



# *Work Smart Live Smart*

## Stress, Health and Farm Life

By  
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Growing up on a dairy farm in rural Ontario gave me an opportunity to learn some very valuable life lessons and made me realize that it takes a special type of person to be a farmer. It takes a very special person to live this way and be a healthy farmer.

We talk about sustainability a lot in agriculture, but often we forget that our main focus needs to be on sustainability of agriculture's most important resource—it's people. Sustainability means being aware of and identifying the sources of stress, understanding the reaction and responses to these stressors and providing a framework to help farmers deal better with these stressors.

### So what do we know?

1. **Farming is one of the most dangerous occupations in Canada.**

Health and safety is a huge issue. Two-thirds of farmers say that they are stressed, with 20% saying that they are very stressed. Ontario farmers reported the highest level of farm stress in Canada.

Shortcuts or inattention can lead to disaster. Though I look at some of the practices from years ago and shudder, today, even with all of the safety programs, I still hear stories of men, women and children who are injured, maimed or killed. Sadly, most of these could have been prevented by taking a few extra seconds to walk around, buckle up, turn off the motor, or by taking a quick break to increase your alertness.

2. **Farming isn't really an occupation.**

For many, it was not a choice but a destiny. While others outside agriculture choose what they want to be when they grow up, those growing up on a farm often continue living the tradition. Choice is around not staying on the farm.

It is not 9 to 5. It is an all-encompassing lifestyle. Sleep is often sacrificed and time is always at a premium. You are at the mercy of the markets, the government and especially the weather. In a split second, all of your hard work can be eliminated by a single summer storm or an infectious disease. You rebuild. You replant. You wait it out and start again.

### **3. Farmers are resilient.**

S%@t happens...to everyone...and you move on. Though there is lots of complaining about what is going on around them, most couldn't imagine living or making a living any other way. Those that can't live this way, don't last and move on.

## **Farming is a lifestyle. Farming is stressful and dangerous.**

### **Sources of stress.**

It is interesting, that when you ask those outside of the agricultural industry, they would probably identify workload as one of the key sources of stress. Farmers are constantly working on their business. Not just 9 to 5. Not just Monday to Friday.

However, when you ask farmers, workload is one of the lower sources of stress on their list. Highest would be government policies, crop prices and the markets, farm debt and finances in general. Other sources would include repairs and upkeep, weather and seasonal changes, pests, work life balance, and health and safety issues.

Personality plays a role in colouring the way we deal with the sources of stress. Pride and privacy prevents farmers from reaching out and sharing when there are stress issues. Most would not talk to their siblings, spouse, friends or other farmers -those that would understand the most and who would care about them the most. Instead, they are more likely to talk to their doctor or a religious figure. These are great, but often limiting in the strategies that they can suggest.

### **Farmers pay a price.**

### **Reactions to these stressors.**

Farm related stress such as the current economic condition can lead directly to illness and injury and make farmers more susceptible to illness and injury. We see increased accidents related to the hurried syndrome – the pressure to get it done before time runs out. We see risk related to an inability to concentrate, fatigue and insomnia. We see health risks from lack of time to go to a doctor or a dentist. We see relationship issues from decreased patience, sarcasm or abrupt communication and lack of time to focus on these relationships. We see increased headaches, back, hip and joint pain, stomach issues, high blood pressure and metabolism issues.

## **Farmers are resilient. Sustainability.**

### **So what can farmers do?**

There is a myriad of choices when it comes to dealing with the sources and symptoms of stress. I suggest that instead of following the new flavour-of-the-day, that you utilize the **S-O-S Principle** to provide a solid framework that ensures that you have enough tools in your tool belt to deal with the challenges that come your way.

## **S-O-S Principle**

### **S – Situation**

Find strategies that help you to problem solve the situation that is causing your stress. Sometimes you have to wait it out. Maybe you can break it down into smaller, easier to deal with pieces. Look for possible outcomes – play the what would I do if game. Can you delegate it, negotiate it, simplify it, ignore it, junk it, or just get at it and get it done? Maybe you need a plan, a goal and some doable steps to go with it. Do you know what your priorities are and are you making decisions that keep these as a priority in your life? The first S is around dealing effectively with the source of your stress.

### **O – Ourself**

Some of our strategies need to focus on how you take care of yourself and how you give yourself a break from the stressor. Are you doing the basics? Eating right? Sleeping enough? Exercising your body? Are you looking at where the stressor is impacting your body and doing something about it? If you feel it in your back, neck or shoulder area, you may want to look at some stretching exercises, a hot tub or hot shower, a massage or a heat pack so that those muscles don't stay tight and knotted. If you feel it in your digestion, you may need to look at the foods that are causing the discomfort. You may need to eat smaller more frequent meals. You may need to take a longer break and not eat on the run so that your digestion can do its thing properly. If you feel it in your patience and find that you are edgy and not able to relax, you may need to find strategies that can help you to re-focus, slow down and change the pace of the day.

Some of the strategies are around balance and getting away from the stressor. Are you able to enjoy family activities or are you thinking about what needs to be done next? Do you have a hobby or activities that are not farm related? All of these things do nothing for changing the source of the stress, but they help your mind and body to re-energize and re-focus so that you are healthy enough to deal with these challenges.

## **S – Support**

It is not a weakness to connect with others. In fact, you must. We are pack creatures by nature. We are interdependent and you need to know that it is okay to ask for help. You need to learn from others so that you don't keep re-creating the wheel or feel like you are alone in your challenges. What do you believe in? Spirituality helps you to know that you are connected and you are not alone. Who is in the community that can help you, that may have answers to questions you may have? Look around your community. Search the internet. Join associations of like minded people. Reach out and share. Who do you have fun with and socialize with? Do they lift you up or cut you down?

In days gone by, it was a given that you had to rely on your community for survival. We need to get back to that and ensure that we have enough supports in our support circle.

The S-O-S Principle provides you with a framework to ask three pertinent questions and the answers to these questions ensures that you have enough tools in your tool belt to be successful and minimize the impact of those challenges.

1. What are you going to do about the situation?
2. How are you taking care of yourself and giving yourself a break?
3. Who is there to support you through this time?

### **Some helpful strategies and lessons I have seen from the farmers I grew up with.**

Though he may not have been the picture of health or centeredness in days gone by, he has learned there is a price to pay if you don't make the time. Today, my dad plays cards with his buddies once a week and he goes out to the community dinners with a couple of his good friends whenever they are put on. My mom and dad go to concerts with my aunts and uncles at least once a month. He has taken up coyote hunting. He goes fishing every summer up north. He sees his doctor regularly and goes to a naturopath. He takes a Jacuzzi bath each night to loosen up his knees and hips. He enjoys the hockey games on TV. He attends farm meetings to stay informed. He works with my brother to plan out what is going on with the farm business. He chats at length on the phone to his grandsons who live far away.

My brother who runs the dairy operation, ensures that he is there for his kid's activities. He makes it to the hockey games and the weekend trips though it is inconvenient and hard to get away. He naps to restore his energy so that he doesn't make mistakes that could be costly. He hires when he needs to. He paces himself as best as he can. He works with a financial advisor. He innately trusts that things will work themselves out because it is a lifestyle that he has chosen.

## **My best stress management advice:**

**Know your priorities.** Don't let the business of farming become such a focus that you forget the connection to your family and friends or the importance of your health.

**Harness your energy.** Eat right. Sleep. Learn to relax.

**Keep perspective.** Use your humour and your experience to know that unless it is the end of the world it isn't the end of the world.

**Look for the awesome.** Enjoy the small moments of pleasure and wonder in your relationships and the world around you. Don't get swamped under by the negative comments and outlooks of others.

**Remember S-O-S.**

## **Sharing my farmer humour joke of the day:**

A farmer was driving along the road with a load of poop and stopped to say hi to the neighbour boy who was out playing. The little boy, said hi and asked "What've you got in your truck?"

"Poop," the farmer replied.

"What are you going to do with it?" asked the little boy.

"Put it on the strawberries," answered the farmer.

"You ought to come to my house," the little boy advised him. "We put sugar and cream on ours."

## **PS**

It is okay to giggle and in fact, it is highly recommended that we do it several times a day.

Stress and wellness specialist, **Beverly Beuermann-King** translates current research and best practices information into a realistic, accessible and practical approach through her dynamic stress and wellness workshops, on-line articles, e-newsletters and media interviews and through a collaboration called *Awakening The Workplace*. Visit [www.WorkSmartLiveSmart.com](http://www.WorkSmartLiveSmart.com) for more on Beverly and her wellness work.

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