

Managing Stress During Tough Times

Fact Sheet No. 10.255

Consumer Series | Family

by R.J. Fetsch*

In tough times resilient people seek options, reach out to others for support, and do not give up. Resiliency is about facing stress as part of life and looking for ways to manage the challenges that emerge in life. The meaning that is attributed to any given experience influences how we react to it. Therefore, resiliency is a process of learning how to re-frame and adjust our thinking and reactions away from a sense of lack and toward a sense of figuring out our options and making choices based on the belief that we always have more than one option.

Learning how to manage stress and increase resilience is important, especially during tough times such as drought. Drought may affect people on many, threatening the financial well-being of many. Financial stress can lead to increased psychological distress.¹ Loss or the threat of loss of the family farm or ranch often produces multiple stress-related manifestations, which can lead to depression.² People who feel disenfranchised due to the unique and often misunderstood experiences of drought as well as the isolation of rural living, are more at risk for substance abuse problems, farm-related accidents, injury, and suicide.^{3,4}

What are the social costs of drought?

Even before the drought, more Colorado farm and ranch families were seeking off-farm employment. In 2002, the most recent year statistics are available, 57 percent of Colorado operators had some off-farm employment, which is up from 55 percent in 1997 and 39 percent in 1974.⁵

Farmers, ranchers, and rural families were also experiencing signs of high stress. Mental health professionals have long documented that among the top predictors for suicide are

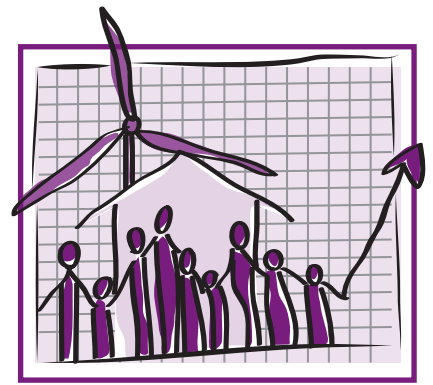
the existence of a mental disorder such as depression (possible brought on by loss and stress), substance use, lack of social support and availability and access to a firearm.⁶

Colorado's overall suicide rate was the 6th highest in the nation at 18.7/100,000, which was 56 percent higher than the national average of 12/100,000.⁶ The leading external cause of death on Colorado ranches and farms was suicide.⁷ If history repeats the grim statistics of the last agricultural crisis in the mid-80s, we could see suicide rates triple among farmers and ranchers as compared to suicide rates for the rest of Colorado.⁸ We can also expect some rural communities to experience social disintegration and some to completely collapse.⁹ In addition, there is the potential for violence against others¹⁰ or oneself.

The economic impact of suicide is high

As the ninth-leading cause of death in Colorado, suicide has a significant impact on the state economy. The direct costs include health care expenses, autopsies, and criminal investigations. Economists estimate the annual direct costs of each attempted suicide is \$6,000 and each completed suicide is \$2,371.¹¹ They also estimate the indirect costs related to life lost – assuming employment until age 65 and based on the present value of lost expenses. Annual indirect costs for each attempted suicide is \$31,616 and each completed suicide is \$446,314.¹² Therefore, the combined estimated direct and indirect costs of each attempted suicide is \$37,616. The combined estimated costs of each completed suicide is \$448,685. Both suicide attempts and deaths are costly to Colorado – \$59 million in direct costs and over \$571 million in indirect costs in 2000.¹³

Tough times such as those experienced during drought can be especially hard on families. If the “Farm Crisis” of the mid-80s is any indication, farm and ranch families



Quick Facts

- Resilient people re-frame and adjust their thinking and reactions away from a sense of lack and toward a sense of options.
- There is always more than one option to solve any problem.
- Stress and depression cause farmers and rural residents to have an increased risk for substance abuse problems, farm accidents, injury, and suicide.
- Depression and stress during tough times, like drought, often result in conflicts with spouses and poor parenting practices that may cause problems for youth in school achievement, peer relations, antisocial behavior, self-confidence, depression, and substance abuse.
- As more people reach out for support, more self-help groups, support groups, and hot lines are created.
- Depression, substance use, lack of social support, and access to a firearm are among the top predictors of suicide.

© Colorado State University Extension. 3/03. Revised 5/12.

www.ext.colostate.edu



*Colorado State University Extension human development and family studies state specialist and professor, human development and family studies. Reviewed by Dr. Jennifer Aberle, assistant professor, human development and family studies. 5/2012

will experience increased intergenerational conflict.¹⁴ There may be increases in depression, divorce, and domestic violence.¹⁵ Farm and ranch children may have an increased risk for mental disorders and antisocial behavior.¹⁶ Some rural youth may rise to the occasion with more responsible behavior as they try to help their families.¹⁷ Depression and stress during tough times often result in conflicts with spouses and poor parenting practices that may cause problems for adolescents in school achievement, peer relations, antisocial behavior, self-confidence, depression, and substance abuse.¹⁸

Nevertheless, because many individuals and families are tough, independent, resilient people they will mediate the effect of economic adversity and experience fewer depressive symptoms by using their personal coping strategies and social support systems.¹⁹ As more people reach out for support, there will be more self-help groups, support groups, and hot lines.²⁰ More people will use mediation services, which will improve their mental health.²¹

SUICIDE WARNING SIGNS: *take notice of...*

Anxiety or depression: Ongoing intense feelings of anxiety or depression.

Withdrawal or isolation: Withdrawn, alone, lack of friends and support.

Helpless and hopeless: Sense of complete powerlessness, a hopeless feeling.

Alcohol abuse: There is often a link between drinking and suicide.

Previous suicide attempts

Suicidal plan: Frequent or constant thoughts with a specific plan in mind.

Taking actions: Makes plans for a burial plot, buys a large amount of life insurance, writes a will, gives favorite possessions away, and reconciles friendships.

Talks about suicide: "I'm calling it quits," or "Maybe my family would be better off without me."

How do I recognize stress and depression?²²

Watch for signs of farm and ranch stress.

Change in routine, care of livestock/farmstead declines, increase in illness, increase in farm or ranch accidents, signs of stress in children.

Watch for physical signs of chronic, prolonged stress.

Headaches, backaches, eating irregularities, sleep disturbances, frequent sickness, ulcers, or exhaustion.

Watch for emotional signs of chronic, prolonged stress.

Sadness, depression, anger or blame, anxiety, loss of spirit, or loss of humor.

Watch for behavioral signs of chronic, prolonged stress.

Irritability, backbiting, acting out, withdrawal, alcoholism, or violence.

Watch for cognitive signs of chronic, prolonged stress.

Memory loss, lack of concentration, or inability to make decisions.

Watch for problems with self-esteem.

"I'm a failure," "I blew it," "Why can't I...?"

Watch for signs of depression.

Appearance: Sad face, slow movements, unkempt look, drastic weight change – either up or down.

Unhappy feelings: Feeling sad, hopeless, discouraged, and listless.

Negative thoughts: "I'm a failure," "I'm no good," "No one cares."

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 so lonely."

Physical problems: Sleeping problems, decreased sexual interest, headaches.

Guilt and low self-esteem: "It's completely my fault," "I should be punished."

Feeling worthless, inadequate, rejected, and insecure.

Lack of future orientation in conversation.

What can I do to cope during tough times?

- Refer a person who is depressed or suicidal to a nearby mental health professional. See your telephone book yellow pages under "Counselor," or refer the person to the nearest hospital emergency room, sheriff, or police.

What to do if you are concerned about someone being suicidal²⁴:

1. **Listen:** let the person talk about what is going on for him/her.
 - give your full attention
 - show that you care
 - avoid empty words of reassurance, such as "things will get better"
2. **Ask:** "Are you thinking about killing yourself?"
 - be direct, open, and honest
 - don't worry about offending the person
 - do not be sworn to secrecy
3. **Take Action:** Get help.
 - if immediate crisis or danger exists, call 911
 - stay with the person if you are not in danger
 - involve family and friends for support

Resources:

National Suicide Hotline:
1-800-273-TALK (8256)

OR

1-800-SUICIDE (2433)

Denver Crisis Services

1-888-885-1222

(2012. Alliance for Suicide Prevention for Larimer County)

- Watch the *meaning* or *perception* you have about the drought. Strive to find a positive meaning that will benefit you, your spouse, and your family.²⁵
- Manage your stress, anger, blame, and depression in healthy ways.
- If your major stressor is a problem between you as a borrower and your lender, ask for mediation help from the Colorado Agricultural Mediation Program.²⁶

How can I maintain my emotional well-being in tough times, like during a drought?

Answer the questions below and learn more resilient ways to weather tough times. For your convenience, we provided space in the left-hand margin for your personal answers to these questions. Use the lines provided to answer the questions.

1. Drought – what does it mean to me today?

(For example, it means we're losing the family farm/ranch. It means that we've got our fences fixed and our roads graded. It means that we're using the time to have family meetings to create a new shared family vision for our future.)

2. What actions/steps am I'm likely to take with a meaning like this?

(I'm likely to withdraw. I'm likely to talk and listen to family members.)

3. What emotions am I likely to feel when I think about this meaning?

(Depression, sadness, enthusiasm, hope, and excitement.)

4. When I experienced a different crisis, what steps did I take that helped me and my family survive? What coping skills did I use then that helped me/us bounce back?

(We brainstormed solutions to our problem. We maintained a sense of humor. We consulted with our attorney, our lender, our family counselor, and our accountant. We held family meetings and listened to one another's ideas.)

5. What personal resources did I use?

(My problem-solving skills, sense of humor, determination to take one day at a time, and my spiritual life.)

6. What family resources did I use?

(Communicating openly and discussing pros and cons of solutions that we brainstormed.)

7. What community resources did I use?

(Accountant, attorney, lender, mental health counselor, physician, priest/minister, and guidance counselor.)

8. What personal, family, or community resources could we use to better cope with this drought situation today?

(Hold monthly family meetings, accept predicaments over which we have no control, and solve problems one at a time.)

9. What are some healthy ways I can use to reduce stress?

(Ask my spouse for a backrub, make time daily to unwind and focus one-on-one with each family member.)

10. What are some healthy ways I can use to decrease my anger levels?

(Stop, step back, and think – what do I really want for me and for the person with whom I am angry?)

11. What are some healthy ways I can use to manage depression?

(Make a list of my strengths and accomplishments and enjoy them. Visit with a trusted counselor, physician, or psychologist.)

12. What are some resources we could call on?

(Physicians, counselors, ministers, accountants, attorneys, and lenders.)

References

- ¹Beeson, P. G. (1999, Winter). The research: Potential mental health consequences of the farm crisis. *Party-Line*, pp. 6-8. Retrieved March 26, 2003 from <http://www.narmh.org/pages/farmfive.html>.
- Meyer, K. (2003). Economic hardship, religion, and mental health during the midwestern farm crisis. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 2 (19), pp. 139-155. DOI: 10.1016/S0743-0167(02)00069-4.
- Schulman, M. D., & Armstrong, P. S. (1989). The farm crisis: An analysis of social psychological distress among North Carolina farm operators. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 17(4), pp. 423-442.
- ²Horne, J. (2000). U.S. farm crisis. The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture.
- Ortega, S.T., Johnson, D.R. Beeson, P.G., & Craft, B.J. (1994) The farm crisis and mental health: A longitudinal study of the 1980s. *Rural Sociology*, 59(4), pp. 598-619.
- ³Brumby, S. A., Kennedy, A. J., Mellor, D., McCabe, M. P., Ricciardelli, L. A., Head, A., and Mercer-Grant, C. (2011). The alcohol intervention training program (AITP): A response to alcohol misuse in the farming community. *BMC Public Health*, 1 (11), pp. 242-248.
- Geller, J. M., Ludtke, R. L., & Stratton, T. (1990). Nonfatal farm injuries in North Dakota: A sociological analysis. *The Journal of Rural Health*, 6(2), pp. 185-196.
- ⁴Fraser, C. E., Smith, K. B., Judd, F., Humphreys, J. S., Fragar, L. J., &

- Henderson, A. (2005). Farming and mental health problems and mental illness. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 51(4), 340-349. DOI: 10.1177/0020764005060844.
- Gunderson, P., Donner, D., Nashold, R., Salkowicz, L., Sperry, S., & Wittman, B. (1993, May/June). The epidemiology of suicide among farm residents or workers in five north-central states, 1980-1988. Farm injuries: A public health approach. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 9, pp. 26-32.
- ⁵17,801/31,369=56.7%. 2002 Census of Agriculture-Census, State-County Data. Retrieved April 10, 2007 from www.nass.usda.gov/census/pull_data_census. USDA. (1997). 1997 census of agriculture, 1(6) (AC97-A-6). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, p. 10.
- ⁶Jobs, A. A. (2006). Managing suicidal risk: A collaborative approach. New York: Guildford Press. Yufit, R. I., & Lester, D. (eds.). (2005). Assessment, treatment, and prevention of suicidal behavior. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- ⁷2009. Deaths: Final Data for 2009, Table 19 from http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/deaths_2009_release.pdf
- ⁸T. Daniels, personal e-mail communication, August 22, 2000. 7 of 28 rural deaths in Colorado were reported as suicides in 1999.
- ⁹In the mid-1980s in Oklahoma, the farm suicide rate was 42/100,000 as compared with an overall suicide rate of 15/100,000. In Kansas the farm suicide rate was 40.27/100,000 in 1985 as compared with an overall suicide rate of 11.5/100,000. Similar high rates of farm/ranch suicide rates were found in Minnesota, Montana, South Dakota, North Dakota, and Wisconsin. Finch, C. (1990, October). Farmers are still killing themselves. *Farm Journal*. (Available from 230 W. Washington Square, Philadelphia, PA.). Peterson, R., & Fetsch, R. J. (2003). Agricultural mental health: Unique practitioner challenges. Unpublished manuscript.
- ¹⁰Beeson, P. G. (1999, Winter). The research: Potential mental health consequences of the farm crisis. Party-Line, pp. 6-8. Retrieved March 26, 2003 from <http://www.narmh.org/pages/farmfive.html>. Davidson, O. G. (1996). Broken heartland: The rise of America's rural ghetto. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. Fitchen, J. M. (1987). When communities collapse: Implications for rural America. *Human Services in the Rural Environment*, 10-11 (4-1), pp. 48-57.
- ¹¹Schwartz, J., & Gertseva, A. (2010). Stability and Change in Female and Male Violence across Rural and Urban Counties, 1981-2006. *Rural Sociology*, 75(3), 388-425. DOI:10.1111/j.1549-0831.2010.00016.x
- ¹²The Colorado Trust, 2002. Suicide in Colorado. Denver. p. 2.
- ¹³The Colorado Trust, 2002, p. 2.
- ¹⁴The Colorado Trust, 2002, p. 2.
- ¹⁵Anderson, R. M., & Rosenblatt, P. C. (1985). Intergenerational transfer of farm land. *Journal of Rural Community Psychology*, 16(1), pp. 19-25.
- ¹⁶Johnson, D. R., & Booth, A. (1990). Rural economic decline and marital quality: A panel study of farm marriages. *Family Relations*, 39, pp. 159-165. See National Mental Health Association. (1988). *National Action Commission Report on the Mental Health of Rural Americans*.
- ¹⁷Conger, R. D., & Elder, H. E. (1994). *Families in troubled times*. Aldine De Gruyter.
- ¹⁸Van Garrison, M. E. B. (1998). Determinants of the quality of life of rural families. *Journal of Rural Health*, 2(14). pp. 146-153. DOI: 10.1111/j.1748-0361.1998.tb00616.x
- ¹⁹Conger, R., Patterson, G.R., & Ge, X. (1995). It takes two to replicate: A mediational model for the impact of parents' stress on adolescent adjustment. *Child Development*, 66(1), pp. 80-97. Ge, X., Conger, R., Lorenz, F., & Simons, R. (1994). Parents' stressful life events and adolescent depressed mood. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 35, pp. 28-44. Conger, R., Lorenz, F., Elder, G., Melby, J., Simons, R., & Conger, K. (1991). A process model of family economic pressure and early adolescent alcohol use. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 11, pp. 430-449. Wadsworth, M. E. and Compas, B. E. (2002), Coping with Family Conflict and Economic Strain: The Adolescent Perspective. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 12: 243-274. DOI: 10.1111/1532-7795.00033
- ²⁰Hoyt, D. R., Conger, R. D., Valde, J. G., and Weihs, K. (1997). Psychological distress and help seeking in rural America. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 25(4). pp. 449-470. Lobao, L. M. (1990). Psychosocial consequences of agricultural transformation: The farm crisis and depression. *Rural Sociology*, 55(1), pp. 58-75.
- ²¹U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, Office of Rural Health Policy. Mental Health and Rural America: 1994-2005.
- ²²Rettig, K. D., Bauer, J. W., & Danes, S. M. (1990). Adjustment of farm families to economic stress: A two-year study [Minnesota Report 220-1990-Item No. AD-MR-3994]. St. Paul: Minnesota Agricultural Experiment Station.
- ²³Adapted from Williams, R. T., & Fetsch, R. J. (2003). *Farm and ranch family stress and depression: A checklist and guide for making referrals*. Retrieved March 4, 2003 from <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/drought/checklist.html>
- ²⁴2012. Hope for today: Interrupting the path to suicide. Alliance for Suicide Prevention of Larimer County.
- ²⁵See Nel, P., & Righarts, M. (2008). Natural disasters and the risk of violent civil conflict. *International Studies Quarterly*, 1(52), pp. 159-185.
- ²⁶Contact Gary Graalman, Colorado Department of Agriculture, 2331 West 31st Avenue, Denver, CO 80211, 303-480-9236, GaryGraalman@ag.state.co.us.

Acknowledgements

Karen Brock, former Baca County Family and Consumer Sciences Agent; Jean Justice, former Bent County Area Family and Consumer Sciences Program Leader; Jan Nixon, retired Logan County Director and Family & Consumer Sciences Agent; and Randy R. Weigel University of Wyoming Human Development Specialist.

Colorado State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture and Colorado counties cooperating. CSU Extension programs are available to all without discrimination. No endorsement of products mentioned is intended nor is criticism implied of products not mentioned.