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FARM STRESS: CONSEQUENCES, RECOGNITION AND RESOURCES

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The owners and workers of farm businesses experience a unique and high level of uncertainty in terms of weather, finances, business structure, legalities, and social changes. These careers also include physical demands, irregular work schedules, and seasonal labour pressures. Stress often occurs at low but measurable chronic levels within the business. Stress can peak during crisis situations such as financial downturns that have impact on individuals, families, and business operations.

The authors conducted a literature review and discovered Ohio research identifies two schools of thought regarding farm family stress. One holds that farmers are less stressed than other workers because of the idyllic pastoral setting in which they work. A second cites numerous stressors that are unique to the farm environment (e.g., adverse economic conditions and unpredictable weather) and claims that farming is a stressful occupation. The Ohio Farm Family Health and Hazard Surveillance Project (OFFHHS), a survey of 4,860 cash grain farms in Ohio, provides an opportunity to make this comparison, and to study the correlates of stress and depression among farmers. Age adjusted results indicate that the farmers were statistically significantly more stressed and more depressed than a national sample of employed, non-disabled males. Preliminary results on the correlates of farm stress indicated that age was inversely related to stress. Principal operators with large farms and low earnings reported higher levels of stress than those with small farms and low earnings. Surprisingly, farmers who worked full time on the farm and also held down an additional full-time job scored lower on the stress measure than those full-time farmers who worked off farm only part-time or not at all. Significant correlates of depression included education and age, each being inversely related to depression. Principal operators of large farms who had low earnings scored higher on the depression scale than operators of small farms with low earnings. Lower depression scores were related to working more hours off of the farm.

Early warning signs or symptoms of stress are important to recognize.

Stress can surface in the form of physical, emotional/mental, or behavior/relationship changes depending on the person and the situation. People react to stress in different ways and have different thresholds of stress. Once symptoms of stress have been identified, one must learn how to manage the stress because the body's reaction to stress can have serious implications to one's health. By managing stress, one will ease some of the actual stress of your everyday life. Successful stress management includes: taking care of one's mental and physical health, knowing the warning signs of stress, and controlling ones reaction to stressful events.

Learning objectives of the poster and available curriculum are: to increase awareness of stress and the impact on mental health of farm families, to provide available mental health resources for farm and horticulture businesses, to provide strategies to reduce stress among farm families, and to use case studies and/or session activities to demonstrate ways to recognize farm and business stress.

Keywords: farm, ranch, stress, mental health, family, business