



Managing stress on the farm

There are many stressful times on the farm; seeding, calving, harvest, and every day in between it sometimes seems. So how does it affect us and how do we deal with it?

BY ANGELA LOVELL.

A national study of 1100 farmers across Canada, that was conducted in 2005 by the Child & Adolescent Services Association (CASA), found that two-thirds of all respondents reported feeling stressed, and one in five described themselves as “very stressed.”

Throw Christmas into the mix and the traditional season of goodwill can become a pressure cooker of consumer, family and social demands. According to statistics there are more heart attacks in December and January than any other time of the year; a 5 to 7.5% increase.

But regardless of the season, it appears that farm families are often reluctant to seek professional advice to help them deal with stress. Only 2 in 10, according to the study, had spoken to a health care professional about stress and mental health concerns, with the reasons most cited for not seeking help being pride and independence.

The stigma associated with the term “mental health” is still pretty pervasive says Janet Smith, Manager of the Manitoba Farm & Rural Stress Line (MFRSL). “There’s still a lot of stigma around the words “mental health”, in fact many of our callers will say, I’m not mentally ill, I’m just stressed out and need someone to talk to,” she says. “But I would say that is changing, which is a good thing. It used to be a dirty word to say depression, but now I hear people saying I am being treated for depression.”

The MFRSL and its team of counsellors, all of whom have a farming background, provide an invaluable service that is often a first point of contact for farm and rural people trying to cope with the stress of everything from finances to BSE. For many it’s a hard phone call to make.

“So often producers tend to be very proud, and resilient and independent thinkers and they isolate themselves from others when things get tough rather than pulling people in and talking about the issues that are bothering them,” says Smith. “So the time they call

our line they are often in a crisis and don’t know where to turn and sometimes feel like they are the only one that’s feeling this way.”

A counsellor’s first task is to normalise clients experiences and make them realise that they are not alone. That translates into a rapport and trust that can start them on a path towards better managing their stress.

“The things that are going on in their lives are all real, but we try to help them choose which of the things they have the ability to work on and change. A lot of those things are internal. It’s our response to the events, not the events themselves, that causes stress, because our life will always be full of events, always be full of difficult and challenging situations, it’s how you look at them and how you perceive them and then what you do with that that is important,” says Smith. “What can you do within your operation, within your family structure, within your own individual response to those things that can make the difference to the decisions that you make, whether those be personal or business related? How can you manage your stress? We talk about stress management being your best business management tool. Because if you are stressed out you are going to make bad decisions, and operate with your machinery and handle your livestock in an unsafe manner. Your cognitive abilities are affected by your stress levels.”

Women, who are, on the whole, much better at discussing their emotions and feelings, often find support from other family members, friends or work colleagues, particularly as they are much more likely to be working off-farm than their spouses. But even then, the pressure of maintaining an off-farm income combined with being the care giver for children, grand-children, in-laws, parents and husband, as well as a community volunteer and resident psychologist for everyone else can take a toll that no-one can cope with alone.

“The load that farm women carry is quite heavy at times and so

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when we talk to women it’s often because of that burn out they get from giving, giving, giving and they are asking what about me, where am I in this picture? What can I do? How can I get my husband to communicate more?” says Smith.

Relationship concerns are probably the starting point for most women, who are often having problems with communication about different issues and challenges, whilst trying to maintain the perfect “home and garden magazine” family image.

“We do put pressure on ourselves too. How do we break that? First it is to recognise what it is and why you are doing it. I think we need to acknowledge that we are all imperfect, and we only acknowledge that when we start talking to each other,” says Smith. “If you say to your friends, why do I clean the fridge before you come over, they will probably say, why do you? I don’t care about the inside of your fridge, I want to talk to you, I want to know who you are. When we start talking to one another those assumptions, those things that we carry around with us, are often broken down. And the real person is revealed. It’s about acknowledging negative patterns and talking about them and taking small steps to break them down.”


Over the past few years women have made up the majority of those calling the MFRSL, but increasingly, men are exceeding the number of women when it comes to farm calls. Smith thinks the very confidential nature of the service has had something to do with that trend.

“I would say it is true that men don’t tend to talk with one another about their feelings, their emotions or their experiences. It’s part of that real frontier spirit, and working independently,

working hard, being the provider, pride, independence, all of those things factor in,” says Smith. “But because knowing that men reach out for help less easily, that there are more barriers for them to reach out, helps us know that we are a service that meets their needs, because they can call us from the tractor, they can call us from the barn, they can call us from their cell phone in the truck on their own time and anonymously.”

Ultimately though, the aim of counselling is to help people to help themselves cope with their own stress, to find mechanisms that work for them which they can incorporate into their daily lives. That involves identifying priorities that are important, things they need to have or do to make them happier, healthier and more able to deal with the traumas and challenges that life is not going to stop throwing their way. It’s what Smith calls work/life balance.

“It starts with you. What are your priorities and what is getting in the way of them? If a priority for one person is going for a walk by themselves every day, and every time they turn around there is more and more demands coming at them and they don’t get that walk, then it’s a self-fulfilling prophesy, they are undermining the thing that is a priority to them,” says Smith. “So you need to be secure in yourself to say, I know it’s not important to you to go for a walk but for me it is and I am going to take this thirty minutes and do that and when I come back we’ll deal with this issue.”

Saying no to the things that we can say no to, and just knowing what they are, is a huge step in establishing goals for ourselves that help us to take charge of our physical and emotional well-being, which ultimately translates into benefits for ourselves, our families and our farms. 

Six steps to achieve work/life balance for women on the farm.

STEP ONE: DECIDE WHAT YOUR VALUES AND PRIORITIES ARE.

Once you are clear and FIRM about your priorities and values you can begin saying NO to things that don’t fit into your priorities and values.

STEP TWO: IDENTIFY THE “BALANCE BLOCKERS”

What are your personal blockers? Stop using blockers as excuses to justify why you can’t achieve balance in your life.

STEP THREE: BALANCE YOUR MIND

The key to balance is all in your head – Begin to think DIFFERENTLY!

STEP FOUR: CREATE “TIME BLOCKS”

Create non-negotiable personal “time blocks” into your schedule at least two times per week – Preferably daily. Devote 30 WHOLE minutes to each block. Write this non-negotiable appointment on the calendar where family can see it.

STEP FIVE: AIM FOR QUALITY, NOT QUANTITY

When you first get started living a balanced life, there is a temptation to do all or nothing. Stop the multi-tasking cycle.

STEP SIX: DO WHAT WORKS FOR YOU...

Take stock of who you are, what you need, and take (small) steps to make it happen. Expect challenges: from yourself and others. Look around and see what others are doing to balance their lives, but do what works for you

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The MFRSL can be reached at 1-866-367-3276 (1-866-FOR-FARM) or by e-mail at help@ruralstress.ca. Also check out the website at <http://www.ruralstress.ca/>