

Extension Responds: Stress and Safety

Watch for warning signs of financial and emotional stress

By Roger Williams

Low prices for milk and other commodities, escalating farm expenses and a generally depressed economy have hit many farm families hard. The resulting financial and emotional stress can lead to serious problems – depression, anger, violence, illness or suicide.

In times like this, it is important for friends, members of extended families, neighbors and others to be aware of the signs that a family may be under severe stress and in need of assistance. Roger Williams, a University of Wisconsin professor of professional development and applied studies says symptoms of stress might include the following:

- **Change in routines.** The farmer or farm family stops attending church, drops out of 4-H, homemakers or other groups, or no longer stops in at the local coffee shop or feed mill.
- **Increase in illness.** Farmers or farm family members may experience more colds or flu or have other chronic conditions such as aches, pains or a persistent cough.
- **Appearance of farmstead declines.** The farm family no longer takes pride in the way farm buildings and grounds look or keeps up with maintenance work.
- **Care of livestock declines.** Cattle may not be cared for in the usual way; they may lose condition, appear gaunt or show signs of neglect or physical abuse.
- **Increase in farm accidents.** The risk of farm accidents increases due to fatigue or loss of ability to concentrate. Children may be at risk if there isn't adequate childcare.
- **Children show signs of stress.** Farm children may act out, decline in academic performance or be increasingly absent from school. They may also show signs of physical abuse or neglect.

People in families that have been under severe stress for long periods of time might develop physical problems like headaches, ulcers, eating irregularities or sleep disturbances. The emotional signs include depression, bitterness, anger or anxiety. Behavioral signs are irritability, withdrawal, violence and alcoholism. They may also show cognitive changes such as memory loss, indecisiveness and lack of ability to concentrate.

The greater the number of signs or symptoms a farm family member is experiencing, the greater the concern should be. If family members exhibit signs of depression or talk about suicide, it is important that they get linked up with help as soon as possible. All cries for help should be taken seriously. Friends, neighbors and business associates can help by putting the stressed family in touch with professionals who are trained to provide assistance.

People who are concerned about a stressed family can do the following:

- Be aware of the agencies and resources available in your community. Find out what services they offer and what their limitations are.
- Listen for signs and symptoms that the person or family needs help -- financial, legal or personal counseling -- that you can't provide.
- Determine which agency or community resource would be most appropriate to address the person's (or family's) problem.
- Discuss the referral with the person or family ("It looks like you are feeling frustrated with your financial problems. I think this person or agency could help you deal with your situation.")
- Explore the individual's or family's willingness to initiate contact with the community resource. Ask: "How do you feel about seeking help from this person or agency?"

If the person or family is unwilling to take the initiative or if there is some danger if action is not taken, a concerned friend can take the initiative. Ask for permission to contact the agency, then call that agency, share your concern and discuss how the agency will respond to this "referral." If it's an emergency situation and the agency can't act quickly, you may need to take other actions. You can call the Wisconsin Farm Center at 800-942-2474 or call 911 for local emergency services.

In rare situations where a person is suicidal, it's important to stay with that person until help arrives or until you can get the person to someone who can help -- a trusted friend or family member, family physician, clergy person or hospital emergency room. Friends, neighbors and agribusinesses can be most helpful in getting farm families linked up with the resources they may need in difficult times

If you have questions about any of these ideas, please contact:

Roger Williams, Professional Development and Applied
Studies
University of Wisconsin-Madison
610 Langdon Street
Madison, WI 53703-1195
(608) 263-4432
rwilliams@dcs.wisc.edu

