete, planning to do, or bookkeeping to catch up on. This can be stressful for some people; especially those who like to feel a sense of completion. Breaking up tasks into steps such as goal writing can help create a sense of accomplishment, and reduce stress. Effective time management can also be a stress-relief strategy.

- Integration of home and work

Separating work from "home life" can be challenging, especially when work occurs at the home. For some people this does not pose a problem, and is, in fact, preferable. For others, it can lead to feelings of never leaving the work environment. The completion of farm or ranch tasks may vie with other more personal matters throughout the day. This stress is not wholly unique to agriculture, but is an important aspect of operating a business out of the home. Strategies for managing home and work priorities may help reduce home vs. work related stress.

- Rural life

As cities grow, rural areas often experience a declining population and less convenient access to services such as medical care, grocery stores, or other essential businesses. Though the tranquility of living in the countryside is what attracts many new farmers and ranchers to agriculture, rural life can be stressful in terms of travel time and expense, as well as the general convenience of living close to town. In addition to this, for those who have social networks or jobs in town, fitting an agricultural schedule into an 8am-5pm society can be challenging. For farmers and ranchers with part-time jobs, finding appropriate ways to distribute time may be a challenge. Managing time in order to attend to business and personal needs may thus include strategizing when certain on-farm or ranch tasks can be accomplished, and when there will be the time to make a trip to town.

Stress on Women Farmers and Ranchers

The general stresses that women experience in society may be particularly acute for women in male-dominated fields such as agriculture. Some of the stresses that women farmers and ranchers may encounter are discussed next. Being able to recognize certain sources of stress may better enable operators to use effective coping strategies and avoid further unnecessary stress or negative reactions to it.

- Agricultural stereotypes

Women's roles in US and California agriculture are varied, yet mainstream images of women in agriculture often include the farm wife, the bookkeeper, or the home gardener. While these roles are important and indeed do describe a portion of the women working in US and California agriculture, this view is incomplete. Women own and operate farms and ranches, which range from the small berry hobby farm, to whole grain and fodder production, to raising large animals.

- Women's lack of perceived authority for farm management

Some women farmers and ranchers have mentioned hurdles to performing certain tasks that were essential to their operation- not because they were physically or emotionally incapable, but because others (who had some sort of influence over that element of the production scheme) would not acknowledge the women's authority over their own farms or ranches. Aside from just a frustration, dealing with stereotypes such as these costs time and may affect a person's self-confidence. In this way, it can be a source of stress that women farmers and ranchers must learn to effectively and assertively address.

- Gender roles and stereotypes at home and in public

As far as social relations may have evolved to recognize equality between women and men, gender roles persist, and may thus mean that women are likely to take responsibility for more of the daily tasks in the home. A 2002 study by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research found that US women, on average, did 27 hours of housework each week, while men did 16¹ (UM News Service 2002). This data should not be interpreted as a universal truth.

¹ Total work—"market" plus housework--was found to be similar in this study.

Still, the fact that women are often expected to take care of household tasks *that often go unrecognized* can translate into added stress.

- Lack of access to agricultural programs and loans

Women's access to credit is a topic often addressed in an international context. For example, women farmers in some developing countries are not allowed, for cultural and regulatory reasons, to take bank loans to purchase farm inputs. Though constraints on access to banking services are not as pronounced in the United States, there has been evidence of gender discrimination in granting of agricultural loans. Small farming and ranching today often requires that operators have access to credit, at least during initial or periodic stages of the farm or ranch. Limited access to funds for women agriculturalists may cause financial and emotional stress. There are, however, a number of loans and business services available to beginning farmers and to women entrepreneurs. These may be found through agencies such as the USDA Farm Service Agency (www.fsa.usda.gov) or the Small Business Association (www.sba.gov).

Moving on...

Again, recognizing sources of stress and your own coping mechanisms may enable you to deal with stress more effectively. This subsection has focused on stresses that you may encounter as a woman in agriculture. We hope that increasing your awareness of potential stressors will help you deal with them if they arise. To that end, the following section addresses stress management.

Women and Stress Management

Mainstream research on stress responses has long held that the "typical" response to stress is "fight-or-flight" in which people face stress (fight) or avoid it (flight). However, 90% of stress research has tested men only, (Berkowitz, 2002). More recently, research has suggested that a hormone in women called *oxytocin* acts to calm women in stress. While it is still believed that women, as well as men, experience the fight-or-flight reaction, an additional behavior pattern, referred to as "tend or befriend," may also enable women to deal with stress, (Taylor et al, 2000). "Tend or befriend" refers to behaviors such as care-taking and

seeking out support networks that are used as a way to cope with stress, and are a tactic with which many women are familiar.

Destructive versus Constructive Coping

The way that individuals react to stress obviously varies with each person at any particular point in time. Fatigue, health status, depression, social environment, excitement, elation and invigoration all influence how one experiences and copes with stress. Though people do deal with stress in many ways, it is important to recognize that not all coping strategies are positive or constructive. Examples of destructive coping include over consumption of alcohol or constant worry. Effects of not dealing with stress constructively may include sleeplessness, depression, anxiety, or prolonged anger. It has been found that farmers (women and men) tend to be reluctant to seek professional help when stress gets severe, but there are many ways to manage stress (Pitzer 1987).

Some constructive ways to deal with stress

- Recognize the symptoms of stress.
- Recognize any destructive behaviors that you may engage in to deal with stress.
- Recognize what has worked for you in the past in terms of stress management, and try to use those strategies when needed.
- Locate the source of stress, and address the source, in addition to the symptoms.
- Know your limits.
- Learn to accept what is realistically beyond your control.
- Delegate tasks to others, as appropriate.
- Include aerobic, physical activity as a part of your weekly routine.
- Take care of yourself (eating regular, healthful meals; sleeping; resting; exercising; etc.)
- Make time for fun.
- Make time for relaxation.

Networks and Stress Management

As discussed above, seeking peer relationships and social networks can be an important part of stress management for women, and these can include networks

of other women agriculturalists. Women's agricultural networks may consist of a small group of local women farmers or ranchers who get together informally to talk about farm or ranch management, or even more personal issues at their operations. Or, they can be more formal community or regional groups that hold regular meetings for focused discussion of technical or regulatory issues in agriculture. Whatever their form, networks can facilitate farmer-to-farmer information exchange and have been found to be helpful to women who balance the many pieces involved in a sustainable agricultural livelihood. Through social networks, women farmers and ranchers have also gained new perspectives, garnered moral support, and exchanged experience-based advice on farm and ranch management.

In addition to purely social relationships, informal or organized networks of women farming or ranching peers may help individuals cope with personal stresses of farm or ranch life. They may also empower women farmers and ranchers by enabling them to recognize their historical and current roles as members and leaders of the agricultural community. Several successful examples of women networks have been documented by researchers and women farming organizations. A list of resources addressing women in agriculture networks is included at the end of this article.

Conclusion

This article has addressed stress and stress management on the farm or ranch, with a focus on how women may experience and manage these aspects of agricultural lifestyles. There are many ways that individuals deal with stress in their lives, ranging from individual self-care to peer-based support networks. Perhaps the most important parts of managing the many sources of stress inherent in agriculture today are to recognize them; to take active steps to control unnecessary stressors; and to maintain the balance between distress (negative stress), and eustress, (positive stress). Doing this will help cultivate balance both on the farm or ranch, and within one's self, and is therefore critical not only to individual well-being, but to the overall sustainability of the farm or ranch.

Additional Online Resources

Manitoba Farm and Rural Stress Line:

<http://www.ruralstress.ca/>

Note that this helpful website is a Canadian service. Online materials are available on the Internet, but any consultation may be strictly for Canadian residents.

Rural Leadership Programs–Family Farm Stress, Manitoba Agriculture

<http://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/homeec/cba01s00.html>

Website contains fact sheets and worksheets on topics such as family farm stress.

Stress Management Briefs, University of Minnesota Extension Service

<http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/familydevelopment/DE7269.html>

Stress Management for Farmers, University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service

<http://pubs.caes.uga.edu/caespubs/pubcd/CHFDE-33.htm>

Stress Management for Couples, North Dakota State University Extension Service

<http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/pubs/yf/famsoci/fs285.pdf>

Manage stress to increase farm safety, Iowa State University Extension

<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM1265L.pdf>

Stress Management–Taking Charge (Lesson 2 in series), Clemson University Cooperative Extension

<http://www.clemson.edu/psapublishing/pages/FYD/HEL67.PDF>

Time, Work, and Family Stress Management Fact Sheet, Kansas State University Cooperative Extension Service

<http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/famlf2/mf2253.pdf>

Farm Alarm: Coping with Stress, University of Minnesota

<http://safety.cfans.umn.edu/farmalarm/index.html>

Women in Agriculture Networks

Pennsylvania Women's Ag Network

<http://wagn.cas.psu.edu>

Women in Agriculture at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln

<http://wia.unl.edu>

University of Wisconsin Association of Women in Agriculture

<http://www.uwmadisonawa.org>

Women's Agricultural Network at the University of Vermont

<http://www.uvm.edu/~wagn>

Works Cited

Berkowitz, G., 2002. "UCLA Study on Friendship among Women: An alternative to fight or flight." Online resource: www.anapsid.org/cnd/gender/tendfend.html . Accessed 8/03/06.

Molgaard, V. and Miller, L. 1996. (Revised 2002). Manage Stress to Increase Farm Safety. SAFE FARM- Promoting Agricultural Health & Safety Project, Iowa State University Extension, Ames. www.cdc.gov/nasd/

Pitzer, R., 1987. Stress and Coping on the Farm. University of Minnesota Extension Service. Online resource: www.extension.umn.edu. Accessed 2/19/08.

Taylor, S.E. et al., 2000. Biobehavioral responses to stress in females: tend-and-befriend, not fight-or-flight. *Psychological Review* 107: 3. pp 411-429.

University of Michigan News Service, Mar 12, 2002. "US husbands are doing more housework while wives are doing less." Online resource: www.ns.umich.edu. Accessed 2/19/08.



This publication was supported in part by a grant from the USDA Risk Management Agency.

The University of California prohibits discrimination or harassment of any person on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity, pregnancy (including childbirth, and medical conditions related to pregnancy or childbirth), physical or mental disability, medical condition (cancer-related or genetic characteristics), ancestry, marital status, age, sexualorientation, citizenship, or status as a covered veteran (covered veterans are special disabledveterans, recently separated veterans, Vietnam era veterans, or any other veterans who served onactive duty during a war or in a campaign or expedition for which a campaign badge has beenauthorized) in any of its programs or activities.

University policy is intended to be consistent with the provisions of applicable State and Federal laws.

Inquiries regarding the University's nondiscrimination policies may be directed to theAffirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Director, University of California, Agriculture andNatural Resources, 1111 Franklin Street, 6th Floor, Oakland, CA 94607, (510) 987-0096.