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*The National  
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## Coping with Stress

In many ways Jean Greener is a typical farm wife. She raised the children, runs the household, assists with farm finances, keeps the family connected to the community, and helps out with seasonal farm chores. Jean and Don have raised seven children who are now between the ages of 20 and 31. Four of their children were adopted and have special needs.

The Greeners have operated a 40-head dairy farm with 2000 acres of pasture and cropland near Brush, Colorado for almost 30 years. Don continues to raise all of his own replacements and purchases additional heifers that he sells as springers, a term used to identify a heifer close to term with her first calf.

Don operates the farm alone but employs one or two part-time hired hands during the busy seasons.

Life changed for all the Greeners in 1990 when Don and Nikki were injured in a car accident. Nikki, 7 ½ at the time, was unconscious for almost three months. She sustained a severe traumatic brain injury and became legally blind. Don was unconscious and was hospitalized for nearly a week. He also sustained a brain injury, but less severe than Nikki's. One of the side effects of the brain injury for Don has been short-term memory loss.

Since the accident, Jean has carried on with her normal day-to-day activities but added to them have been additional emotional and hands-on support for her husband Don in operating the farm. Nikki's severe disabilities required Jean to provide more intense caregiving. In addition, Jean began home schooling Nikki part of each week. In 2001, Jean became overwhelmed by the many demands of her life. Not only did she worry about how her husband was going to handle all the farm work and keep a roof over their heads but she was also trying to deal with coordinating educational and medical services for Nikki. Combining these worries with running the household and helping with the farm, Jean was feeling the cumulative effects of stress.

*"She [Carla] was able to help me look at the big picture. She provided me insights and help on working with all the providers and agencies."*

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## Mental Health

Over 44 million people (one in five) in any given year suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder. Depressive disorders alone affect 9.5% of the U.S. population and 4 out of 10 causes of disability are mental health disorders; specifically major depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder<sup>1</sup>. While mental health disorders occur at the same rate in urban and rural areas, suicides are higher in rural communities<sup>2</sup>.

In a survey of state and local rural health leaders, mental health was the fourth most often selected topic as a high rural health priority. Yet, access to mental health care is limited due to shortages in staff and in an inadequate mental health service infrastructure. Traveling great distances to get services, the perceived stigma, and under-diagnosis by primary care physicians only confound the development of needed services<sup>3</sup>.

### **What is Mental Health?**

*Mental health* is a relative state of mind in which a person who is healthy is able to cope with and adjust, in an acceptable way, to the recurrent stresses of everyday living.

*Mental health problems* are signs and symptoms affecting thinking, mood, or behavior but are not as intense or lasting in duration so as to meet the criteria for diagnosis as a mental disorder. Almost everyone, at some point, has experienced mental health problems in which the distress one feels affects their functioning ability.

*Mental health disorders or illness* are health conditions that are characterized by alterations in thinking, mood, or behavior (or some combination thereof) associated with distress and/or impaired functioning. Usually these conditions have persisted for a significant period of time.

### **Causes of Mental Health Disorders**

Precise causes of most mental health disorders are unknown. The interplay between biological (e.g., genes, infections, physical trauma, nutrition, hormones, and toxins), psychological (e.g., stressful life events, affect, personality, and gender), and socio-cultural factors (e.g., parents; socioeconomic status; racial, cultural, and religious background; and interpersonal relationships) may contribute to the development of a disorder.

### **Agriculture and Stress**

Today's farmers and ranchers face numerous situations that could lead to stress. Left unchecked, these stress factors have the potential to develop into serious and persistent physical and/or mental health problems, even suicide.

#### **Top 10 farm-related stressors<sup>4</sup>**

- Death of family member
- Foreclosure
- Mounting bills, cash flow, middleman profits
- Divorce or marital separation
- Major illness or accident, insufficient insurance
- Care of elderly or other special-needs family member
- Off-farm job and on-farm responsibilities
- Bad weather and natural disaster
- Low commodity prices and shifts in world supply and demand
- Lower than expected crop yields or livestock production
- Closing or relocation of key rural businesses

Focus

Mental Health

Roger Williams, a University of Wisconsin-Extension professor of professional development and applied studies, says symptoms of farm stress might include the following:

- **Change in routines.** The farmer or farm family stops attending church; drops out of 4-H, home-makers, 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 incidents.** The risk of farm incidents increases due to fatigue or loss of ability to concentrate. Children may be at risk if there is not 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.

**Stress Management**

Learning how to manage stress may relieve some of the symptoms a farmer, rancher, or other family member is experiencing. To manage stress, you must first recognize that you are experiencing it. Professor Williams offers a checklist below to help evaluate whether stress is present. The more stress indicators you check, the greater the likelihood that stress may be affecting your functioning ability.

<p><b>Physical</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Headaches</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Backaches</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ulcers</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Eating Irregularities</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sleep Disturbances</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Frequent Sickness</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Exhaustion</li> </ul>	<p><b>Emotional</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sadness</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Depression</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Bitterness</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Anger</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Loss of Spirit</li> </ul>	<p><b>Behavioral</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Loss of Humor</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Irritability</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Backbiting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Acting Out</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawal</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Passive-Aggressiveness</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Alcoholism</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Violence</li> </ul>
<p><b>Cognitive</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Memory Loss</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lack of Concentration</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Inability to Make Decisions</li> </ul>		<p><b>Self-Esteem</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> "I'm a failure."</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> "I blew it."</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> "Why can't I...?"</li> </ul>

Once you recognize symptoms of stress, try to determine the probable causes. Is it something that you may have control over; for example, lack of help with care giving or farm financial counseling? Or is it something that you have to accept and move beyond; such as, low commodity prices or bad weather? Focus your attention on those aspects or situations you can manage. Try to be realistic about yourself and your agricultural operation. You may not have the answers to everything and may need to ask for help.

Planning ahead is an excellent way to alleviate stress or potential stress. Stress heightens during periods of heavy workloads, such as, planting and harvesting seasons.

- Prepare your farm machinery before your busiest seasons so that it runs more efficiently and safely.
- Exercise during the off-season so that your body can handle the strenuous, longer workdays.
- Plan your nutrition and fluid intake so that you avoid the coffee/soda pop/candy bar habit. Drink 64 ounces of water each day.
- Learn as much as you can about your industry. You are never too old to learn and will have equipped yourself with better information for planning and decision-making.
- Do not ignore your paperwork. This will keep you in control and reduce confusion and frustration.
- Other ideas to help reduce stress include; get enough sleep, take a brisk walk early in the day, laugh (usually best when shared with others), schedule family talk times so that you can prioritize and coordinate family commitments with work schedules.
- Avoid increased alcohol, drug, and tobacco use. These short-term solutions rarely live up to your expectations.

**Medical Treatment**

Sometimes stress management isn't quite enough. Medical treatment may be necessary. What kind of treatment depends on the type and severity of the mental health problem or disorder. Most treatments

fall under two general categories; psychosocial and pharmacological. The combination of the two can sometimes be even more effective than each individually.

Psychosocial therapy is accomplished through verbal communication with a professional counselor or therapist. The goal of the therapy, generally, is self-understanding, change in actions/behavior, and/or development of healthier problem-solving skills. Counselors and therapist can be in medical clinics, mental health centers, or in private practice.

Pharmacological therapies use prescription medications to control the symptoms of the mental problem or disorder. The types of medications used can be divided into four large categories; anti-psychotic, anti-manic, anti-depressant, and anti-anxiety medications<sup>5</sup>. Your doctor or psychiatrist would prescribe the appropriate medication for your particular problem or disorder.

***Innovative Mental Health Outreach Programs for Farmers and Ranchers***

*Sowing Seeds of Hope:* The “Sowing the Seeds of Hope” project is a seven-state, federally funded effort to help farm families respond to stress in appropriate ways. The following states have projects: Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. The services offered may include outreach; community education; training of health care providers; direct services to farmers/ranchers through counseling vouchers, hotlines, retreats, and support groups; and advocacy with community and governmental entities. For more information, visit [www.agriwellness.org](http://www.agriwellness.org).

*Farm Resource Center:* Illinois, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania started a nonprofit farm resource centers to provide farmers with links to mental health services. Using a grassroots’ approach, outreach workers provide farmers with stress management strategies, connect them with community resources, and manage a hotline service. For more information, visit [www.frci.org](http://www.frci.org). ❖

***Crisis and Emotional Support Helplines***

The following resources are comprised of crisis lines for the general public as well as specific resources for farmers.

National Hopeline Network: 800-784-2433.

Individual state helplines by city or county: <http://suicidehotlines.com>

***Selected Farmer Resource Helplines***

Illinois - Mental Health Outreach: 800-851-4719 & 800-468-1834

Indiana: 800-545-2296

Iowa Concerns Hotline: 800-447-1985, 515-965-9301 (out-of-state); Iowa Healthy Families: 800-369-2229

Kansas: 800-321-3276

Louisiana: 225-388-4141

Maryland Farm Sense Mediation Program: 800-492-5597, 410-841-5770 (out-of-state)

Minnesota Farm Advocate Program: 800-967-2474 (in-state), 651-296-1484 (out-of-state); Minnesota Rural Crisis: 800-555-6566 or 800-363-3659

Missouri: 800-363-3659; 573-681-5549 (mediation); 573-449-1336 (Rural Crisis Center)

Nebraska: 800-464-0258 (in-state), 402-864-5578 (out-of-state); Farm Mediation Service: 1-800-446-4071

New York: 800-547-3276

Oklahoma: 800-248-5465 (mediation)

Pennsylvania: 800-851-4719

South Dakota: 800-691-4336, 800-228-5254 (in-state), 605-773-5436 (out-of-state)

Tennessee: 800-345-0561

West Virginia: 800-851-4719

Wisconsin: 800-942-2474

***Online References and Resources:***

1. National Institute of Mental Health: The Numbers Count: [www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/numbers.cfm](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/numbers.cfm)
2. National Association of Rural Mental Health; Notes and Data on Rural Suicide: <http://narmh.org/pages/resframe.html>
3. "Mental Health and Mental Health Disorders- A Rural Challenge": [www.srph.tamushsc.edu/rhp2010/litreview/08Volume1mentalhealth.htm](http://www.srph.tamushsc.edu/rhp2010/litreview/08Volume1mentalhealth.htm)
4. "Managing Farm Stress during Crisis Times" Small Farm Digest: [www.reeusda.gov/smallfarm/sfd/fall00.html](http://www.reeusda.gov/smallfarm/sfd/fall00.html)
5. National Institute of Mental Health: Medications: [www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/medicate.cfm](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/medicate.cfm)

***Additional Online Resources:***

Farm Alarm: Coping with Stress: <http://safety.coafes.umn.edu/farmalarm/farmalarm.pdf>

Issues in Agriculture: Extension Responds; Stress and Safety: [www.uwex.edu/ces/ag/issues/stress-safety/index.html](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/ag/issues/stress-safety/index.html)

Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General: [www.mentalhealth.org/features/surgeongeneralreport/home.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.org/features/surgeongeneralreport/home.asp)

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill: [www.nami.org/](http://www.nami.org/)

## The Colorado AgrAbility Project

Technology is only part of the solution when considering how to meet the needs and goals of a farmer or rancher with disabilities. This is a fundamental philosophy of the Colorado AgrAbility Project. The project achieves a holistic approach to services through sharing interdisciplinary know-how from the disciplines of family counseling, psychology, occupational therapy, and technology.

“You may be able to hand a person your idea of what the perfect tool or technology solution may be, but unless that person is motivated and psychologically prepared for it, it will wind up in a shed gathering dust,” states Carla Wilhite, former Project Coordinator. When conducting an on-the-farm visit, the staff seeks information about the participant’s physical abilities, stresses and concerns, general adaptability, and determines what barriers exist to accessing equipment, buildings, tools, and tasks.

“Depending on what we find out, we will work with the participant in getting mentally prepared for using technology, as well as how to use the technology,” says Michelle Zorack, Case Manager. Sometimes an individual may feel using an adaptive piece of equipment is a negative event or admitting defeat. In this case, it is the staff’s job to help the individual work through the feelings and perceptions they have about adaptive devices. If dealt with in advance, acceptance of technology now and in the future is more likely to be positive.

As an engineer and technologist, Jason Beck keeps the psychosocial in mind as he selects potential assistive and adaptive technologies. “The more that is known about the person, their preferences, and how they like to do the job, the better job I can do in assisting with a solution.” He always seeks the most natural, simple, and direct solution possible. Jason works with the individual to determine whether rearranging the environment will allow the task performance to happen, or whether a practical device or a high tech device will be needed.

Almost all farmers and ranchers must deal with the stressors of unpredictable weather, declining farm commodity prices, and increasing costs. Studies

suggest that people with disabilities are more vulnerable to stress and depression. Increasing the resiliency of AgrAbility participant’s is not overlooked. Bob Fetsch, the Project Director, conducts eight workshops a year that cover AgrAbility services and provides information and resources to farming and ranching families affected by disability issues on coping, stress, recognizing depression, and how to obtain assistance. Dr. Fetsch’s research indicates that families who hold regular family meetings can often reduce anger and conflict and promote a safe and harmonious household. This is just as important for families who are affected by disability issues, such as, giving care, re-assigning tasks and chores, getting to town for therapy or medicines, having inadequate time to get things done, and especially, changing roles within the family unit.

A farmer or rancher who acquires a disability may feel that his/her role as head of the family is jeopardized or lost. They may feel “worthless” or “no good to anybody.” These feelings may be displaced on others through anger or resentment. Dealing with disability and its effects on relationships can be done in healthier ways. Learning good family communication skills is one way. Being empathetic and understanding, suspending judgment, and striving to look at the situation through the other’s eyes is a good beginning.

Managing depression is tough, but it can have a significant impact on the success of a farmer or rancher with a disability if left unacknowledged and untreated. Recognizing the symptoms of depression is important (all or only a few may be present): sadness, hopelessness, negative thoughts, reduced activity, poor concentration, guilt, physical problems, or suicidal thoughts. According to Donna Schulte, AgrAbility program manager, “An AgrAbility participant who is depressed may have a harder time dealing with change, experience greater frustration when dealing with agencies, or simply give up on the process.” Colorado AgrAbility staff encourages the individual with depression to seek help through their physician or nearby mental health center.

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*July 2003*

State Project Feature

Colorado AgrAbility Project

Peer volunteers can become an important resource in addressing the USDA goal of providing peer support. Dr. Fetsch, along with other state AgrAbility Project staffs, are working to develop a module that can be used to train peer volunteers in working with an individual with a newly acquired disability or chronic health condition. Peer support goes beyond the ingenuity network model of sharing information and practical know-how. The Colorado AgrAbility Project views peer support as requiring more in-depth training and preparation for the peer volunteer. The Colorado AgrAbility Project will begin piloting the new training this year.

Colorado AgrAbility believes holistic assessment is the only way to go, realizing it will lead to better insight in to each individual’s needs and abilities. It allows the staff to customize recommendations and information for each participant, and possibly eliminate the “invisible” barriers caused by disability and health challenges.

Colorado AgrAbility staff covers over 103,000 sq. miles of territory. The state is roughly divided into equal thirds of eastern plains, central Rocky Mountains, and western high desert. The agricultural production of the state is diverse: cattle, sheep, grains, orchard, wine grapes, potatoes, beans, cantaloupe, organics, dairy, and producers large and small. Irrigation is essential in most locations to grow agricultural products. Out of 63 counties, 23 counties are considered frontier, and 29 are rural (52 total). This vast western geography is a challenge to cover, but the Colorado AgrAbility staff is always willing to go where they are needed. ❖

## The Staff at the Colorado AgrAbility Project



*front row: Michelle Zorack & Carla Wilhite  
back row: Donna Schulte, Robert Fetsch,  
& Jason Beck*

**Robert Fetsch, Ph.D.**, is a Colorado State University Cooperative Extension Family Life Specialist. Dr. Fetsch is a teacher, researcher, and scholar and has written extensively on dealing with stress, anger, and depression in rural and agricultural communities and families. Dr. Fetsch is the Principal Investigator and Project Director of the Colorado AgrAbility Project.

**Donna Schulte**, is the head of Easter Seals Colorado-Employment Services Program and is the Project Manager for the Colorado AgrAbility Project. Schulte has over 20 years of experience working in the disability field.

**Carla Wilhite, B.Sc, OTR**, is the Project Coordinator for the Colorado AgrAbility Project. Wilhite is a registered occupational therapist with several years of experience in physical rehabilitation

and home health care in rural communities. (Note: Wilhite moved to Oklahoma in June and is now with the Oklahoma AgrAbility Project.)

**Michelle Zorack, B.Sc., COTA**, is the Case Manager for the Colorado AgrAbility Project. Zorack brings a strong background in psychology and is a certified occupational therapy assistant.

**Jason Beck, B.Sc. Mech. E.**, serves as the Colorado AgrAbility Project Technologist. He provides technical assistance and information on assistive technology, modifications, and adaptations to the work-site to improve human task performance.

## Client Story

Suspecting that Jean was overwhelmed, the Morgan county extension agent suggested that Jean contact Carla Wilhite, former project coordinator with the Colorado AgrAbility Project at Easter Seals Colorado. This was the Greeners' first contact with AgrAbility but not their first contact with Easter Seals. Shortly after the car accident, the Greeners had worked with Easter Seals Colorado staff, who helped the family obtain a computer for Nikki to use in school.

Jean told Carla that, "Don's first priority is to keep the farm going and to keep a roof over our heads. I am dealing with everything else." Jean felt she had to support Don in whatever ways she could but she was confused and consumed by the details and changes in rules and regulations affecting her daughter's education. The AgrAbility staff helped support Jean in her role as caregiver for Nikki. "She [Carla] was able to help me look at the big picture. She provided me insights and help on working with all of the providers and agencies [working with my daughter]," Jean reports. "Carla offered the kind of expertise I didn't have. She understands the issues related to having a child with a disability and living on a farm. I trust Carla's opinions."

The AgrAbility staff also suggested to Jean that she may benefit from counseling services. They connected her to the Centennial Mental Health Center. Centennial Mental Health is a nonprofit organization funded by the state of Colorado, private insurance, Medicaid, and client fees. For the past year and a half, both Jean and Nikki have been meeting with the Centennial counselors. Jean says that these services have been extremely helpful for them. The counselors helped her put her concerns into perspective, develop techniques to remain calm, and manage her reactions to stressful situations. Due to state budget constraints, however, the funding for these services is in jeopardy. Lack of access to and availability of rural mental health services across the country have been issues that rural communities continue to battle. Jean has learned stress management strategies that she hopes will continue to serve her well.

Jean's positive outlook, nice sense of humor, and willingness to seek help when she recognized her need, are positive factors that help her manage her stress. Jean wholeheartedly recommends that other farmwomen not hesitate to seek and accept help when they are feeling overwhelmed by life's many stressors. She urges them to contact their state AgrAbility Project or other local resources for assistance if they find themselves in a situation similar to hers. ❖

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The **AgrAbility Project** promotes success in agriculture for individuals with disabilities and their families through on-site assistance and educational resources. For additional information on the **National AgrAbility Project** or for a current list of state project sites, addresses and telephone numbers contact:

**University of Wisconsin - Cooperative Extension**  
**460 Henry Mall**  
**Madison, WI 53706**  
**866-259-6280 or 608-262-5166**

**Easter Seals, Inc.**  
**700 Thirteenth St., NW, Suite 200**  
**Washington, DC 20005**  
**800-914-4424 or 202-347-3066**

<http://www.agrabilityproject.org>

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