

# When Stress is More Than a Season

Tips for Managing Stress and Mental Health on the Farm.

**F**arming can be both rewarding and extremely challenging.

As farmers, we know how to recognize stress in our livestock, crops and equipment. But do we know how to recognize when stress is too much for us and what we can do to help get through those difficult periods?

At CFFO's Annual Meeting in March, guest speaker Lesley Kelly, co-founder of the Do More Agriculture Foundation, shared her family's experiences with stress on the farm and the ways they have learned to manage it together.

## Understanding Stress

Stress is a normal response to pressure, causing the body to release hormones that increase blood pressure, heart rate and blood sugar. It helps to remember that stress is a



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cycle: it has a beginning, middle and end, and we have to help our minds and bodies go through it.

Small amounts of stress motivate us, but it can become harmful when it's prolonged and overwhelming. Without any opportunity to recover, we can become physically and mentally drained.

Learn to recognize the signs and symptoms. When stress is overwhelming, we can have difficulty controlling our emotions. We may withdraw or enter a state of depression. We may experience changes in diet and sleep, as well as a lack of concentration.

## Stressors for Farmers

One of the main stressors we see in farming is the unpredictability of weather and markets. Other causes we're seeing today include physical exhaustion, isolation, crop or animal care, family or labour dynamics and – more recently – negative public perception. The pressure of running a farm that's been in the family for generations or going through succession planning can also cause a lot of strain.

But even when the stressor is gone, it doesn't mean the stress is gone. For example, it's a great feeling when the harvest is done, but it can still take a few days to work through the stress.

## Dealing with Stress Together

Stress can negatively affect relationships and deteriorate communication. It's important to talk about it, listen to each other and support each other.

**Talk about it:** Check in with each other about your stress levels. It's

helpful to assess the signs of stress you see within yourself and your loved ones.

**Listen with interest:** People often listen in order to fix the problem. But when it comes to stress, sometimes people just need to feel heard. Instead of offering suggestions, ask questions and acknowledge what they're feeling.

**Provide support:** Sometimes providing support means offering advice or problem solving. But more often than not, it means providing empathy, understanding, encouragement and reassurance.

## Working through Conflict Positively

Conflict will happen. Make it a goal to process conflict with gentleness and to aim for win-win outcomes. Make it a habit to offer repair attempts: express appreciation, apologize, look for compromises, use humour, ask for help and guidance, take responsibility and make commitments.

## Stress Management

Farmers often think that the farm always comes first, but it's important to remember that the farmer is the most important asset on the farm. Take breaks to recover and recharge. Find opportunities for social interaction. Share laughter and affection. Make time for creative expression (hobbies, personal interests, physical activities, etc.).

The bottom line is that it's okay to feel many different things. You don't have to always put up a positive front. It's good to seek support and professional help if needed.