



The Agricultural Health and Safety Network

**DAILY CHORE:**

**HANDLING STRESS ON THE FARM**

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UNDERSTANDING STRESS, ITS IMPACT,  
AND EXPLORING COPING METHODS.

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[aghealth.usask.ca](http://aghealth.usask.ca)



Farming can be both a rewarding but demanding occupation. Farmers are exposed to a great deal of physical health risks with long strenuous labour and poor working conditions inhibited by weather and time of day. Due to the nature of farming, farmers and their families are susceptible to high levels of stress, depression, anxiety, and suicide. The National Stress Survey found that “almost two-thirds of Canadian farmers are feeling stressed on their farm” (CASA, 2005). As a result of the high stress among Canadian farmers, the Agricultural Health and Safety Network has developed this resource to support farmers’ understanding of stress, its impact and promote a variety of helpful coping methods to assist in stress reduction.

“I got my swather stuck, a minute later my father phoned to tell me the unloading auger stopped working on the combine, and then shortly after that a bearing went on our other combine. This all happened midday, peak season of harvest, with rain in the near forecast. Everything went wrong all at once, talk about being stressed.”

– Saskatchewan Farmer

“We are farming a lot more land these days, and it can be pretty challenging organizing several workers on the farm-keeping everyone on track making sure they are safe and running the equipment properly trying to get a lot of work done. My wife is a big help to me on our farm, but I know that I have been pretty short with her lately. She is busy working off the farm, helping the kids keep up with school and activities and keeping on top of the bills that need to be paid. My sister phones every couple of days, reminds me that Dad shouldn’t be running the equipment anymore as his memory is getting poor. I know my family is worried about my Dad just like I am. I haven’t been sleeping well, and my stomach feels like it is always in a knot.”

– Saskatchewan Farmer

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# What is stress?

Stress can be difficult to define as people experience stress differently. Negative events do not always lead to stress, and positive events are not necessarily stress-free. Simply, stress is the disruption of the body's homeostasis (i.e. ideal bodily function). Stress is the human response to change that is perceived as a challenge or a threat; it is a natural occurrence in life. However, too much stress can be harmful to the body, especially over a long period.

## Is all stress bad?

A small amount of stress can be good for people as it makes us more alert and gives us a boost of adrenaline. Just enough stress can motivate people to accomplish tasks. This good stress is referred to as eustress. An example of eustress on the farm may be the motivation to make it through the busy seeding or harvest season.

## Harmful stress

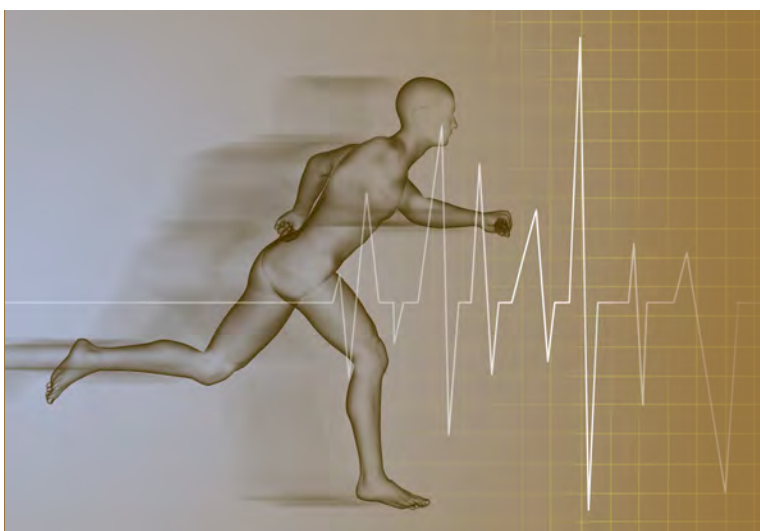
A build-up of tension without the opportunity to recover can lead to harmful stress. Bad stress is when events make us feel uncomfortable and not in control, leading to poor concentration, poor decision-making and deteriorating relationships. The main problem with stress is feeling overwhelmed by too many demands resulting in loss of confidence in our ability to cope.

## HOW STRESS WORKS



Stress is part of daily life as it is a result of both the good and bad things that happen. When you find an event stressful, your body undergoes a series of responses. Health Canada describes these responses in 3 stages:

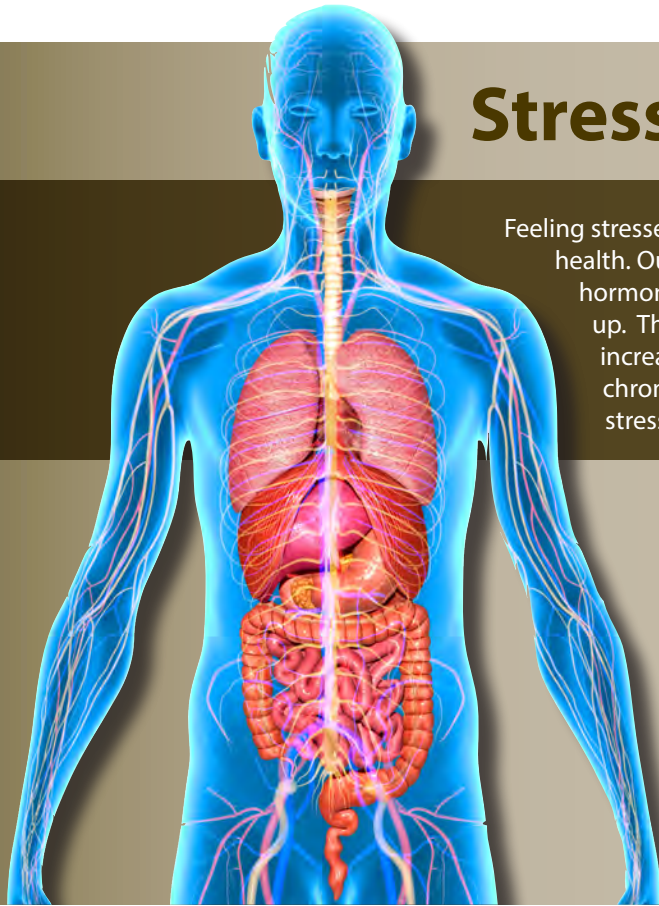
- **Mobilizing Energy:** Your body releases adrenaline, your heart beats faster and you breathe faster. Both good and bad events can trigger this surge of energy and strength. You may feel like “butterflies” are in your stomach. Some also experience indigestion, no appetite, and feelings of light-headed or dizzy.
- **Consuming Energy Stores:** When your body remains in the “mobilizing energy” stage for a period of time, it releases stored sugars and fats. You will then feel driven, pressured and tired. You may experience anxiety, negative thinking or memory loss, catch a cold or get the flu more often than normal as your immunity is compromised. You may increase unhealthy habits such as eating more food, drinking more coffee, drinking more alcohol and smoking.
- **Draining Energy Stores:** If you are unable to decrease your stress levels, your body's need for energy will become greater than its ability to provide it. At this stage, you may experience insomnia, errors in judgment and personality changes. Draining energy stores can lead to serious illness such as heart disease, high blood pressures, stroke or be at risk of mental illness such as depression.



### Side note: Evolution of stress

Stress has evolved over the years. Back in primitive years, stress was more physical than psychological and was short term in duration. For instance, say an early human was out gathering food to eat when all of a sudden a predator such as a lion approaches. Stress enabled the body to quickly react, sprinting away from the lion. After escaping, the body would then go into recovery mode, bringing the body back to its homeostasis. While we aren't running away from predators anymore, our busy lifestyle has put a constant strain on our body and mind. Stress has become more chronic and long term as a result of this transition.

# Stress Impacts Your Health



Feeling stressed for periods of time can take a toll on your mental and physical health. Our bodies respond to stress by releasing stress hormones. These hormones make blood pressure, heart rate, and blood sugar levels go up. The first symptoms are relatively mild, like chronic headaches and increased susceptibility to colds however with increased exposure to chronic stress more serious health problems may develop. Some stress- influenced conditions include, but are not limited to:

- Heart Disease
- High blood pressure
- Abnormal heart beats
- Mental health disorders, like depression and anxiety
- Obesity
- Menstrual problems
- Acne and other skin problems
- Bowel disease
- Weakening of Immune system

**“FIND WAYS TO MINIMIZE STRESS AS YOUR HEALTH DEPENDS ON IT!”**

## Recognizing symptoms of stress

Stress can surface in the form of physical, emotional and behavioural changes depending on the person and situation.

**Check the stress symptoms you may have experienced.**

### Physical

- Headaches
- Chest Pain
- Stomach problems (eg. constipation or diarrhea)
- Rapid beating heart
- Change in blood pressure
- Grinding/clenched teeth
- Fatigue
- Drop in sexual interest

### Emotional

- Increased angry blow-ups
- Frustration
- Difficulty controlling emotions
- Impatient
- Low self-esteem
- Depressed
- Suicidal thoughts

### Behavioural

- Overeating/neglect diet
- increased smoking/ drinking
- Change in sleeping habits (Insomnia, early waking,
- over-sleeping)
- Difficulty relaxing
- Restlessness/lack of concentration
- Withdrawn from others
- Trouble adapting to changing circumstances
- Forgetfulness
- Procrastination
- Short tempered
- Sarcastic arguments
- Impulsive buying
- Gambling



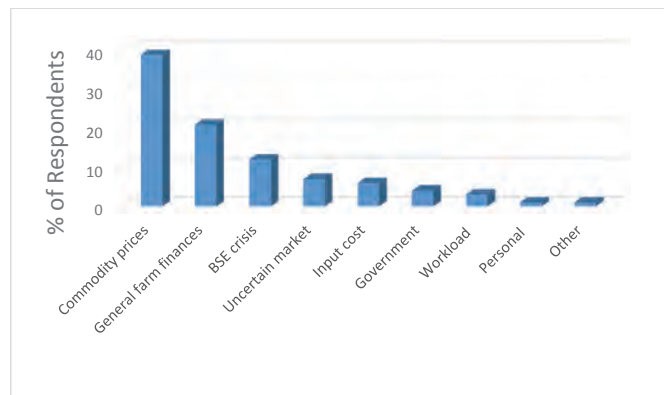
# WHAT ARE STRESSORS?

Stressors are those events or circumstances that cause people to become stressed. Stressors can be physical (e.g. pain, illness, or injury) or psychological (e.g. financial worry, time pressures, or family matters). Stressors and their severity vary among people.

## Common stressors on the farm

- workload - too much to do in too little time
- weather - not doing what is needed
- financial pressures and uncertain incomes
- large debt loads
- livestock well-being
- erratic markets-unfair and unequal returns on the market
- increased government regulation and complicated paperwork
- long working hours
- disagreements with other family members in the farm operation
- uncertain crop yield and forage production
- machinery breakdowns
- handling dangerous goods
- lack of rest
- technology- frustrating when not working properly
- unreasonable personal pressure and or goals

## Canadian farmers listed the single biggest factors causing stress



National Stress and Mental Survey of Canadian Farmers – CASA

## Stress can build over time

1. Stress can occur suddenly with no warning – hail destroys your quarter of lentils.
2. Stress can build rapidly over a short period of time - one thing after another goes wrong in a day. For example, the cows are out, the ATV has a flat tire, can't find any fencing staples, cell phone keeps ringing...
3. Stress can snowball over weeks, months, and even years - poor cash flow, high debt, and personal worries escalate

# Identifying your stressors

Farming involves many situations that cause stress. Common farm stressors are finances, weather, heavy work overloads, and conflict in relationships.

Complete the following inventory to identify your stressors. Rate your stressors on a scale of 1 to 5. (1 = low stress 5 = high stress).

	low				high
1. Sudden and significant increase in debt load	1	2	3	4	5
2. Significant production loss due to disease or pests	1	2	3	4	5
3. Insufficient regular cash flow to meet financial obligations or for daily necessities	1	2	3	4	5
4. Delay in planting or harvesting due to weather	1	2	3	4	5
5. Media distortions of farm situation	1	2	3	4	5
6. Low commodity prices	1	2	3	4	5
7. Significant changes in type or size of farming operation	1	2	3	4	5
8. Meeting with loan officer for additional loan	1	2	3	4	5
9. Purchase of major machinery, facility or livestock	1	2	3	4	5
10. Not being considered part of the farm business by others	1	2	3	4	5
11. Taking an off-the-farm job to meet expenses	1	2	3	4	5
12. Prolonged bad weather	1	2	3	4	5
13. Problems with weeds or insects	1	2	3	4	5
14. Machinery breakdown at a critical time	1	2	3	4	5
15. Not enough time to spend with spouse	1	2	3	4	5
16. Crop loss due to weather	1	2	3	4	5
17. Illness during planting/harvesting	1	2	3	4	5
18. Deciding when to sell	1	2	3	4	5
19. Rising expenses	1	2	3	4	5
20. Government policies and regulations	1	2	3	4	5
21. Concerns about the continued financial viability of the farm	1	2	3	4	5
22. Having a loan request turned down	1	2	3	4	5
23. Farming-related accident	1	2	3	4	5
24. Government free-trade policies	1	2	3	4	5
25. Government "cheap food" policies	1	2	3	4	5
26. Metric conversion	1	2	3	4	5
27. Breeding or reproductive difficulties with livestock	1	2	3	4	5
28. No farm help or loss of help when needed	1	2	3	4	5
29. Need to learn/adjust to new government regulations and policies	1	2	3	4	5
30. Spouse doesn't have enough time for child-rearing	1	2	3	4	5
31. Increased workload at peak times	1	2	3	4	5
32. Unplanned interruptions	1	2	3	4	5
33. Use of hazardous chemicals on the farm	1	2	3	4	5
34. Dealing with salespeople	1	2	3	4	5
35. Long work hours	1	2	3	4	5

36. Few vacations away from the farm	1	2	3	4	5
37. Feeling isolated on the farm	1	2	3	4	5
38. Having to travel long distances for services, shopping and health care	1	2	3	4	5
39. Pressure of having too much to do in too little time	1	2	3	4	5
40. Keeping up with new technology and products	1	2	3	4	5
41. Worrying about market conditions	1	2	3	4	5
42. Having to make decisions without all the necessary information	1	2	3	4	5
43. Being expected to work on the farm as well as manage the house	1	2	3	4	5
44. Worrying about owing money	1	2	3	4	5
45. Worrying about keeping the farm in the family	1	2	3	4	5
46. Not seeing enough people	1	2	3	4	5
47. Not having enough money or time for entertainment and recreation	1	2	3	4	5
48. Death of a parent or member of immediate family	1	2	3	4	5
49. Death of a friend	1	2	3	4	5
50. Problems balancing work and family responsibilities	1	2	3	4	5
51. Problems with relatives in farm operating agreement	1	2	3	4	5
52. Divorce or marital separation	1	2	3	4	5
53. Problems with a partnership	1	2	3	4	5
54. Daughter or son leaving home	1	2	3	4	5
55. Trouble with parents or in-laws	1	2	3	4	5
56. Conflict with spouse over spending priorities	1	2	3	4	5
57. Major decisions being made without my knowledge or input	1	2	3	4	5
58. Having to wear too many hats, eg. farmer, spouse, father, son etc.	1	2	3	4	5
59. Surface-rights negotiations	1	2	3	4	5
60. Other recent events which have had an impact on your life:	1	2	3	4	5

## Putting Your Score in Perspective

### **If the majority of scores are 4 or 5:**

It is important for you to devote immediate attention to stress management. Give yourself credit for the tough times you have survived. It is important to remember that when you are under stress for a long time, it depletes your internal resources. It is common to identify with these farm stresses in your operation. Remember there are people to talk to, to listen and help brainstorm ways to cope. Please refer to the back page of this book for local contacts. There is no shame in talking to someone about your concerns.

### **If the majority of scores are 3:**

Focus on your stress management strengths and continue to expand your coping skills that will help to deal with farm stress. Set goals that allow you take control of what is controllable on your farm. The skills you are using, and those you will develop can help you to deal with uncontrollable situations that arise.

### **If the majority of scores are 1 and 2:**

You have farm stress coping skills. Share your skills with others. Farming will continue to challenge you, so continue to communicate, prioritize daily tasks and support your family, friends, workers and community in difficult times.

# How do you deal with stress?

Farmers vary in their ability to handle stress. Each person reacts to stress in their own way. What may be tolerable to one person may be a challenge to another.

## Awareness

- |     |    |  |
|-----|----|--|
| Yes | No | Can you name three recent situations that have caused stress in your life?                                       |
| Yes | No | Can you list three symptoms (physical, emotional or behavioural) that you suffer from when you are under stress? |

## Acceptance

- |     |    |  |
|-----|----|--|
| Yes | No | Can you maintain a positive or neutral attitude when dealing with "little things" in life? |
| Yes | No | Can you talk yourself out of feeling stressed?   |

## Coping

- |     |    |   |
|-----|----|---|
| Yes | No | Do you know (and use) relaxation techniques like deep breathing and meditation? |
| Yes | No | Do you ever use exercise to get rid of stressed feelings?                       |

## Action

- |     |    |  |
|-----|----|--|
| Yes | No | Do you make a list and prioritize tasks to keep yourself from feeling overwhelmed by all there is to do? |
| Yes | No | When conflict arises can you express your feelings and communicate them to others effectively?           |

\_\_\_\_\_ Total

Less than 7 yes                      Any effort made to improve your ability to recognize and deal with stress will help promote balance in your life.

More than 7 yes                      You are on the right track! Share your ability to balance farm stress through difficult times with friends, family and colleagues. Be aware there can be a big difference between knowing what to do and doing it.

**“ REMEMBER THAT EVERYONE RESPONDS TO STRESS DIFFERENTLY “**

## Coping with Stress

Coping is how a person manages both their stressful problems and their responses to them. Each person may have a different way of coping with stress, and that coping style may also change based on the situation.

Two common coping styles among people

- **approach coping:** deal with stressor by trying to resolve it
- **avoidant coping:** avoid the problem causing stress

People who use *approach coping*, are more likely to adapt to stressors and have more positive outcomes than those who use *avoidant coping*.

## Coping Methods

There are a many stress coping methods that can help resolve or reduce stress. One method may be best suited for one stressor but not the other. Coping methods are not meant to be interdependent, but they can supplement one another when two or more are used together.

Useful stress coping methods may include:

- Cognitive-behavioral restructuring
- Physical activity
- Relaxation
- Social Support





## Changing stressful thoughts to positive thoughts

**Cognitive-behavioural restructuring** reduces stressful thoughts by restructuring them to be more realistic and unthreatening. Below is a coping technique that guides you through altering your stressful thoughts.

1. Keep things in perspective. Ask yourself,
  - Has this happened before?
  - What did I learn last time this happened?
  - What is the worst possible outcome?
  - Are my fears realistic?
  - What else can I do?
  - What do I tell a friend in this situation?
  - A year from now, how important will this be?
2. Use positive self-talk – let go of the blame and guilt.
  - I did the best that I could at the time.
  - I will succeed.
  - There is no place to go but up.
  - Someday we'll laugh about this.
  - This is a learning experience.
  - Calm down.
  - Things take time.
3. Keep a positive attitude
  - You are more likely to find a way out. It is easier to live and work with others.
4. Develop a stress-resistant personality.
  - Set realistic goals and expectations.
  - Build a time for leisure activities.
  - Exercise regularly.
  - Put problems in perspective and look at them as challenges.
  - Look for possibilities and get creative.
  - Connect with a positive social network that is supportive.
  - Share responsibilities and ask for help.
5. Talk to someone you trust to help you clear your head and focus on eliminating or reducing stress and anxiety - family, friends or a clergy member. Consider seeking out a professional counselor or confidential phone line programs to help if you feel completely alone, overwhelmed or hopeless. **There is never any shame in asking for help to help sort the wheat from the chaff in your life.**

# Physical activity



Physical activity is another great coping mechanism to reduce stress. Research has found those who exercise often are less likely to experience stress and depression. How does physical activity reduce stress?

Physical activity:

- releases neurotransmitters in your brain called endorphins that are often referred to as the “feel good” chemical. Endorphins reduce the perception of pain, the body’s natural morphine.
- aids in better sleep, which is important since stress can disrupt sleep. Getting 7-9 hours of sleep a night keeps the body alert and fully functional, helping the body ward off the negative effects of stress.
- is a form of diversion. When you are out curling or playing hockey, you are concentrated on the game and having fun, soon forgetting about the stressors that may have been bothering you.

Examples of Physical activities:

- Walking or Running
- Curling
- Recreational hockey
- Bowling
- Dancing
- Riding a bike

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# Relaxation



**“ TAKE SMALL BREAKS OUT OF YOUR DAY TO COLLECT YOURSELF AND RECHARGE ”**

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. Most relaxation techniques involve shifting your stressful thought by concentrating on one positive image, thought, or task. Relaxation can be achieved in many different ways such as meditation, reading a magazine, listening to your favorite music, and going for a walk. It is important to take small breaks out of your day to collect yourself and recharge. Breaks do not have to be long, a short 3-minute relaxation break maybe all you need to boost your energy and mood.

3-minute guided relaxation technique

- While sitting upright on a chair, plant your feet on the ground.
- Take a deep breath in and slowly release, closing your eyes. To check you’re breathing technique, place your hand on your stomach and feel your stomach expand and contract, really concentrating on long deep breaths.
- Continue breathing in and out, inhaling for 5 seconds, holding breath for 5 seconds, and then exhaling for 5 seconds.
- Focus on your breath, how the air feels entering and exiting your body. With each breath, try concentrating on a part of your body, moving from your head down to your toes.
- If any thoughts come along, let them pass by, try not to acknowledge them.
- Continue breathing technique for 3 minutes or as long as you feel needed. You can set a timer if you would like.

## To get a good quality sleep

Sometimes when we are stressed, our sleep can be compromised. Overthinking things can make it very difficult to fall asleep and stay asleep. We have to remember that sleep is very important to help our body and mind cope with the symptoms of stress. Here are a few tips to you may find helpful to get a quality sleep:

- Get some exercise throughout the day but avoid too much exercise before bedtime.
- Avoid nicotine, caffeine and alcohol.
- Eat the big meal of your day earlier in the day and have a lighter supper that is higher in carbohydrates and lower in protein.
- Have a warm bath or shower an hour or so before bed and relax.
- Make sure the place where you are sleeping is dark. A small amount of light can prevent melatonin production, and that does not make for a good sleep.
- Make sure your room is nice and cool while you sleep – a slight drop in body temperature induces sleep.
- If you can't sleep, then it is best to get up as watching the clock, tossing and turning will only make you tense and more stressed. Try relaxing in a comfortable chair reading a book, watching television, or play solitaire and before you know it you'll be dozing off. By resting in a comfortable place you are lowering your anxiety about sleeping and this will help make it easier for you to fall asleep.



## Social Support



Our ability to cope with stress can also depend on our social support we receive from others. Social support is connected with reduction of stress, decreased risk of depression, better health, and faster recovery from illness.

Support your family, business partners and community

- Learn to negotiate and address the problem– create interaction rules and develop agreed-upon methods for handling problems. It is OK to have a difference of opinion but take the time to find a compromise.
- Show confidence in your family, business partners and community skills and decisions.
- Provide encouragement and concern for your family, business partners, and community. Ask what can be done to help the situation. A simple solution may be the answer.
- Have realistic expectations of your family, business partners, and community. Spend time together to relax, laugh and celebrate. Family strength is important in the prevention of overwhelming stress but is extremely important in coping with overwhelming stress.

## Laugh, it makes you feel good!

Laughter is critical to relaxation and wellbeing; it's FREE, low calorie, and available without a prescription.

Did you know that when you laugh:

- 17 muscles in your face relax
- blood circulation is improved
- respiration is increased
- muscles in your abdomen are massaged
- the brain's natural painkillers are stimulated through the release of endorphins

**" HE WHO LAUGHS.....LASTS. "**  
**MARK TWAIN**



Now that you understand what stress is, the impact it can have, and different coping methods for dealing with it, the next step is to take action. Direct your energy towards problem-solving and coping with your stressors. Use this recipe to deal with the stressors as they arise on the farm.

What is on my mind?	What does this affect?	What can I do?	Who can help?

## Set “SMART” goals

It’s important to get a picture of what you, ideally, would like to have happen in your life and on your farm in the short and long term. SMART goals can help to turn all these stress skills into personal satisfaction and productivity.

**S**pecific: Set a concrete goal that addresses behaviour and results.

“For the next month, when I feel stressed and am telling my spouse about the problem I am going to use I statements rather than blaming statements, so the discussion is calmer and more productive.”

**M**easurable: State your goal in a way that you can easily measure progress.

“My goal is to take twenty minutes at the end of each day and relax.”

**A**greed upon: Don’t do it alone, ask others to help and support you.

“Everyone one this farm has agreed to not interrupt my twenty minutes relaxation time to ask what needs to get done tomorrow.”

**R**ewarding: Behaviour change should be as much fun as possible. Reward yourself for achieving a goal as well as passing milestones.

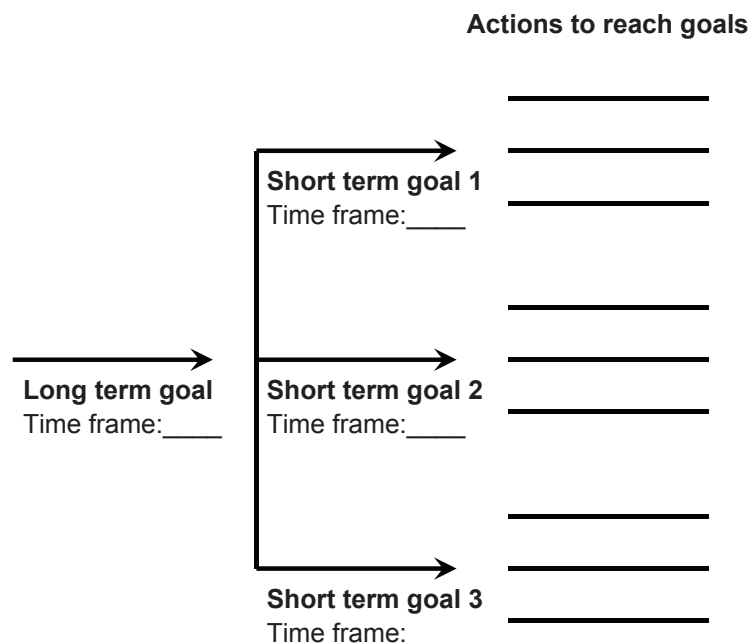
“If I go for a mile walk every day to get some exercise at the end of the month I will take Sunday afternoon to go fishing.”

**T**rackable: Keep track of your progress in a visible way, so you do not get discouraged.

“I will keep a notepad in my pocket with a list of things to do each day and strike each job off when it is complete.”

## Goal setting template:

To achieve long-term goals, you need to set three short term goals. Develop actions that will enable you to succeed in reaching the short term goals. Outline a time frame for each goal. This template can be useful in setting goals on your farm.



## 10 Positive and Productive Ways of Dealing with Stress

1. **Work it off:** Exercise gives you energy and makes you feel better. Try some brisk walking.
2. **Strive for a good rest:** Rest revitalizes your body and mind. Try relaxation exercises and deep breathing to lower your anxiety about falling asleep if needed.
3. **Keep it simple and positive:** Take one step at a time, one day at a time. Be aware of negative thoughts. Keep your thinking positive and realistic!
4. **Take time to relax:** Make time for yourself. Do something that you enjoy.
5. **Prioritize:** Avoid putting things off, make up a weekly schedule that includes leisure activities as well as things you must do. Prioritize tasks, make lists, set goals, organize your time, delegate to others and reward yourself.
6. **Be assertive:** Don't try to please everybody. Learn to say "no".
7. **Eat healthy:** Eat a well-balanced diet rich in vegetables, fruit, whole grains, dairy and alternatives, and lean meat and alternatives. Limit salt, sugar, saturated and trans fat intake.
8. **Keep your mind active:** Learn something new, research something you are interested in on the internet, play cards, doing quizzes or crosswords.
9. **Get it all off your chest:** A problem shared is a problem cut in half. Talking to someone you trust can really help.
10. **Accept the things you cannot change:** Focus your attention and energy on the things you can do and that you have control over and try to accept that there are certain things you cannot change. Take hope, you will get through this.

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

24 hours per day. Seven days per week. Free and Confidential. There is no call display.

The Farm Stress Line is staffed by peer counsellors, men and women from the farm, trained to assist people in crisis, taking calls on personal and family issues, financial situations and other concerns affecting the farm operation.



#### Who Can Help

Canadian Mental Health Association	1-306-525-5601
Child Abuse	1-306-933-5069
Domestic Abuse	1-306-933-7751
Farm Consultation Services (pro-active business planning)	1-800-777-9309
Heart and Stroke Foundation	1-306-244-2124
Problem Gambling Help Line (24 hrs)	1-800-306-6789
Public Health Agency of Canada	phac-aspc.gc.ca
Kid's Help Phone Line (24 hrs)	1-800-668-6868
Farm Debt Mediation Services	1-800-559-1044
Suicide (24 hrs) (Tel. Dir. blue pages: "Mobile Crisis Service")	9-1-1 or 1-306-933-6200

#### Fill in local contacts

Community Addiction Services	_____
AgKnowledge Centre	_____
Counsellor	_____
Clergyman/Priest/Pastor	_____
Family Doctor	_____
Financial Counselling	_____
Mental Health Services (Local health district)	_____
Narcotics Anonymous (Phone directory, white pages)	_____
RCMP	_____
Rural Service Centre	_____
Sexual Assault Crisis Line (Tel. Dir. white pages)	_____

Information provided in this booklet is general in content and should not be seen as a substitute for professional medical advice. Concerns over stress, and agricultural related exposures should be discussed with your doctor.



# Disclaimer

## References

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