



350 Warren Hall, Ithaca NY 14853  
1-800-547-3276 nyfarmnet.org

## Identifying Signs of Stress in Farm Families

By Extension Associate Daniel Welch and Extension Support Specialist Kate Downes

New York State farm families are experiencing higher levels of financial and emotional stress due in part to several years of low commodity prices. This is an especially difficult time for dairy farmers because regional conditions in dairy markets have further reduced farm revenues. Farm families can also experience stress as the result of a sudden event—such as crop loss, an accident, a personnel change, or family death. In other instances, it may be a gradual change from a prolonged physical illness, excessive working hours, or relationship difficulties.

### Warning Signs of Stress:

- **Change in routines:** Farmers or members of the farm family may change who attends a market, stop attending regular meetings or religious activities, drop out of other groups, or fail to stop in at the local coffee shop or feed mill.
- **Decline in the care of domestic animals:** Livestock or pets may not be cared for in the usual way.
- **Increase in illness:** Farmers or farm family members may experience more upper respiratory illnesses (cold, flu) or other chronic conditions (aches, pains, persistent cough, migraines).
- **Increase in farm accidents:** The risk of farm accidents increases with fatigue or loss of ability to concentrate. Children may be at risk if there isn't alternative child care.
- **Decline in appearance of farmstead:** The farm family no longer takes pride in the way farm buildings and grounds appear.
- **Signs of stress in children:** Farm children may act out, show a decline in academic performance, or be increasingly absent from school. They may also show signs of physical abuse or neglect, or become depressed.
- **Decreased interest:** Farmers or farm families may be less willing to commit to future activities, sign up for gatherings, or show interest in community events.

### Signs of Chronic, Prolonged Stress

When farm families are under stress for long periods of time, members of the family may exhibit:

- Headaches, backaches, etc.
- Irritability
- Depression
- Ulcers
- Anger
- Passive-aggressiveness
- Frequent sickness
- Exhaustion
- Loss of humor
- Memory loss
- Self-judgment (e.g., "I blew it.")
- Lack of confidence (e.g., "Why can't I...?")
- Sadness
- Bitterness
- Withdrawal
- Sleep disturbances
- Loss of spirit
- Substance abuse
- Violence
- Lack of self-confidence (e.g., "I'm a failure.")
- Lack of concentration
- Difficulty making decisions



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## Signs of Depression or Suicidal Intent

The greater the number of signs of stress a farm family member is exhibiting, the greater the need for additional help and support. If farm family members are exhibiting the following signs of depression or suicidal intent, it is important that they get help as soon as possible. Many of these are signs and symptoms of fatigue and stress. However, when there are multiple signs, they should be taken seriously. If there are significant changes in the way someone typically functions, they may need immediate help or intervention.

- Appearance: Sad face, slow movements, unkempt appearance, lack of facial expression
- Anxiety and/or depression: Severe/intense feelings, appearance of anxiety or depression (both may be present)
- Unhappy feelings: Feelings of sadness, hopelessness, worthlessness
- Withdrawal or isolation: Reclusiveness, discouragement, listlessness, rejection of friends and support
- Negative thoughts: “I’m a failure,” or “I’m no good”
- Helpless and hopeless: Sense of complete powerlessness, sense that no one cares.
- Reduced activity: Absence of planning, increased sleeping, feeling that “doing anything is just too much.”
- Substance abuse
- People problems: Lack of interest in being social (“I don’t want anyone to see me.”)
- Previous suicide attempts: Previous attempts are important signs, regardless the severity.
- Physical problems: Sleeping problems, decreased appetite, various physical ailments from aches and pains to severe muscle tension or chronic pain
- Suicidal plan: Frequent or constant thoughts of a specific suicide plan
- Guilt and low self-esteem: “It’s all my fault,” or “I should be punished.”
- Cries for help: Making a will, giving away possessions, making statements such as “I’m calling it quits” or “Maybe my family would be better off without me.”

## How to Help

- Listen. Provide opportunities for the farmer or family member to talk about what they are going through. You don’t need to have answers, but be aware of local resources so that you can refer them.
- Listen for signs that the individual needs more than a sympathetic ear—signs that person needs professional help that you can’t provide, such as financial, legal, or personal counseling.
- Access the agency or community resource most appropriate to address the person’s (or family’s) problem.
- Discuss the referral with the person or family (“It sounds/looks like you are feeling \_\_\_\_\_. I think \_\_\_\_\_ could help you deal with your situation.”)
- Explore the individual’s or family’s willingness to initiate contact with the community resource (“How do you feel about seeking help from this person/agency?” or “Can I help you contact \_\_\_\_\_ at this agency?”)



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## Selected New York Resources to Support Stressed Farm Families

### NY FarmNet

NY FarmNet provides completely free and confidential on-farm services for farmers and farm families in New York. Specializing in personal wellbeing, stress management, family communication, financial analysis, business planning, transition planning, and estate planning, FarmNet financial and personal consultants guide farm families through periods of transition, opportunity or challenge.

1-800-547-3276, [www.nyfarmnet.org](http://www.nyfarmnet.org)

### National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-8255 (TALK), [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

### Crisis Text Line

Text "START" to 741-741, [www.crisistextline.org](http://www.crisistextline.org)

### New York State County Mental Health Directory

[http://www.clmhd.org/contact\\_local\\_mental\\_hygiene\\_departments/](http://www.clmhd.org/contact_local_mental_hygiene_departments/)

*Adapted with permission from Associate Extension Professor Leslie Forstadt and Associate Extension Professor Tori Jackson, University of Maine, "The University of Maine Cooperative Extension Bulletin #4805, Recognizing Signs of Farm Family Stress."*

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