



# FAMILY

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## Managing Stress During Tough Times no.10.255

by R.J. Fetsch<sup>1 (4/07)</sup>

### Quick Facts...

Resilient people reinterpret negative meanings into positive ones.

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.

In tough times resilient people do not give up. They face their stress directly, learn from the past, and reach out for and use resources. They also reinterpret negative meanings into positive ones. Especially in rural areas, many individuals and families are strong, independent, self-sufficient, and resilient.

Learning how to manage stress and increase resilience is important, especially during tough times such as drought. If the history of the mid-80s repeats itself, we can expect financial stress to lead to increased psychological distress.<sup>2</sup> Loss, or threat of loss, of the family farm or ranch will often produce multiple stress-related symptoms or depression.<sup>3</sup> Farmers and rural residents will often have an increased risk for substance abuse problems, farm accidents, injury, or even suicide.<sup>4,5</sup>

### 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.<sup>6</sup>

Farmers, ranchers, and rural families were also experiencing signs of high stress. Colorado's overall suicide rate was the 7th highest in the nation at 16.0/100,000, which was 48 percent higher than the national average of 10.8/100,000.<sup>7</sup> The leading external cause of death on Colorado ranches and farms was suicide.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> We can also expect some rural communities to experience social disintegration and some to completely collapse.<sup>10</sup> In addition, there is the potential for violence against others<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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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 will experience increased intergenerational conflict.<sup>15</sup> There may be increases in depression, divorce, and domestic violence.<sup>16</sup> Farm and ranch children may have an increased risk for mental disorders and antisocial behavior.<sup>17</sup> Some rural youth may rise to the occasion with more responsible behavior as they try to help their families.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> As more people reach out for support, there will be more self-help groups, support groups, and hot lines.<sup>21</sup> More people will use mediation services, which will improve their mental health.<sup>22</sup>

#### **Signs of suicidal thinking:**

**Anxiety or depression:** Severe, 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.

**Cries for help:** 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?<sup>23</sup>

#### **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.
- 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.<sup>24</sup>
- 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.<sup>25</sup>

Use the space below to answer the questions on the right.

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## 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.

### 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.)

Answers, cont.

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**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.)

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<sup>7</sup>2002 Census of Agriculture-Census, State-County Data. Table 1. County Summary Highlights: 2002. Retrieved April 10, 2007, from [www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/pdf/mortality/nvsr54\\_13\\_129.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/pdf/mortality/nvsr54_13_129.pdf).

<sup>8</sup>T. Daniels, personal e-mail communication, August 22, 2000. 7 of 28 rural deaths in Colorado were reported as suicides in 1999.

<sup>9</sup>In 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.

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