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YOUR GUIDE TO MENTAL HEALTH

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The Good, the Bad and the Ugly of Stress

By [Jennifer Shike](#) ✉️ 🐦

From epidemic illnesses impacting pigs to falling commodity prices to increasing farm debt load, many factors are causing stress among pig farmers today. Add in a little rural mindset – the idea you can convince yourself to be happy and work yourself out of depression – and it’s a perfect formula for what Athena Diesch-Chham, a clinical veterinary social worker at the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine, calls moral distress.

Stress is a requirement for life. For humans to be productive, Diesch-Chham said we need a certain level of stress.

“When conditions are right and we are in our zone, we can be incredibly creative and productive. However, at a certain point, when stress is too high, our performance, creativity and problem-solving skills all significantly drop,” she explained.

From Stress to Burnout

Burnout results from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It often results in feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one’s job or negative feeling toward one’s career and ultimately, reduced professional productivity.



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“One of the biggest challenges with managing burnout is that most work environments do not support slowing down for ‘normal’ things,” Diesch-Chham said.

Unfortunately, if burnout is the cumulative effect of long-term stress, she questions if anyone really recognizes the signs of long-term stress. How often do people “push through” the burn until they are too far gone?

When people stop asking for help or quickly respond with all requests with “I’ve got it,” she said it’s a sign they are “pushing through.” Saying no is really hard these days – saying yes is much easier.

“People who are pushing through tend to view time off as less of an option, but this is when it becomes an absolute necessity,” Diesch-Chham said. “We need time off, but we come up with 1,000 excuses for why we can’t afford to take it.”

More Than Burnout

For decades, compassion fatigue has been talked about in veterinary medicine circles. It’s the emotional response to heavy work for a long time. She said it’s different from burnout because of the emotional component. Until recently, she thought it made sense for what she saw happening among farmers. But she has always struggled with one of the signs of compassion fatigue: apathy, or the loss of the ability to care.

“I don’t believe vets or pig farmers actually stop caring,” she said. “I hypothesize they continue to care, very deeply, to their own detriment.”

“People who are pushing through tend to view time off as less of an option, but this is when it becomes an absolute necessity.”

She believes many farmers and veterinarians face moral injury and moral distress. Moral injury is damage done to a person’s moral and ethical compass when they have to engage in activities that don’t always “line up with their due north,” she said. Sometimes that means doing things that don’t always feel great but are in the best interest of the herd. When a producer determines an optimal treatment course but is blocked from carrying it out, whether because of money, or beliefs or rules, that can result in moral distress.

“When emotional connections are formed, there is a higher level of devastation when the bond is broken,” she said.

There’s no question caregiving is emotionally fulfilling and draining. After all, Mother Theresa required nuns take an entire year off every four to five years, to allow for them to heal from the effects of their caregiving work. “If this worked for the nuns, imagine what it could do for swine producers,” she said.



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The Rock Theory

Humans tend to pick up things they think they need to carry – it can be anything from a side comment from a colleague or an awful interaction with a family member to an unavoidable decision on the farm.

“When we have something that emotionally stung, we tend to pick it up and carry it with us. I call those rocks,” Athena Diesch-Chham, a clinical veterinary social worker at the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine, explained. “All of a sudden, those rocks get pretty heavy.”

Everyone has a choice about how long they are going to carry around those rocks, she said.

“There is some power in acknowledging that this happened, that it impacted me, that I am potentially changed by what has happened in a situation,” she said.

“But also, I can leave it here and I don’t have to carry it with me.”

Pay Attention to Warning Signs of Stress

So, how do you recognize stress? Warning signs of stress are like the flashing lights on the dashboard of your car, Sean Brotherson, an Extension family life specialist at North Dakota State University, explains. They are an indicator something might be wrong with your health and you need to slow down and get it checked out. Stress typically manifests itself in these four areas of our health:



Physical:

Tension in your body, headaches, muscle aches or digestive difficulty such as upset stomach or ulcers.

Existing health conditions might become exacerbated or more challenging. Other signs include extreme fatigue, shortness of breath, sweating or shaking.

Behavioral:

Difficulty with sleep, inability to relax or destress, anger issues, trouble with decision making, increased use of self-medicating approaches such as alcohol or other drugs, overeating or not wanting to eat at all.



Emotional:

Irritability, restlessness, feeling discouraged or hopeless, wanting to isolate yourself, having difficulty concentrating, or feelings of panic and anxiety.

Relational:

Communication difficulties, avoiding others or withdrawing, working long hours, avoiding interaction or communication with people.

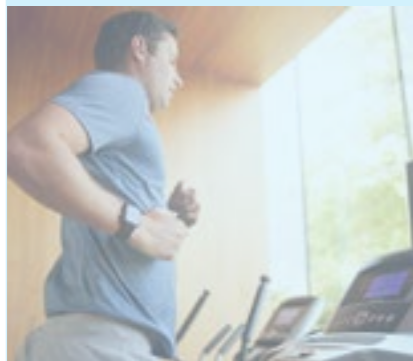


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5 Tips to Deal with Stress

1

Recognize your own stress and your stress response type. There are three main ways people respond to stress: hot reactors (explode in the moment), sustainers (go and go and go until they can't anymore) and the resilient (lower reactivity and healthy daily habits).



2

Recognize what you can control and what you can't. There are a lot of things that we perceive we have control over that we don't. We can control our reactions, emotions and communication. We can't control what anybody else brings to the table.



3

Do some digging. Find people in the community who are educated in rural mental health. There is a need to train mental health professionals about the challenges of the rural lifestyle.



4

Recognize what you should and shouldn't carry. We tend to make assumptions what people say is always a reflection of us. It's often not. Don't carry things that weren't meant to be yours to carry.



5

Breathe. When we become more present in ourselves, stress starts to come down. Breathing is one of the easiest things we can do to handle stress. When we think about it, we tend to do it better.





Get the Conversation Started

How do you push back the canned answers and find out how your friends are doing? “Most of us don’t wait or push for a real response,” Athena Diesch-Chham said. “We need to be able to be comfortable pushing a little bit more because if we ask the right questions, we can get real answers.” Here are seven ways to get people talking.

- 1.** I hear you saying (repeat back concerns they had).
- 2.** This sounds like a lot to manage, how are you coping with all of that?
- 3.** It sounds like the current situation is very difficult.
What can I do to support you?
- 4.** These are some tough challenges. How can I help?
- 5.** Would it be helpful to work together on an action plan to manage these concerns?
- 6.** Every situation is different, but ___ tried ___ with a similar situation.
What do you think about that?
- 7.** Are there any people who have been supportive or helpful in the past when times have been rough?
Would be helpful to reach out to them now?



Simple Daily Habits to Help Manage Stress

Health is the most important asset for any operation, says Sean Brotherson, an Extension family life specialist at North Dakota State University. If you look at the list of assets typically associated with a farm or ranch operation, you might see equipment, livestock or land, but rarely is the health of those who work in the operation listed. He argues if it's the most important asset, it needs to be the most important priority in managing your daily life and farm operation. Brotherson suggests picking three simple healthy habits you can do every day to help mitigate stress. Then find someone to hold you accountable to following through with those habits. Healthy habits include:

Physical

- ✓ Visit with a healthcare provider, he advises.
Stress can add physical challenges or exacerbate existing health issues.
- ✓ Get a baseline sense of where you are in your health and functioning.
- ✓ Exercise every day – even 15 to 20 minutes is helpful for stress reduction and health management.
- ✓ Drink four to eight glasses of water daily,

Mental

- ✓ Plan regular mental breaks during the day to relax and recharge.
- ✓ Slow down, listen to music, connect with nature, take a short walk or watch a funny video.
- ✓ Take regular five- to 10-minute breaks in your day to relax and recharge.

Emotional/Spiritual

- ✓ Connect with a resource where you can talk and share concerns you might be feeling – for some that's prayer and for others it's talking to a family member, counselor or mental health professional.
- ✓ Do random acts of kindness.
- ✓ Express "thank you" to someone daily (send a note, etc.)
- ✓ Write down three things you are grateful for daily

Relational

- ✓ Social connections are important – stay connected with a friend or a group of friends or family members who give you a sense of social engagement.
- ✓ Learn more about your family history.
- ✓ Reflect on and write down your goals.

Don't Let Social Distancing Lead to Social Isolation

Farming has always been stressful. But when you add on the physical, mental and financial concerns caused by COVID-19, the stress levels can be off the charts.

Social support is important. No one is alone in facing these hard times, adds Val Farmer, a clinical psychologist and author. Don't fall into the misguided view that you need to handle the stress by yourself.

"Hard times will come and go," he says. "Do what you can to help everyone at this point – don't just focus on yourself. Broaden your concerns and share your inner life with people more. Don't worry about what neighbors think and say – they are in the same boat you are. The more you talk, the better.

Farmer adds one of the main ways you can spot the signs among your friends is noticing where your friends are not showing up.

"Social withdrawal is a key thing to look for, but with social distancing now, that's hard to see," Farmer says. "We have to find ways to get our friends talking – to find out what is going on with them. As long as they can stay hidden, they are more dangerous to themselves."

Phone calls, texts, social media messages, drive-by visits and waves can all help now. "Once it's out in the open, it becomes a solvable problem," Farmer says.

If you need immediate help, call the U.S. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **(800) 273-8255**.






3 Simple Tips to Get Your Health on Track

Wellness doesn't just happen. It's a choice that requires prioritization and accountability. From how you spend your time to who you spend it with, it all requires a balance that's often challenging to find.

Emily Byers, DVM, offers three tips to help people improve their wellbeing.



Take Care of Yourself Even in the Midst of Crisis

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