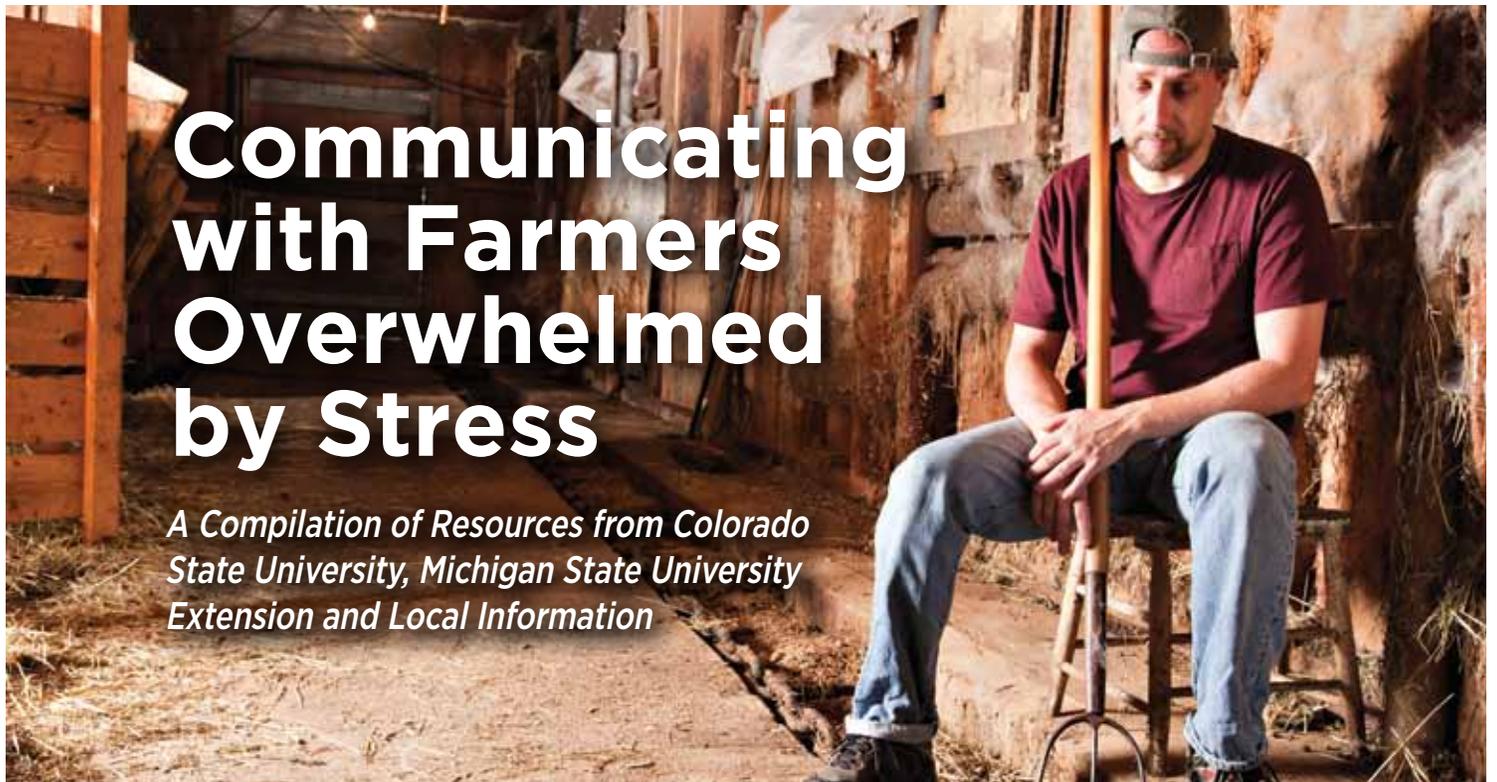


Communicating with Farmers Overwhelmed by Stress

A Compilation of Resources from Colorado State University, Michigan State University Extension and Local Information



Supporting Those Overwhelmed by Stress By Charlie Gardner, DVM, MBA

We are currently in unprecedented times in the dairy industry. The milk price is below the cost of production on many farms. Some producers are losing their market. Many dairy farmers feel trapped between their strong desire to keep the farm going and the reality of a growing pile of overdue bills. When we arrive at their farm, we find many of them showing obvious signs of stress.

What can we do to help? Usually the best we can do is just to show that we care. Asking “How are you?”, with strong eye contact and a caring voice is a good way to begin. If you get an “automatic” answer of “Oh, fine”, ask again. This time say, “Seriously, how are you holding up with these milk prices?” Then wait for an answer. You will find that some of your clients really open up at this point. If they do, let them talk. Do not interrupt. Do not offer advice. Do not share meaningless platitudes. Just listen. Doing this demonstrates interest and caring.

Listen and Show Empathy

Once you are satisfied that they are through, offer some statement of empathy and support. “I understand things are really hard right now. It has to be tough to deal with this situation,” is one possible reply. You might add “What can I do to help?”

Most producers will not want you to do anything more than what you just did, which is to listen and to care. Ask them if they are talking things out with their family and other dairy farmers. If you have a helpful, non-critical suggestion, this might be the time to share it. Depending on your faith and theirs, you might offer to pray for them.

Consider a Discussion Group

One way to help customers and farmers open up is through a discussion group. Invite farmers you are working with to get together for a discussion group or just for a meal and conversation. I find that getting eight or ten clients together at one farm to exchange ideas is very helpful. Make sure most of the time is spent in positive conversation, rather than just complaining. Lay guidelines to that effect.

There is a complicating factor to all of this, in that your client may well be past due in his or her account with you. Even though you are trying to be supportive, both of you may be thinking about the money the farms owe you. I suggest saving that conversation for another time. If your client brings it up, ask him or her how they would like to handle it. They may feel better getting it out in the open. Some clients may bring up the possibility of selling out. If they are willing to talk about this subject, a caring ear may aid them greatly. You may be able to help them know that there can be a satisfying life after dairy farming.

One final point. Be aware of the stress this situation is having on you. Calling on depressed clients all day is no fun. Knowing some of them cannot pay you only makes it worse. What is your support group? To whom do you vent? Make sure you are caring of yourself as well as your clients and customers.

Signs of Overwhelming Stress:

It varies from one person to another, but here are some common ones:

- **Depression** - having little to say, and no interest or enthusiasm for the future.
- **Irritability** - finding fault over small things that would ordinarily not phase them.
- **Anger** - lashing out at others in an inappropriate manner, or abusing animals.
- **Neglect** - letting animals go without proper care, or letting buildings and machinery deteriorate.
- **Avoidance** - perhaps not coming out of the house to help you, or not responding to questions.

- Simply a **change from their usual demeanor** may be an indicator of significant stress.

Additional Signs of Stress

An article published by the Colorado State University offers this advice:

- **Watch for signs of farm and ranch stress:** Changes in routine, care of livestock/farm decline, increase in illness, increase in farm accidents, signs of stress in children.
- **Watch for physical signs of chronic, prolonged behavior:** headaches, backaches, irregularities, sleep disturbances, frequent sickness, ulcers or exhaustion.
- **Watch for emotional signs of chronic, prolonged stress:** irritability, backbiting, acting out, withdrawal, alcoholism, or violence.
- **Watch for cognitive signs of prolonged stress:** Memory loss, lack of concentration, or inability to make decisions.
- **Watch for problems with self-esteem:** “I’m failure,” “I blew it,” “Why can’t I...?”
- **Watch for signs of depression:** — Appearance: Sad face, slow movements, unkept look, dramatic weight change either up or down. — Unhappy feelings: feeling sad, hopeless, discouraged and listless. — Negative thoughts: “I’m a failure,” “Nobody cares,” “I’m no good.” — Reduced activity and pleasure in usual activities: “Doing anything is just too much of an effort. — People problems: “I don’t want anyone to see me,” “I feel lonely.” — Feeling worthless: inadequate, rejected and insecure — Lack of future orientation in conversation.



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Resources to Help

Being the person driving in and out of the farm lane during challenging times can be challenging. You become the person farmers vent to when they are frustrated and lean on when they don't know what to do. Sometimes providing that listening ear is all that is needed. Others need a little more support and direction.

Concerned about a Crisis? Article from Colorado State University



1. Listen: let the person talk about what is going on. Give them your full attention, show you care and avoid empty phrases like "Things will get better" or "Everything will work out."

2. Ask: "Are you thinking about killing yourself?" Be direct, open and honest. Do not worry about offending the person. Do not be sworn to secrecy.



3. Take Action: Get Help! If immediate danger, call 911. Stay with the person if you are not in danger. Involve family and friends for support.

Who to Call:

1. In Crisis Situation:

- Contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-8255**, or **1-800-SUICIDE (2433)**.
- Call the County Crisis Invention Hotline. These county hotlines are staffed by trained counselors. In rural areas, they have an understanding of agriculture. A list of the county numbers can be found at: www.cor.pa.gov/Documents/PACountyCrisisContacts.pdf

2. In Non-Crisis Situation:

- If you have a situation where you would like a trained counselor to accompany you to visit a farmer or if you



have a farmer who you believe should talk with a trained counselor who understands agriculture, the Center for Dairy Excellence has a network of counselors to recommend.

- These counselors are available to join you in farm visits or visit with farm families on their own.
- To request to connect with one, contact:

The Center for Dairy Excellence
Heidi Zimmerman, Coordinator
Phone: 717-346-0849
Cell: 717-648-4490
Email: hzimmerman1@centerfordairyexcellence.org

Financial Planning Resources:

In some cases, overwhelming stress is the result of not being able to effectively evaluate the situation and make decisions to move forward.

Resources to help farms better understand their situation and make more informed decisions are available through the Center for Dairy Excellence. Often these resources can give farm families direction and hope.

Encourage dairy farm families who are struggling to navigate the path forward to take advantage of one of these programs:

Dairy Decisions Consultant Program: The Center offers up to \$3,500 in funding to provide a consultant to work with your dairy on those difficult decisions that shape the future of your farm. The consultant can identify bottlenecks and opportunities on the dairy, evaluate options for strengthening the business, including diversification, and help you create a plan to move forward positively.

On-Farm Resource Team Program:

The Center offers funding and support to help farms establish a team of their key advisors to provide greater insight into the business decisions on the dairy. This can lead to improved profitability, enhanced performance and future opportunities. It can also aid in transition and transformation projects.

To learn more, contact:

Melissa Anderson
Program Manager
Center for Dairy Excellence
Phone: 717-346-0849
Email: manderson@centerfordairyexcellence.org



Additional Resources:

The Center for Dairy Excellence has assembled resources provided from other sources to help both dairy farm families and agribusiness professionals cope with the overwhelming stress a downturn in the dairy industry can create. Those resources can be found at: www.centerfordairyexcellence.org/stress-management-resources/

For More Information, call:

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