

A RURAL STRESS TOOLBOOK


the
centre
for Agricultural Medicine
UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

**RURAL HEALTH
EXTENSION PROGRAM**

"Things have gotten real bad around here. My husband and I fight all the time, he can't sleep, he complains about headaches and stomach aches. The kids are cranky and yesterday I almost hit my youngest for fighting with her sister. We're behind in our payments and we have a meeting that involves our creditors in two weeks. I don't know how we're going to make it. Talk about stress, we're up to our eyeballs in it."

Saskatchewan farmer

What is stress?

Stress is your reaction to any change you perceive as a challenge or threat. Stress isn't all in your head but that's where it starts.



Events don't cause stress; it's how you interpret and react to them that does. Adrenalin and other chemicals are pumped into your bloodstream. Your heart rate and breathing become faster, muscles tense up and the body prepares for action. This "fight or flight response" makes you stronger and more alert in the short term. It can help you meet challenges and accomplish goals. In a crisis, it can help you do things you didn't know were possible.

But when you experience ongoing stress over months or years, your body is all geared up with no place to go. High levels of adrenalin and other chemicals, meant to be a short term response, are harmful when they continue indefinitely. The results can include high blood pressure, heart disease, changes in your body's ability to fight off infection, depression and other diseases. Some authorities believe up to three-quarters of disease is stress-related.

What causes rural stress?

Things that are beyond your control and that last for a long time create the most stress. Weather, market prices, equipment breakdown, interest rates, and government policy are just some of the stressors beyond the control of farmers.

Rural town-dwellers can't control the loss of business and services due to depopulation. Families and communities can't control the closure of schools and health care facilities, the increased driving distances that result, and the loss of friends and family who move to the city.



Does everyone react the same way to stress?

No. Perceptions of stress and reactions to stress are individual. Some people will be severely stressed in response to an incident or set of circumstances and others will think it is nothing. However you react is OK. If your partner is stressed because of something and you're not, neither of you is "right." The two of you just react differently. People experience a wide variety of symptoms when they are stressed. Here are some examples:

Physical symptoms	Emotions	Behaviour
Tight neck and shoulders Pounding heart Chest pain Headaches High blood pressure Upset stomach Fatigue Cold or sweaty hands Constipation or diarrhea Nervous tics Rashes Grinding teeth	Depression Anger Irritability Low self-esteem Indifference Impatience	Overeating Increase in smoking/drinking Change in sleeping habits Reckless driving Forgetfulness Increase in accidents/injuries Drug use Tendency to over-react, lash out "Out of control" behaviour

Dealing with stress

Stress can't be cured but it can be managed. Learning to manage stress is a three-part process. First you identify the symptoms and the causes. Then you learn the skills to manage it; and thirdly, you learn how to use those skills.

How you deal with stress depends on the source. If it's caused by something beyond your control, your only alternative may be to learn acceptance. At other times, coping skills may help you adapt to the stress or alter the situation. When stress is caused by something you can control, you can take action to change the situation.

Just as people differ in the way they perceive and react to stress, people differ in how well they manage stress. The ability to cope with stress depends partly on temperament or inherited disposition, partly on previous experience dealing with stress, and partly on the availability of support systems. Anyone can learn skills to help them manage stress more effectively. Four types of skills are required:

- ✓ Awareness skills
- ✓ Acceptance skills
- ✓ Coping skills
- ✓ Action skills



Awareness Skills

How well do you currently manage stress? Can you list all the stressors in your life? To answer questions like these, you need awareness skills. The following four exercises will help you develop them.

Exercise 1: Quiz: How well do you manage stress?

YES NO

Awareness

- Can you name three recent situations that have caused stress in your life?*
- Can you list three symptoms (physical, emotional or behavioural) that you suffer when you are under stress?*

Acceptance

- Can you maintain a positive or neutral attitude during tough times and keep from getting upset over little things?*
- Can you sometimes talk yourself out of feeling stressed?*

Coping

- Do you know (and use) relaxation techniques like deep breathing and meditation?*
- When you feel stressed, do you ever use exercise to get rid of the feeling?*

Action

- Do you make a list and prioritize tasks to keep yourself from feeling overwhelmed by all there is to do?*
- Can you express your feelings and communicate with others effectively when conflict arises?*

___ ___ *Total*

Count the "yes's." How did you do? If you scored fewer than seven, you can definitely improve your ability to recognize and deal with stress. Even if you answered "yes" to most of the questions, be aware that there can be a big difference between knowing what to do and doing it.

Exercise 2: Keep a stress log

The first step in managing stress is to recognize it. Then, you decide how to deal with it.

<i>STRESS LOG</i>	
<i>What happened?</i>	<i>How I reacted (thoughts, feelings, behaviour)</i>

Exercise 3: Farming stress inventory

Rate your stressors on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = low stress, 5 = high stress).

1. Sudden and significant increase in debt load	1 2 3 4 5	33. Use of hazardous chemicals on the farm	1 2 3 4 5
2. Significant production loss due to disease or pests	1 2 3 4 5	34. Dealing with salespeople	1 2 3 4 5
3. Insufficient regular cash flow to meet financial obligations or for daily necessities	1 2 3 4 5	35. Long work hours	1 2 3 4 5
4. Delay in planting or harvesting due to weather	1 2 3 4 5	36. Pressure of having too much to do in too little time	1 2 3 4 5
5. Media distortions of farm situation	1 2 3 4 5	37. Feeling isolated on the farm	1 2 3 4 5
6. Low commodity prices	1 2 3 4 5	38. Few vacations away from the farm	1 2 3 4 5
7. Significant changes in type or size of farming operation	1 2 3 4 5	39. Having to travel long distances for services, repairs, shopping and health care	1 2 3 4 5
8. Meeting with loan officer for additional loan	1 2 3 4 5	40. Keeping up with new technology and products	1 2 3 4 5
9. Purchase of major machinery, facility or livestock	1 2 3 4 5	41. Worrying about market conditions	1 2 3 4 5
10. Not being considered part of the farm business by others	1 2 3 4 5	42. Having to make decisions without all the necessary information	1 2 3 4 5
11. Taking an off-the-farm job to meet expenses	1 2 3 4 5	43. Being expected to work on the farm as well as manage the house	1 2 3 4 5
12. Prolonged bad weather	1 2 3 4 5	44. Worrying about owing money	1 2 3 4 5
13. Problems with weeds or insects	1 2 3 4 5	45. Worrying about keeping the farm in the family	1 2 3 4 5
14. Machinery breakdown at a critical time	1 2 3 4 5	46. Not seeing enough people	1 2 3 4 5
15. Not enough time to spend with spouse	1 2 3 4 5	47. Not having enough money or time for entertainment and recreation	1 2 3 4 5
16. Crop loss due to weather	1 2 3 4 5	48. Death of a parent or member of the immediate family	1 2 3 4 5
17. Illness during planting/harvesting	1 2 3 4 5	49. Death of a friend	1 2 3 4 5
18. Deciding when to sell	1 2 3 4 5	50. Daughter or son leaving home	1 2 3 4 5
19. Rising expenses	1 2 3 4 5	51. Problems balancing work and family responsibilities	1 2 3 4 5
20. Government policies and regulations	1 2 3 4 5	52. Divorce or marital separation	1 2 3 4 5
21. Concerns about the continued financial viability of the farm	1 2 3 4 5	53. Problems with a partnership	1 2 3 4 5
22. Having a loan request turned down	1 2 3 4 5	54. Trouble with parents or in-laws	1 2 3 4 5
23. Farming-related accident	1 2 3 4 5	55. Conflict with spouse over spending priorities	1 2 3 4 5
24. Government trade policies	1 2 3 4 5	56. Major decisions being made without my knowledge or input	1 2 3 4 5
25. Government "cheap food" policies	1 2 3 4 5	57. Having to wear too many hats, eg. farmer, spouse, father, son etc.	1 2 3 4 5
26. Metric conversion	1 2 3 4 5	58. Surface rights negotiations	1 2 3 4 5
27. Breeding or reproductive difficulties with livestock	1 2 3 4 5	59. Problems with relatives in farm operating agreement	1 2 3 4 5
28. No farm help or loss of help when needed	1 2 3 4 5	60. Elder care	1 2 3 4 5
29. Need to learn/adjust to new government regulations and policies	1 2 3 4 5	61. Retirement and farm transfer to next generation	1 2 3 4 5
30. Spouse doesn't have enough time for child-rearing	1 2 3 4 5	62. Other recent events which have had an impact on your life:	1 2 3 4 5
31. Increased workload at peak times	1 2 3 4 5	_____	1 2 3 4 5
32. Unplanned interruptions	1 2 3 4 5	_____	1 2 3 4 5
		_____	1 2 3 4 5

Exercise 4: Where to start?

Do you ever spend ten dollars worth of energy worrying about a ten-cent problem? Or focus so much on things you can't change that you neglect to take charge where you can make a difference? This exercise will help you set priorities. For each stressor identified in the Farming Stress Inventory, ask yourself two questions: "How important is it?" and "Can I control this event?" Put the stressors in the appropriate box.

IMPORTANT, CONTROLLABLE STRESSORS (Use Action Skills)

IMPORTANT, UNCONTROLLABLE STRESSORS (Use Acceptance and Coping Skills)

UNIMPORTANT, CONTROLLABLE STRESSORS
(Use Action Skills or Acceptance Skills)

UNIMPORTANT, UNCONTROLLABLE STRESSORS (Use Acceptance Skills)

Acceptance skills

1. Keep it in perspective

When worries and fears are causing you a lot of stress, ask yourself:

- *Has this happened before? What did I learn from that experience?*
- *What's the worst possible outcome?*
- *What else can I do?*
- *What advice would I give a friend in this situation?*
- *Five years from now, how important will this seem?*

2. Use positive self-talk

Many people find that repeating a saying helps them accept what they can't change. Some examples are listed below. Choose (or invent) one as a "secret weapon" against bad times.

- *We/I can gain strength from this.*
- *We/I have skills, abilities and talents that go beyond this farm.*
- *We have each other, our family and friends.*
- *There is more to life than this farm.*

3. Keep a positive attitude

It's hard to smile when things are going wrong. There are times when you need to blow off steam or express your resentment. But letting negative emotions take over completely only makes the situation worse. If you focus on the positive side, you're more likely to find a way out. A positive attitude can become contagious, making it easier to live and work with others.

4. Develop a stress-resistant personality

Some people create stress for themselves and others. Type A personalities have these traits in common:

- *Unrealistically high expectations*
- *Inability to relax*
- *Constant dissatisfaction*
- *Always in a hurry*

If you recognize these traits in yourself, be aware they can make you more prone to stress-related disease. Try to accept the fact that reality often falls short of expectations. People who are always rushing and pushing often accomplish less than people who take time to think through the problem. Getting regular, non-competitive exercise is a good way to temper a Type A personality. Another way to develop stress resistance is to consider problems as challenges. Look for possibilities and creative solutions. Commitment to family, friends, religion and community activities also helps buffer stress and put problems in perspective. Being "connected" to others can provide strength and meaning.

5. Get counselling

Sometimes the only way to deal with stressful events is to get professional help.

Seeking counselling is not a sign of weakness; it takes strength to recognize when you can't go it alone. Learn to make use of, not avoid, expert resources. If you feel completely alone, overwhelmed or hopeless, seek professional help.

Coping skills

1. Physical fitness

You can literally run away from stress - or bike, walk, dance or lift weights away from stress! Physical fitness helps fight stress in two ways:

- A physically fit body is better able to withstand the effects of stress. A balanced lifestyle that includes regular exercise, healthy meals and adequate sleep gives you energy and endurance to handle whatever comes your way.*
- Exercise has a calming effect that lasts long after the exercise session itself is over. Repetitive exercises like running or cross-country skiing can produce a mental state like meditation. Aerobic exercise that gets your heart pounding for at least 20 minutes releases chemicals in the brain called "endorphins" that reduce depression and stress.*

2. Relaxation

Do you know how to relax? Many of the ways we think we relax - drinking, smoking, watching TV, eating - do nothing to reverse the physical effects of stress. True relaxation is a skill that you can learn and use when you need it. Stress tenses your muscles, makes your breathing shallow, raises your blood pressure, makes your heart pound and clouds your judgment. Relaxation skills can reverse those effects to make you feel better, think better and perform better.

- Choose a time when you're not extremely stressed to learn the skills. Once you've learned and practised them a few times, you'll find they help when you need them.*
- Go to a quiet place. Sit or lie in a comfortable position, and try the following. Scan your body, looking for tension by focussing on each part. Start with your feet and work up through your legs, buttocks, torso, arms, shoulders, head and neck. Let your jaw drop. Allow your eyelids to be heavy and relaxed. At each place that you feel tension, take a deep, full breath and imagine the tightness "melting" as you breathe out. You can also tighten each area for a count of five, and then allow it to relax. Try squeezing the muscles in your face, arms, legs and buttocks. Feel the difference as you let them melt.*
- Allow your thoughts to pass through your mind without paying attention to them. Repeat the following to yourself:*

"I am relaxed and warm."

"My hands are heavy and warm."

"My heartbeat is slow and regular."

"I feel peaceful and still."

Continue to breathe slowly and regularly.

- Best of all, once you feel relaxed, enjoy it. Imagine you are in a beautiful place, sitting in front of a campfire on a starry night, or drifting in a boat on a calm lake - your favourite place. Remain in this relaxed state for 5 to 10 minutes before getting up.*

Action skills

1. Communicate

Successful communication requires at least two people: a sender and a receiver. Some people are good at saying what they mean, but not so good at listening. Others listen well but don't send clear messages. Studies have shown rural women withstand the stress of low income and long hours of work provided that they have a supportive spousal relationship.

No one can cope with the stress of the farm income crisis alone and stay healthy. Find others who share your concerns and losses. Talking about the tough realities is the start of a cooperative stress-busting effort.

Breaking the silence is the first step to controlling stress.

2. Manage your time

If you're feeling tense because of too much to do, time management skills can help you get things under control.

- 1. Make a list of everything you want to do today.*
- 2. Prioritize tasks and do the important ones when your energy is high and resources are available.*
- 3. Break down tasks into bite-sized chunks.*
- 4. Consolidate similar trips and tasks.*
- 5. Delegate as much as possible. Can your kids or spouse take over some tasks? Can you barter skills with a neighbour?*
- 6. Reduce paperwork by handling each piece of paper only once.*
- 7. Avoid time-wasters. When you're interrupted, let them know you can't spend time now, and arrange to call or visit them soon.*
- 8. Homemade isn't always better. It's spending the evening with friends, not what you serve them, that counts. A simple card with a photo can take the place of a gift.*
- 9. Be prepared. Mentally rehearse a stressful situation so you'll have several alternatives when the time comes. Gather any resources you'll need.*
- 10. Ask for help. Admit when you've got too many priorities.*

3. Set "S-M-A-R-T" goals

It's important to get a picture of what you, ideally, would like to have happen in your life. Use the relaxation exercise described in the section, "Coping Skills". Visualize all parts of your life - home, work and recreational settings. Then picture your ideal situation - three months, six months, one year, five years from today. What will you be doing? How will you look? What will you be feeling? Which people will be a part of your life, and what will be the quality of your relationships with them?

Now the trick is to identify those skills that can help you reach your goals. Awareness skills can help you understand what's happening, within yourself, your family and your community. Acceptance skills can change your attitude. Action skills such as time management and communication can increase your effectiveness. You can use coping skills to handle the strain of increased workloads. Choosing "S-M-A-R-T" goals can turn stress into personal satisfaction and productivity.

Specific. *Set a concrete goal that addresses behaviour and results, not emotions.*

Example: "For the next month, when I feel stressed, I will use exercise or relaxation to cope." When a goal isn't do-able, revise it.

Measurable. *You must be able to tell when you arrive, and to set milestones along the way.*

Example: "My goal is to reduce the times when I feel stressed to fewer than one a day."

Agreed upon. *Don't be the Lone Ranger; ask others to support and help you.*

Example: "My spouse knows that stress management is important, and will be supportive when I need to exercise or relax."

Rewarding. *Behaviour change should be as much fun as possible. Decide how you will reward yourself, both for achieving your main goal and passing milestones along the way.*

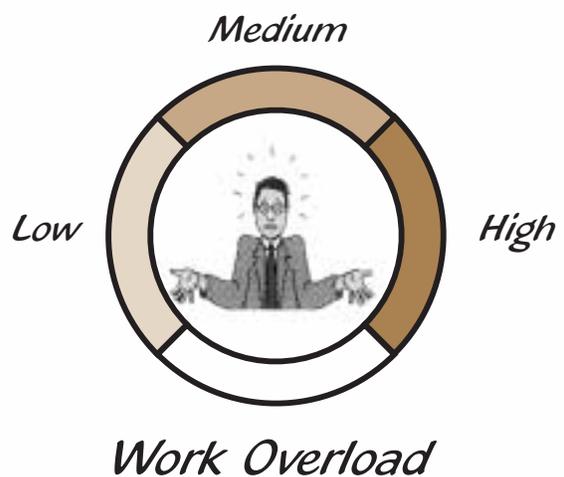
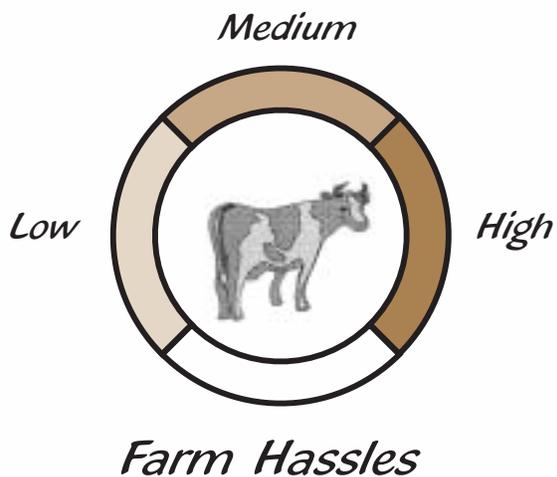
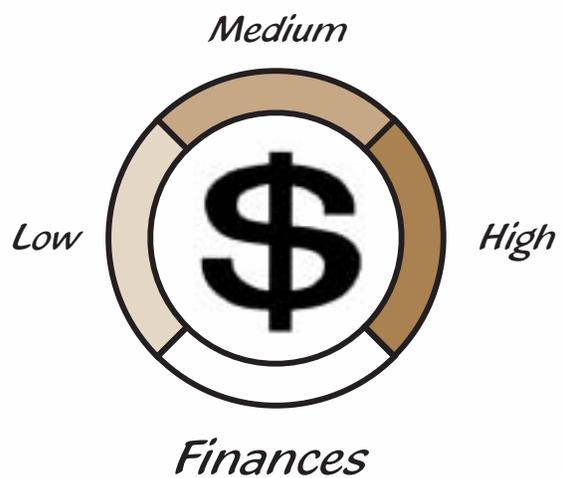
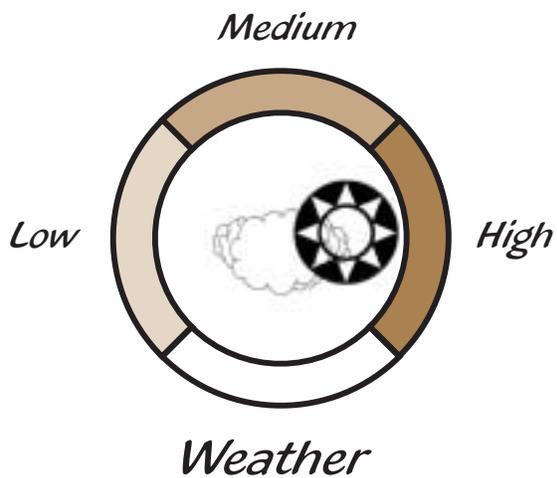
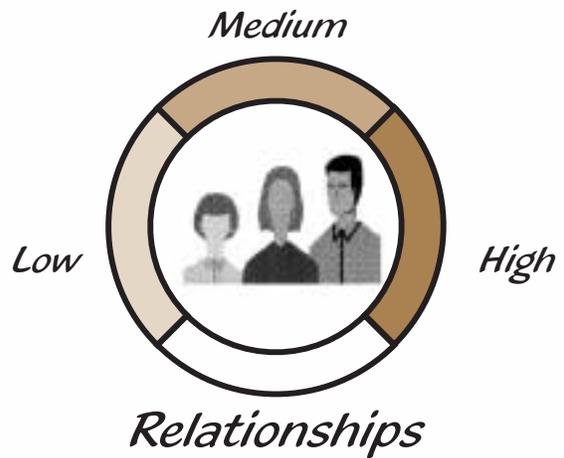
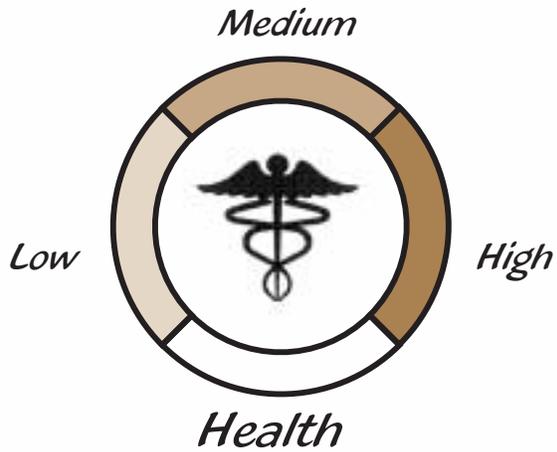
Example: "For each week that I meet my stress management goal, I will reward myself with one evening, doing what I want to do."

Trackable. *Keep track of your progress in a visible way. This helps keep you from getting discouraged by showing your day-to-day improvement.*

Example: "I will keep a daily stress log, listing stressors, how I reacted and how I handled it."



PRESSURE POINTS WHERE ARE YOURS?



Basic stress prevention

1. *Exercise regularly*

A fast walk, slow jog or any activity that gets your heart rate up into the 120's and 130's and keeps it there for 20 minutes or more three times a week will improve your endurance and soak up tension.

2. *Relax*

Learn techniques of deep breathing, meditation and muscle relaxation. Practice them daily and at times when you feel uptight.

3. *Set priorities*

Determine what you value the most in your life and make sure you are spending time, money and energy on them rather than on those things others value.

4. *Choose your response*

Develop your "bag of tricks." You can run away (from confrontation), you can fight, or you can compromise, bargain, negotiate or cooperate. Don't get caught in responses that are destructive for you.

5. *Solve the problem*

None of the above is more than a quick fix until you determine what's bugging you and move to change, neutralize or otherwise deal with the situation.

6. *Avoid the chemical haze*

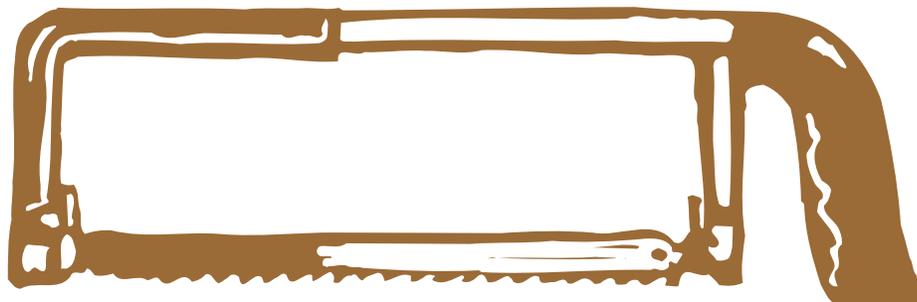
Booze, tranquilizers, eating, cigarettes, coffee - any or all of them may help for a short period but all of them have negative side effects and make stress worse over the long haul.

7. *Listen to your body*

Pay attention to muscle aches, indigestion, tooth grinding, fist clenching and the like. Your body is trying to tell you to use one of the above ways of dealing with stress.

8. *Reach out*

Share your concerns with family, self-help groups and organizations working on farm income issues. You will gain and give strength to others.



Reference and Resource List

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Saskatoon District Health

Ken Imhoff, Manager
Farm Stress Unit
Sask. Agriculture and Food

Where to get help

FARM STRESS LINE

1-800-667-4442

Farmers, men and women from rural communities, are trained to assist people in crisis. They handle calls in confidence. With access to a computerized database of services, they provide information on programs and services related to personal and family matters, farm financial crisis and other issues affecting the farm operation. A Livestock Care Service assists commercial livestock producers when livestock are endangered.

8:00 am to 9:00 pm, Monday to Saturday and holidays

OTHER SOURCES OF HELP

Tel. No's.

Accountant

local no. _____

Addictions

local no. _____

(Tel. Dir. white pages, Local Health District/Authority, "Addiction Services")

Alcoholics Anonymous

local no. _____

(Tel. Dir. white pages: AA Alcoholics Anonymous)

Bankruptcy Information

(306) 780-5391

(Provincial Government: Superintendent of Bankruptcy)

Counselling (Tel. Dir. yellow pages: "Counselling")

local no. _____

Domestic Abuse 9-1-1

local no. _____

(Tel. Dir. blue pages: "Social Services: Family Support Centre, Domestic Abuse Program")

Child Abuse

local no. _____

(Tel. Dir. blue pages: "Social Services, Emergency Child Abuse Intake Crisis Line")

Clergyman/Priest

local no. _____

Family Doctor

local no. _____

Farm Consultation Services (pro-active business planning)

1-888-777-9309

Problem Gambling Help Line (24 hrs)

1-800-306-6789

Kid's Help Phone Line (24 hrs)

1-800-668-6868

Lawyer

local no. _____

Mediation Services (Tel. Dir. blue pages: "Mediation Services")

local no. _____

Mental Health

local no. _____

(Tel. Dir. white pages, Local Health District/Authority, "Mental Health Services")

Narcotics Anonymous (Tel. Dir. white pages: Narcotics Anonymous)

local no. _____

RCMP (24 hrs) (Police emergencies only)

310-7267 or 9-1-1

Rural Service Centre/Extension Agrologist

local no. _____

(Tel. Dir. blue pages: "Agriculture and Food")

Sexual Assault Crisis Line (Tel. Dir. white pages: Sexual Assault)

local no. _____

Social Services (Tel. Dir. blue pages: "Social Services")

local no. _____

Suicide (24 hrs) (Tel. Dir. blue pages: "Mobile Crisis Service") 9-1-1

local no. _____

If you are experiencing medium or high stress, call for help now.

Partners:

*The Agricultural Health and Safety Network at the
Centre for Agricultural Medicine, University of Saskatchewan
Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities (SARM)
Canadian Coalition for Agricultural Safety and Rural Health
Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada*



Canadian Coalition for
Agricultural Safety and Rural Health
Coalition canadienne pour la sécurité
agricole et la santé rurale



Agriculture and
Agri-Food Canada

Agriculture et
Agroalimentaire Canada

Where to get help

FARM STRESS LINE

Call your Rural Service Centre or your telephone company's Directory Assistance Service to inquire about a Farm Stress Line in your area. Where a Farm Stress Line exists, men and women from rural communities are trained to assist people in crisis. They handle calls in confidence. With access to a computerized database of services, they provide information on programs and services related to personal and family matters, farm financial crisis and other issues affecting the farm operation.

OTHER SOURCES OF HELP

Consult your telephone directory or call your telephone company's Directory Assistance Service to check the local telephone numbers for these services.

	<i>Tel. No's.</i>
<i>Accountant</i>	_____
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<i>Bankruptcy Information</i> (Provincial Government: Superintendent of Bankruptcy)	_____
<i>Counselling</i> (Tel. Dir. yellow pages: "Counselling")	_____
<i>Domestic Abuse 9-1-1</i> (Tel. Dir. blue pages: "Social Services: Family Support Centre, Domestic Abuse Program")	_____
<i>Child Abuse</i> (Tel. Dir. blue pages: "Social Services, Emergency Child Abuse Intake Crisis Line")	_____
<i>Clergyman/Priest</i>	_____
<i>Family Doctor</i>	_____
<i>Farm Consultation Services</i> (pro-active business planning)	_____
<i>Problem Gambling Help Line</i> (24 hrs)	_____
<i>Kid's Help Phone Line</i> (24 hrs)	1-800-668-6868
<i>Lawyer</i>	_____
<i>Mediation Services</i> (Tel. Dir. blue pages: "Mediation Services")	_____
<i>Mental Health</i> (Tel. Dir. white pages, Local Health District/Authority, "Mental Health Services")	_____
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<i>RCMP</i> (24 hrs) (Police emergencies only)	_____
<i>Rural Service Centre/Extension Agriologist</i> (Tel. Dir. blue pages: "Agriculture and Food")	_____
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Your Local Contact



Canadian Coalition for
Agricultural Safety and Rural Health
Coalition canadienne pour la sécurité
agricole et la santé rurale



Agriculture and
Agri-Food Canada

Agriculture et
Agroalimentaire Canada