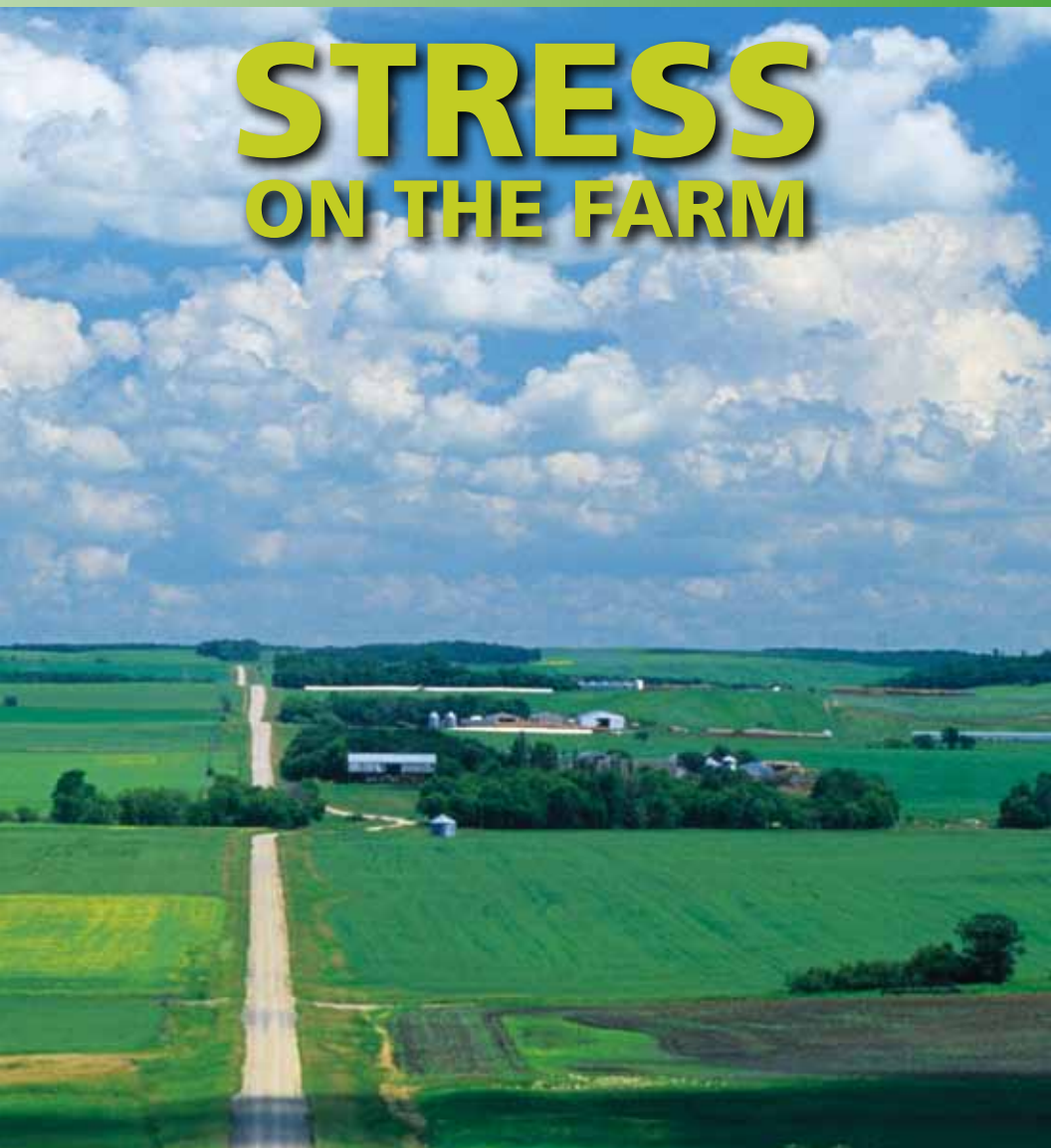


DIFFICULT TIMES:

**STRESS**  
**ON THE FARM**



*"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**



# DIFFICULT TIMES: STRESS ON THE FARM

This resource has been produced by the Agricultural Health and Safety Network after evaluation through questionnaires and focus groups of the Rural Stress Toolbook (2000) by farmers and health professionals.

## The Need

Farmers have a strong tradition of being independent. The tendency is not to openly talk about problems or ask for support until things are absolutely desperate.

## A Way

This resource is a way of enabling farm families to understand stress, its impact, and learn skills to help balance stress when farming in difficult times.



# THE SITUATION

Farmers face tremendous pressure as they work to balance farm and off-farm work and struggle to have the farm support itself.

Many factors that influence a farm's viability are out of a farmer's control. Often what we cannot control causes us to feel the most stress.

Factors affecting stress on the farm:

- The weather
- Increased input costs
- Large debt loads
- Animal disease outbreaks (BSE and Avian Influenza)
- Erratic markets
- Increased government regulation and complicated paperwork
- Long working hours
- Disagreements with other family members in the farm operation
- Uncertain crop yield and forage production
- Machinery breakdowns
- Handling dangerous goods

Stress for farmers continues as rural communities shrink, schools close and fewer services are conveniently available. As members of these communities, farmers work to fill the gaps in attempts to keep their communities functioning. Rural communities in turn are affected by the high stress farm environment.

*Take credit for moving forward  
through these difficult times.*



# STRESS

- Stress is the human response to any change that is perceived as a challenge or threat.
- Changes that cause worry, frustration and upheaval, and seem beyond our control can cause stress.
- Attitudes, perceptions, and meanings that people assign to events determine a large part of their stress levels.

## Not all stress is bad

When we are excited about an event in our lives, we feel anticipation. Anticipation helps us get mentally and physically ready for a task. This energizing stress is called **eustress**. Eustress helps us work long hours to finish a job. Eustress keeps us going during seeding and harvest.

# DISTRESS

Distress occurs when we suffer from increased amounts of stress for a long period of time. Distress can threaten our physical and mental health.

Experiencing ongoing distress for months or years leaves our bodies all geared up with no place to go. High levels of adrenalin and other stress chemicals, meant to be used for short term response to challenges, are harmful when they continue with no relief. The results can be high blood pressure, heart disease, a weakened immune system and depression.



# EFFECTS OF STRESS

Stress overload changes the way we think. We get tunnel vision and have difficulty exploring options. We grow paranoid, thinking people are criticizing or making fun of us. We have difficulty handling anger because stress reduces our tolerance and resilience.

Keep in mind stress can:

- Occur suddenly with no warning
  - hail destroys your quarter of lentils
- Build rapidly
  - one thing after another goes wrong in a day
  - the cows are out, the ATV has a flat tire, you can't find any fencing staples, your cell phone keeps ringing.....
- Snowball
  - over weeks and months
  - poor cash flow, high debt, and personal worries escalate

Consequences of "too much stress" for a farm family can widely vary from

- tension in family relationships
- poor operational decisions
- death from a farm incident

*BALANCE is the key to effectively dealing with stress. We all need to find our own BALANCE.*



# SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Stress can surface in the form of physical, emotional and behavioural changes depending on the person and situation.

Check the symptoms of STRESS you are presently experiencing.

## Physical

- Headaches
- Stomach problems (constipation or diarrhea)
- Chest pain
- Rapidly beating heart / change in blood pressure
- Grinding / clenched teeth
- Fatigue
- Drop in sexual interest

## Emotional

- Increased angry blow ups
- Frustration
- Impatience
- Difficulty controlling emotions
- Low self-esteem
- Depression
- Suicidal thoughts

## Behavioural

- Overeating / neglecting diet
- Increased smoking / alcohol drinking
- Change in sleeping habits
- Difficulty relaxing; restlessness / lack of concentration
- Withdrawn from others
- Trouble adapting to changing circumstances
- Forgetfulness
- Procrastination
- Short-tempered
- Sarcastic arguments
- Impulsive buying / gambling

*Everyone views stressful situations differently and has different coping skills. No two people respond exactly the same way to a given situation. Understanding ourselves and our reactions to stress allows us to learn how to hand stress more effectively.*



# DEALING WITH STRESS

People vary in their ability to handle stress. What may be tolerable to one person may be a challenge to another.

Farmers who are **aware** of stressors know some are out of their control, and they **accept** that. These farmers then concentrate on directing their energy towards problem solving and **cop**ing with stressors that are within their control. Farmers demonstrate control with **actions** - controlling tempers, keeping farm records, and **practicing** safe productive farming skills.

Learning to cope successfully with a particular stressor once makes it easier to cope the next time.

*Just as people differ in the way they perceive and react to stress, people differ in how well they manage stress.*





# HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH STRESS?

## Awareness

---

**Yes No** Can you name three recent situations that have caused stress in your life?

**Yes No** Can you list three symptoms (physical, emotional or behavioural) that you suffer when you are under stress?

## Acceptance

---

**Yes No** Can you maintain a positive or neutral attitude when dealing with “little things” in life?

**Yes No** Can you talk yourself out of feeling stressed?

## Coping

---

**Yes No** Do you know and use relaxation techniques like deep breathing and meditation?

**Yes No** Do you ever use exercise to get rid of stressed feelings?

## Action

---

**Yes No** Do you make a list and prioritize tasks to keep yourself from feeling overwhelmed by all there is to do?

**Yes No** When conflict arises can you express your feelings and communicate them to others effectively?

**Yes total** \_\_\_\_\_

**No total** \_\_\_\_\_

**YES Less than 7:** *Any effort made to improve your ability to recognize and deal with stress will help promote balance in your life.*

**YES 7 or more:** *You are on the right track! Share your ability to balance farm stress through difficult times with friends, family and colleagues. Be aware there can be a big difference between knowing what to do and doing it.*



# AWARENESS

## Farm Stress Inventory

Farming has ongoing situations that cause stress. Common farm stressors are finances, daily hassles, lack of control over the weather, heavy work overloads, and conflict in relationships. **Complete the following inventory to identify your stressors. 1 = low stress; 5 = high stress.**

Sudden and significant increase in debt load	1	2	3	4	5
Significant production loss due to disease or pests	1	2	3	4	5
Insufficient regular cash flow to meet financial obligations or for daily necessities	1	2	3	4	5
Delay in planting or harvesting due to weather	1	2	3	4	5
Media distortions of farm situation	1	2	3	4	5
Low commodity prices	1	2	3	4	5
Significant changes in type or size of farming operation	1	2	3	4	5
Meeting with loan officer for additional loan	1	2	3	4	5
Purchase of major machinery, facility or livestock	1	2	3	4	5
Not being considered part of the farm business by others	1	2	3	4	5
Taking an off-the-farm job to meet expenses	1	2	3	4	5
Prolonged bad weather	1	2	3	4	5
Problems with weeds or insects	1	2	3	4	5
Machinery breakdown at a critical time	1	2	3	4	5
Not enough time to spend with spouse	1	2	3	4	5



Crop loss due to weather	1	2	3	4	5
Illness during planting/harvesting	1	2	3	4	5
Deciding when to sell	1	2	3	4	5
Rising expenses	1	2	3	4	5
Government policies and regulations	1	2	3	4	5
Concerns about the continued financial viability of the farm	1	2	3	4	5
Having a loan request turned down	1	2	3	4	5
Farming-related accident	1	2	3	4	5
Government free-trade policies	1	2	3	4	5
Government “cheap food” policies	1	2	3	4	5
Metric conversion	1	2	3	4	5
Breeding or reproductive difficulties with livestock	1	2	3	4	5
No farm help or loss of help when needed	1	2	3	4	5
Need to learn/adjust to new government regulations and policies	1	2	3	4	5
Spouse doesn’t have enough time for child-rearing	1	2	3	4	5



# AWARENESS

## Farm Stress Inventory *Continued*

Complete the following inventory to identify your stressors. 1 = low stress; 5 = high stress.

Increased workload at peak times	1	2	3	4	5
Unplanned interruptions	1	2	3	4	5
Use of hazardous chemicals on the farm	1	2	3	4	5
Dealing with salespeople	1	2	3	4	5
Long work hours	1	2	3	4	5
Few vacations away from the farm	1	2	3	4	5
Feeling isolated on the farm	1	2	3	4	5
Having to travel long distances for services, shopping and health care	1	2	3	4	5
Pressure of having too much to do in too little time	1	2	3	4	5
Keeping up with new technology and products	1	2	3	4	5
Worrying about market conditions	1	2	3	4	5
Having to make decisions without all the necessary information	1	2	3	4	5
Being expected to work on the farm as well as manage the house	1	2	3	4	5
Worrying about owing money	1	2	3	4	5
Worrying about keeping the farm in the family	1	2	3	4	5
Not seeing enough people	1	2	3	4	5



Not having enough money or time for entertainment and recreation	1	2	3	4	5
Death of a parent or member of immediate family	1	2	3	4	5
Death of a friend	1	2	3	4	5
Problems balancing work and family responsibilities	1	2	3	4	5
Problems with relatives in farm operating agreement	1	2	3	4	5
Divorce or marital separation	1	2	3	4	5
Problems with a partnership	1	2	3	4	5
Daughter or son leaving home	1	2	3	4	5
Trouble with parents or in-laws	1	2	3	4	5
Conflict with spouse over spending priorities	1	2	3	4	5
Major decisions being made without my knowledge or input	1	2	3	4	5
Having to wear too many hats (ex. farmer, spouse, father, son, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
Surface-rights negotiations	1	2	3	4	5
Other recent events which have had an impact on your life:	1	2	3	4	5



# INVENTORY SCORE

## Putting Your SCORE in Perspective:

### ***If the majority of your scores are 4 or 5:***

It is important to devote immediate attention to stress management. Give yourself credit for the tough times you have survived. Long term stress depletes your internal resources. It is common to identify with these farm stresses in your operation. Remember there are people who will listen and help brainstorm ways to cope. For help, please refer to the back page of this resource book for local contacts. There is no shame in talking to someone about your concerns and remember to incorporate the five STEPS (page 19) to cope with stress on the farm.

### ***If the majority of your scores are 3:***

Focus on your stress management strengths. Continue to expand your coping skills. Set goals that allow you take control of what is controllable on your farm. The skills you are using and those you will develop can help you to deal with uncontrollable situations that arise.

### ***If the majority of your scores are 1 and 2:***

You have stress coping skills. Share your skills with others. Farming will continue to challenge you, so continue to communicate, prioritize daily tasks and support your family, friends, workers and community in difficult times.

*Keep in mind that the average farmer is experiencing more stress than observed in other occupations, so even an "average" level of farm stress may be too much!*



# AWARENESS

## What I Can Control...

*Stress cannot be cured but it can be handled.  
A farmer cannot control outside forces that  
affect the farm and family but a farmer can control  
how they handle the stress.*

## Events

- **Plan ahead.** Don't procrastinate. *Replace worn machinery parts and complete maintenance during down times rather than when the equipment is needed in the field.*
- **Use your time efficiently.** Set priorities and work at tasks accordingly. *Remember there are only so many things that you can do in a day.*
- **Prior to stressful seasons** - *calving, seeding, harvest*—delegate and plan who will take care of the everyday chores.
- **Learn to say NO to extra commitments.** *There is only one you. Take care of yourself so you can fulfill present commitments.*

## Attitudes

- Concentrate on thinking and using your positive energy to solve a problem instead of worrying yourself sick about it.
- Give yourself and others credit for what has been accomplished instead of focussing on what hasn't been done.
- Set realistic goals. *"My goal this next year is to fence that back quarter south of the house."* Having a major long term goal makes it easier to keep things in perspective. Setting daily priorities becomes more straightforward too.
- Make a plan for your day. When you cannot get everything you want completed in a day, tackle what will give you the biggest return.
- Look at the big picture and count the good things that happen. *"It's a good thing that I noticed that bearing was gone on the combine while still in the yard. Fixing it in the field would have been really difficult."*
- Leave a little time to deal with the unexpected.



# AWARENESS

Put the stressors that you identified in the Farm Stress Inventory starting on page 8 or any personally identified stressors in the appropriate boxes below.

## **Important/Controllable Stressors**

*Ex. getting your taxes filed*

## **Unimportant/Controllable Stressors**

*Ex. Who is going to do chores when I am gone next Tuesday?*

*"Grant me the strength to change the things I can  
I cannot change and the wisdom to know the difference"*





# AWARENESS

Put the stressors that you identified in the Farm Stress Inventory starting on page 8 or any personally identified stressors in the appropriate boxes below.

## **Important/Uncontrollable Stressors**

*Ex. the weather*

## **Unimportant/Uncontrollable Stressors**

*Ex. the neighbours' crooked new fence line*

*an change, the courage to accept those things  
om to know the difference."*



# ACCEPTANCE SKILLS

Acceptance skills can change your attitude toward controllable and uncontrollable stressors.

- ▶ **Keep things in perspective.** Ask yourself:
  - Has this happened before?
  - What did I learn last time this happened?
  - What's the worst possible outcome?
  - Are my fears realistic?
  - What else can I do?
  - What do I tell a friend in this situation?
  - A year from now, how important will this be?
- ▶ **Use positive self-talk** – let go of the blame and guilt:
  - I did the best that I could at the time.
  - I will succeed.
  - There is no place to go but up.
  - Someday we'll laugh about this.
  - This is a learning experience.
  - Calm down.
  - Things take time.
- ▶ **Keep a positive attitude.**
  - With a positive attitude it is easier to live and work with others and find solutions.

*Someone to talk to is a phone call away. Look on the inside back cover to see who is there to help in your area.*



# ACCEPTANCE SKILLS

- ▶ **Develop a stress-resistant personality.**
  - Set realistic goals and expectations.
  - Build time for leisure activities.
  - Get some exercise.
  - Put problems in perspective and look at them as challenges.
  - Look for possibilities and get creative.
  - Connect with a positive social network that is supportive.
  - Share responsibilities and ask for help.
- ▶ **Talk to someone you trust to help you clear your head and focus on eliminating or reducing stress and anxiety.**
  - Family, friends or a clergy member.
  - Consider seeking out a professional counsellor or confidential phone line program to help if you feel completely alone, overwhelmed or hopeless.
  - There is no shame in asking for help to sort the wheat from the chaff in your life.

*"I felt like I was trapped and couldn't get out. Half of me didn't want to open up to anyone. I think I was afraid people would judge me and think I wasn't able to solve my problems. The other half of me desperately needed someone to talk to, to listen, and to help me brainstorm some ways to cope. When I finally opened up, I felt like a weight had been taken off my shoulders."*



# COPING SKILLS

Coping skills are ways in which an individual or their family uses personal, financial and community resources to help to handle the strain of stress.

A positive attitude, willingness to explore resources, accepting and offering help, and being flexible in stressful situations are helpful ways to cope so one does not feel isolated and frustrated.

## Exercise

- Curling
- Playing old time hockey
- Bowling
- Dancing
- Riding a bike

## Hobbies

- Doing a crossword puzzle
- Playing a musical instrument
- Trying something you always wanted to do
- Reading a book
- Woodworking projects
- Restoring an old car

## Diversions

- Playing cards with friends
- Fishing
- Checking a local attraction
- Having a wiener roast
- Taking a mini holiday
- Phoning the funniest person you know

## Relaxation

- Getting a massage
- Taking a nap
- Enjoying a bath
- Listening to music
- Taking a walk
- Stretching

## Physical fitness fights stress in two ways:

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



# COPING SKILLS

## Relaxation

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.

### To get a good sleep:

- Get some exercise throughout the day but avoid too much exercise before bedtime.
- Avoid nicotine, caffeine and alcohol for they really do not help at all.
- Eat the big meal of your day earlier in the day and have a lighter supper that is higher in carbohydrates and lower in protein.
- Have a bath an hour or so before bed and relax.
- Make sure the place where you are sleeping is dark and the darker the better.
- Sleep with the window slightly open.

## 5 STEPS to keep stress in check

- **S**top to take breaks, relax at least 20 minutes a day.
- **T**alk about your stress with others.
- **E**at three meals a day, while comfortable and seated.
- **P**repare for stressful events.
- **S**trengthen your relationships with others – **HAVE SOME FUN!**

*Avoid the chemical haze. Booze, tranquilizers, cigarettes and caffeine do not help deal with stress.*

*Give your body an exquisite treat.  
Take a 20 minute nap.*



# ACTION SKILLS

Farmers, ranchers and their families can use action skills to increase their effectiveness when dealing with important and unimportant controllable stressors. Everyone can choose to do something to make things a little better.

## ► Communicate

- Talk about the tough realities as the start of a cooperative stress-busting effort.
- Communication takes time and includes talking and listening.
- Realize men and women indicate their concerns in a different manner. Women discuss their feelings more often than men. Men tend to concentrate on discussing information and facts.
- Use *I* statements rather than blaming statements which lead to calmer, more productive discussions.
- Understand that the quality of one's statements can be affected by energy level, past discussions and personality.

## ► Prioritize

- Make a list of everything you want to do today. Be realistic.
- Prioritize tasks and do the important ones when your energy is high and resources are available.
- Break down tasks into bite-sized chunks.
- Combine similar trips and tasks.
- Delegate as much as possible. Can the spouse, kids or partner take over some tasks? Can you barter skills with a neighbour?
- Reduce paperwork by organizing your paper and creating a filing system that works for you.
- Avoid time-wasters. When you're interrupted, let them know you can't spend time now, and arrange to call or visit them soon.
- Admit when you have too many priorities.
- Ask for help.



# ACTION SKILLS

## ► Support your family, business partners and community.

- Plan ahead.
- Learn to negotiate and address the problem. Create interaction rules and develop agreed-upon methods for handling problems. It is OK to have a difference of opinion but take the time to find a compromise.
- Show confidence in your family's, business partner's and community's skills and decisions.
- Provide encouragement and concern for your family, business partners and community. Ask what can be done to help the situation. A simple solution may be the answer.
- Have realistic expectations of your family, business partners and community.
- Spend time together to relax, laugh and celebrate. Family strength is important in preventing overwhelming stress and is extremely important in coping with overwhelming stress.

## Laugh. It makes you feel good!

Laughter is critical to relaxation and wellbeing. It's FREE, low calorie, and available without a prescription.

When you laugh...

- 17 muscles in your face relax
- blood circulation is improved
- respiration is increased
- muscles in your abdomen are massaged
- the brain's natural pain killers are stimulated through the release of endorphins



# ACTION SKILLS

## Set “SMART” goals

It’s important to get a picture of what you, ideally, would like to have happen in your life and on your farm in the short and long term. SMART goals can help to achieve personal satisfaction and productivity.

**Specific:** Set a concrete goal that addresses behaviour and results. *“For the next month, when I feel stressed I will tell my spouse about the problem, using I statements rather than blaming statements so the discussion is calmer and more productive.”*

**Measurable:** State your goal in a way that you can easily measure progress. *“My goal is to take twenty minutes at the end of each day and relax.”*

**Agreed upon:** Don’t do it alone; ask others to help and support you. *“Everyone on this farm has agreed to not interrupt my twenty minutes relaxation time.”*

**Rewarding:** Behaviour change should be as much fun as possible. Reward yourself for achieving a goal as well as passing milestones. *“If I go for a mile walk every day to get some exercise, at the end of the month I will take Sunday afternoon to go fishing.”*

**Trackable:** Keep track of your progress in a visible way so you do not get discouraged. *“I will keep a notepad in my pocket and a calendar in the house with a list of things to do each day. I can then strike jobs off when they are completed.”*





# ACTION SKILLS

## How to use the goal setting template:

In order to achieve long term goals you need to set three short term goals. Develop actions that will enable you to succeed in reaching the short term goals. Outline a time frame for each goal. This template can be useful in setting goals on your farm.

		<b>Short term goal 1</b>	<b>Actions to reach goals</b>
<b>Long term goal</b> Time frame: _____	→	Time frame: _____	_____
			_____
			_____
	→	<b>Short term goal 2</b>	
		Time frame: _____	_____
			_____
			_____
	→	<b>Short term goal 3</b>	
		Time frame: _____	_____
			_____

*Farm families with positive coping skills are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, are involved in decision making, and are willing to give and use support.*



# Now that you are AWARE

You are aware of your stressors and have identified what you can and cannot control. Direct your energy towards problem solving and coping with stressors that are within your control. Incorporate actions, goal setting, coping skills and where to get help in the following table to organize your thoughts. Use this recipe to assist you as you farm in difficult times.

**What is on my mind?**

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**What does it affect?**

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**What can I do?**

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**Who can help?**

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## **Manitoba Farm & Rural Support Services**

Telephone and on-line counselling  
Phone: 1-866-367-3276  
Web: [www.ruralsupport.ca](http://www.ruralsupport.ca)  
Monday to Friday 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.  
Free, confidential information, support, counselling and referrals for farmers and all rural Manitobans.



## WHO CAN HELP — Toll Free Numbers

Domestic Violence Crisis Line	1-877-977-0007
Farm Debt Mediation Service (federal)	1-866-452-5556
Gambling Help Line	1-800-463-1554
Health Links	1-888-315-9257
Kid's Help Phone Line	1-800-668-6868
Klinic 24 Hour Crisis Line	1-888-322-3019
Law referral Phone-In	1-800-262-8800
Manitoba Farm Debt Mediation Board (provincial)	1-800-282-8069
Manitoba Farm & Rural Support Services	1-866-367-3276
Manitoba Suicide Line	1-877-435-7170
Mobile Crisis Unit 24 Hour Helpline	1-888-379-7699
Sexual Assault 24 Hour Crisis Line	1-888-292-7565





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