

Identifying and Managing Stress: A Business Owner's Guide

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Factsheet

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INTRODUCTION

Owning a farm or other business is much more than a way to make a living; it is a way of life. Everyone involved in business knows there are occasionally some very stressful times. During busy seasons or critical production periods, it is normal to be faced with time constraints and work pressures. If one is also faced with major financial issues, these pressures can be multiplied many times over.

Unfortunately, at times, these demands can put everyone involved in the business under a great deal of stress. With so many potential challenges (many of which are out of your control), it is important to identify practical ways of coping.

Before learning to manage this stress, it is critical to be able to identify it in yourself and in others. By identifying it, you can then take action to reduce it. Some strategies to help manage this stress are outlined in this Factsheet.

Admitting you are stressed about family or business isn't a sign of weakness — admitting it is the first step towards handling it.

SIGNS OF STRESS

Stress manifests itself in different ways in different people. Below are some of the more common signs; the list is not meant to be comprehensive. They can be organized into four categories.

Behavioural indicators include:

Resentment
"Using" people
Irregular personal care
Isolation
Active protesting
Staying in bed all day

Physical signs include:

Insomnia
Fatigue
Eating too much or too little
Excessive drinking
Excessive smoking
Stomach cramps
Child/spouse abuse
High blood pressure
Teeth grinding
Diarrhea/constipation
Head/back/neck pain

Emotional indicators include:

Frustration
Anger
Bitterness
Shouting/screaming
Crying
Withdrawal
Depression
Guilt
Nervousness
Mood swings
Worrying

Psychological signs include:

Negative attitude
Feeling worthless
Feeling a failure
Afraid of people
Hopelessness
Forgetfulness

STRATEGIES TO MANAGE STRESS

Managing stress takes daily practice, discipline and a deliberate effort. You need to understand how to manage your stress; how to accept the uncontrollable factors and work on the ones you can control. You must develop strategies that work for you.

Attitude

Your reaction or attitude towards a particular event or situation is a major factor in reducing stress. For example, if a loved one is late, and you immediately jump to the conclusion that they've had an accident, you will experience more stress than if you assume they are just running behind.

Controllable vs. uncontrollable — Know the difference between what you can and cannot control. Take action to change what you can. Accept the rest. Ask yourself: "What will happen if I ignore this?"

Look for the light — Most situations can be viewed from several different angles. Most of the time it is possible to put a positive spin on a stressful situation. Adopt a winning attitude.

Approach a situation as a challenge, not a crisis — Stop worrying and start problem solving. Problem solving is the proactive approach to finding solutions to controllable problems.

Give yourself credit — Set realistic daily goals and then rejoice in what you accomplish each day. Don't dwell on what you didn't get done.

Be proactive rather than reactive — When you look at a situation, take charge and become involved — don't sit on the sideline.

Events

A common situation in many businesses is to have many stressors all at once. Here are some hints to manage various events and situations.

Don't procrastinate — Plan ahead and get things done. Before equipment is needed for next season, replace worn parts, change the oil (if necessary) and do regular maintenance. When buildings are empty, clean up and do repairs. Plan ahead financially — including provision for unexpected cash requirements.

Practise time management and set priorities — List what you want to get done in a day or a week. Rank your plans from one to three, starting with the most urgent. Start with the "1's" and work through your list. If the "3's" don't get done, they were not that important in the first place. Always expect the unexpected and make contingency plans.

Prioritize stressors — Decide which stressors you want to deal with and which ones you do not. Giving some priority to stressors will help you spend your energy wisely.

Say no — Many people find it hard to turn down a request because they do not want to be viewed negatively as a "non-participant" or "difficult." However, sometimes you just have to refuse extra commitments because you do not have the time. You can still help by offering an alternate suggestion.

Take the engineer's approach — Engineers are trained to break big projects into smaller, more manageable parts. As each step is finished, celebrate the accomplishments.

Source and Reaction

If you seriously want to ease stress, the key is in determining the source and then managing your reaction.

Listen to your body — Pay attention to physical, mental and emotional signs of distress, such as fatigue, carelessness, aches and pains. Change your pace or activities.

Take care of your physical and mental self — Get adequate rest, nutrition and exercise. Well-nourished, rested people withstand stress better. Those who work in a physical environment, such as construction or farming, contend they get enough exercise at work. However, by adding walking, dancing or running, for example, you increase your pulse rate and bring fresh oxygen to your muscles. Stress is reduced in the process.

Work off your anger — Redirect any built-up anger into something positive, such as chores. Later, after the initial anger has passed, formulate your anger into words. Pinpointing the real feelings that led to the anger will help resolve not only the immediate difficulty, but other problems as well.

Take relaxation breaks — Several times a day, take three deep breaths, hold, tense and relax each part of your body. Let your mind wander, where you imagine yourself in some restful spot for a few minutes.

Balance work and play — Plan time for activities that give pleasure and provide balance.

Talk it out — Find someone to talk to about your worries and frustrations. Get professional help when needed. There are times when everyone can benefit from mental health agencies, crisis hot lines or private counsellors.

Stop worrying about what others think — If you worry too much about your image in the community, you'll come to question everything you do — How does it look to the neighbours? This increases stress when things are not going well. Remember others are more concerned about their own image than yours.

Look for your own positive feedback — Running a business can be very rewarding, but at times there is very little feedback. Find those things that give you positive feedback. Enjoy it when you are paid a compliment.

Develop a support network — Sometimes it is difficult to reach out and ask for help, especially if your finances are the core issue. Talk to your spouse, partner and family. When appropriate, your friends and neighbours can provide a tremendous support network. Sharing ideas, concerns and working out solutions together will help you feel less isolated.

Laughter is good medicine — Look for the humour in everything you do. Positive thoughts and humour will help maintain perspective when you tackle serious problems.

CONCLUSION

It is important to realize that not everyone sees a situation the same way. What is stressful to one person may not be for another. Individuals must be sensitive to this reality and try to understand others' reactions.

Furthermore, there are times when professional help may be required. It is important to understand that if the situation is serious, it is time to consider professional assistance.

It is useful to remember that most stressful situations will pass. Although, it is very hard at the time, focus on the good and enjoyable times.

SERVICES AND RESOURCES	
<p>OMAFRA Obtain a brochure listing local support and counselling services available to farm families in your area by visiting your nearest OMAFRA Resource Centre or by calling the OMAFRA Agricultural Information Contact Centre at 1-877-424-1300.</p> <p>OMAFRA Factsheets <i>Programs and Services for Ontario Farmers,</i> Order No. 07-021.</p> <p><i>Diagnosing and Managing Cash Flow Problems,</i> Order No. 06-085.</p> <p><i>Options for Farmers Dealing with Financial Difficulties,</i> Order No. 04-041.</p> <p>Canadian Farm Business Advisory Services 1-866-452-5558 Provides assistance to complete a farm financial assessment and action plan.</p> <p>Farm Debt Mediation 1-866-452-5556 Provides mediation assistance to farmers experiencing financial difficulties.</p>	<p>The Farm Line 1-888-451-2903 Confidential emotional support and referral services for farmers and farm families on topics dealing with financial, legal, self-help, stress and other issues. An Online Resource Directory is also available at www.thefarmline.ca.</p> <p>Distress Centres Ontario Toronto (416) 486-2242 www.dcontario.org</p> <p>Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario (416) 977-5580 or 1-800-875-6213 (toll-free in Ontario) www.ontario.cmha.ca</p> <p>TeleHealth Ontario 1-866-797-0000</p> <p>Call your local District Health Unit for a list of local services or a referral to a professional.</p>

REFERENCES

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This publication is intended as general information and not as specific advice concerning individual situations. The Government of Ontario assumes no responsibility towards persons using it as such. In certain circumstances, professional help may be required. It is important to understand that if the situation is serious, professional assistance should be sought.

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