



Farming, Ranching and Work-life Stress

Reviewed and revised by: **Sean Brotherson**,
Family Science Specialist, NDSU Extension

Folks working in farming and ranching experience pressure from all directions. While all of us must deal with economic ups and downs or family challenges, individuals in agriculture face added uncertainties like weather concerns, commodity price changes and other factors that directly influence their livelihoods, health and relationships.

— On Farming —

“It’s sort of in your blood.
You don’t think about the
long hours or the money.
You do it because you
love it.”

—
Ross Haberfield

Common Farm and Ranch Stresses

What images come to mind when you think of stress in farming or ranching? They might include:

- Running into town to buy spare parts.
- Listening to the radio and hearing the market drop on prices.
- Rushing to get work done before a storm.
- Working late into the night putting in a crop, handling animals or fixing equipment.
- Feeling fatigue, discouragement or continuing frustration.

Despite such stresses, often folks do not reveal the stresses they face or talk about the frustrations they feel as they work on the farm or ranch.

Individuals or families in farming or ranching often experience pressures and uncertainty, especially during times of harvesting and planting. If feelings of frustration and helplessness build up and are not managed, they can lead to intense family problems involving one’s spouse, children, parents or other relatives. If left unresolved, these stressful conditions can lead to costly accidents, health concerns and deaths.

The Whys of Stress in Farming and Ranching

So, why do farming and ranching carry higher stresses than other occupations? Research by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and other sources highlight several patterns.

- **Those working in agriculture more often deal with stress-related health conditions.** Some health conditions linked with stress that are common for folks in farming or ranching include heart disease, high blood pressure, respiratory illness, headaches and depression.
- **Those working in agriculture often handle dangerous situations and are more likely to experience accidents while working.** In 2020, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that both farm and ranch managers and agricultural workers ranked in the top 15 occupations for accidental deaths per 100,000 workers in the United States. Both adults and youth on farm or ranch operations face health or injury concerns associated with equipment issues, chemical or dust exposure, fatigue, or mental stress. In addition, those in agriculture often have no or limited health or disability insurance coverage.

- **Those working in agriculture must adapt to continuing changes in technology and management of farm or ranch operations.** Rapid changes in farming and ranching have shifted such work from being largely physical occupations to jobs involving new technology, regular financial decisions, and production and management advances regarding livestock and crops.
- **Those working in agriculture typically face stress spillover effects into their work and family lives.** A majority of folks working in agriculture work additional jobs (off-farm jobs, etc.) to provide non-farm income for their households. Those in farming or ranching face the same stressful events that others do, such as economic difficulties, turmoil in the world, loss of a family member or divorce. However, stressful situations on the farm or ranch also “spill over” into their lives, such as machinery breakdowns, livestock deaths, uncontrollable weather, or varied crop pests and diseases.

Understanding Work-life Stress

In the engineering field, **stress** refers to the capacity to withstand strain. Structures have a measurable strength and resistance to strain according to the type and size of material. If overloading occurs, the structure distorts and breaks.

Work-life stress refers to demands and pressures occurring in work settings that “spill over” into the rest of one’s life. When applied to people, stress is more complex. Everyone takes in energy (strength) from the sun, air and food. When people remain relaxed and balanced as they go about their daily tasks, this energy flows in and out of their bodies in a healthy, harmonious way, but when they become mentally overwhelmed, physically fatigued or otherwise have difficulties due to work-life pressures, then they become “stressed out”—a recipe for health problems and other concerns.

You always have multiple choices in responding to and managing stress. Learning to identify your stresses, using healthy coping strategies, and managing your resources will help you develop a better work-life balance. Ideas and strategies for doing so are shared in the other fact sheets in this series.

Key Resources for Farm Stress

- **NDSU Extension** – Farm/Ranch Stress Resources: www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/ag-hub/ag-topics/farm-safety-health/managing-stress
- **North Dakota Dept. of Agriculture** – www.nd.gov/ndda
- **North Central Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Center** – www.farmstress.org
- **FirstLink Help Line** (24-hour helpline, services, referral) – Call 2-1-1 or go to www.myfirstlink.org
- **Together Counseling LLC** – Offers in-person and telehealth farm-to-farm counseling services; counselors have farming backgrounds. Cost coverage available as needed. Call 701-404-0997 or go to www.togethercounselinggroup.com/farm-to-farm
- **North Dakota Regional Human Service Centers** – Counseling services available statewide. Go to www.nd.gov/dhs/locations/regionalhsc/
- **North Dakota Behavioral Health Supports** – To access mental and behavioral health supports in North Dakota, go to www.behavioralhealth.nd.gov
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** (available 24 hours/day) – Call 9-8-8 or call/text 1-800-273-8255 (TALK).
- In an emergency, call **911**.

Stress Level in Your Farm or Ranch Operation?

Stress on a farm or ranch operation can vary across times and circumstances. Take a moment to do a simple assessment of the current stress level in your farm or ranch operation. Give one of the following scores to each stress source – then add them for a total score between 0 and 40. What is your score? Then, think about next steps for managing such stresses.

0 = very low	3 = medium
1 = low	4 = medium-high
2 = low-medium	5 = high

Equipment wear and tear or breakdowns	_____
Debt concerns and/or operating costs	_____
Uncertain or shifting commodity prices	_____
Weather difficulties (drought, moisture, etc.)	_____
Family disagreements or conflict	_____
Personal or family health concerns	_____
Policy challenges	_____
Other	_____
Total Score	_____

Scoring

Add the points together for each of the 8 items. Scores indicate:

- 0-10 — None to Mild Stress – Smooth Sailing
- 11-20 — Mild to Moderate Stress – Challenging but Manageable
- 21-30 — Moderate to Severe Stress – Slow Down and Get Things Checked
- 31-40 — Severe to Critical Stress – Focus on Health, Access Resources, Take Next Steps

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Original publication by Robert J. Fetsch, Professor and Extension Specialist, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Colorado State University

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