

Sowing Seeds of Support:

Positive Mental Health Guidance
for the Farming Community



Introduction

Farmers face unique stressors. This leaflet aims to raise awareness about mental health issues in farming. It explores a number of practical coping strategies to manage stress reduction, places an emphasis on the importance of self-care, community connections and seeking professional help when needed.

Farming can be challenging due to issues such as drought, fodder shortage and associated financial issues. There are many issues in farming that can cause stress and associated ill health and injury. Research shows a high satisfaction and quality of life associated with countryside living. Individual circumstances can arise however which lead to stress.

The *'Total Health Model'* indicates that, safety, health and mental health are inter-related and these components need to be promoted holistically.

Managing your health and safety needs to be considered as a core part of farming. This means both identifying and implementing key actions to maintain both safety and health.



What is stress?



Stress is your body and minds way of responding to any kind of demand that makes you feel threatened. When working properly, stress helps you to stay focused, energetic, and alert. But beyond a certain point, it can stop being helpful and start causing damage to your health, your mood, your productivity, your relationships and your quality of life.

Anyone can suffer from stress. Every person has a different reaction to stress, Some of the more common warning signs outlined in Table 1 indicate when it's time to manage stress and consider getting help.

Table 1: SIGNS OF STRESS

Physical Signs	Mental Signs	Behavioural Signs
High blood pressure	Negative attitude	Loss of interest and enjoyment
Muscle tension	Reduced concentration	Withdrawal from friends & family
Disturbed sleep pattern	Forgetfulness and confusion	Irritability and mood swings
Weight change	Difficulty in decisions	Increased drinking, smoking, or drug use
Reduced energy	Feeling uncertain or overwhelmed	Loss of sense of humour

Source: IFA leaflet – ‘Let’s Talk – Dealing with Stress’

Stress in Farming

Research as part of Farmers Have Hearts:

Cardiovascular Health Programme Van Doorn, (2023) found that of the farmers (868) that took part in the study 13.5% reported stress based on a validated scale. Intervention activities (GP visit, phone consultation, text message, follow-up health check after one year helped reduce reported stress levels to 8%. Thus, it can be seen that being proactive about health can strongly influence stress levels.

A further study of Irish farmers, conducted by Dublin City University, found that almost one in four farmers (24%) reported burnout and half (50%) had sleep issues. Being tired or 'below par' can lead to poor decision-making and work becoming a grind.

Across all sectors, good farm management and positive working and personal relationships can be helpful in preventing stress.



MANAGING STRESS

A key approach to managing stress is recognising the signs and responding to them. Each person must realise or 'become aware' of the issues leading to stress and then adopt positive strategies to minimise the stressor.

Changes to manage stress in a farming context can include such changes as modifying the farming system, to cut work time, or having a health check completed.

Recommended Coping Strategies

Resilience is not just about an ability to bounce back; it is also about moving forward. We can all take steps to achieve it and thereby improve our quality of life, our physical and mental health.

The following are some helpful guidelines:



TALK ABOUT IT

Reach out to a trusted friend, family member, or neighbour. Expressing what you're going through can be helpful and reassuring.

TIME MANAGEMENT

Plan ahead and avoid overextending yourself to reduce stress. Prioritise tasks and set realistic goals.



HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

Ensure having a daily balanced diet and off-farm exercise. Physical health is closely linked to mental health and wellbeing.

LIMIT SUBSTANCE USE

Avoid using unhealthy ways of coping with stress such as reliance on alcohol, smoking, or drugs as a way to cope with stress.



LEISURE

Make time for relaxation and activities that you enjoy. This can include hobbies, reading, or volunteering

ASK FOR PROFESSIONAL HELP

When stress becomes overwhelming, make an appointment to see your Family Doctor or a mental health professional such as a Counsellor. Consider attending local support groups or online communities for farmers. Sharing experiences can provide comfort and sound advice. (see back page 'Support').



POSITIVE STRATEGIES TO MINIMISE STRESS

Social involvement is crucial.

- Share your thoughts with trusted family members, neighbours and friends.
- Discuss farming problems with your Agricultural Advisor.
- Join social groups like Farm Discussion groups, GAA community groups which has a valuable social dimension.
- Farming and sporting organisations perform valuable social networks in rural Ireland.



HEALTH RELATED GOALS

- Have a regular health check-up with your family doctor. Forming this habit is crucial in the long-term.
- Exercise regularly; being physically active is a key approach to stress management. Farm work activity, however, may lead to 'strength' but not to 'aerobic fitness' which is required for cardiovascular health.
- Eat a balanced diet, including fruit and vegetables.
- Some foods in excess such as alcohol, chocolate, coffee and soft drinks cause increased tension.
- Find more information in these booklets: 'Staying Fit for Farming – A Health Booklet for Farmers' and 'Coping with the Pressures of Farming'.



FARMING MANAGEMENT

- Examine your farm for hazards and remove them.
- Work organisation is crucial to avoid long hours, rushing and injury.
- Examine the profitability of your farm – complete a profit monitor. Numerous studies indicate that efficiency beats scale in terms of profitability.
- Check the length of your working day as excessively long working days can lead to isolation and stress.



LEISURE

- Think about the changes you can make.
- Take regular breaks and a holiday from farming.
- Take time out every day for relaxation.



Five ways to wellbeing

“Your health is your wealth”

These five ways will support your self care. Applying them as a daily routine, they can reduce the risk of injury, potential loss of life and they will support your mental and physical wellbeing.



CONNECT – Social interaction and feeling valued by other people are fundamental human needs. Connecting with other people will support wellbeing, and is a cushion against feelings of loneliness and isolation. It is important to make time to connect with other people and develop off-farm interest, such as joining a local voluntary group, attending local matches, agricultural shows, focus groups and meetings.



BE ACTIVE – Regular off-farm physical activity is good for your mental health and general wellbeing. It is also associated with lower rates of depression and anxiety. Perhaps more importantly being physically and mentally fit reduces, considerably, the risk of farm accidents, as you will be more alert.



TAKE NOTICE – Farming is a very demanding way of life, both physically and mentally. When a person is very busy there is a risk of physical and mental overload. Take notice of how you are looking after yourself. Do you take time for enjoying the nature that surrounds you. Taking a few random minutes for self-care, to slow and gather your thoughts, can make a huge difference to your overall wellbeing.



KEEP LEARNING – Being interested about matters on and off-farm is good for the mind. Learning about new methods in farming can be rewarding. Keeping up to date on local news and developments through reading the local papers is also stimulating. Consider joining your local library, attending a local adult education class – these places provide an opportunity to socialise and make new friends.



GIVE – Giving can help you feel good about yourself. It is very satisfying when your time, words and deeds are appreciated and acknowledged. Listening to someone who is struggling and having a conversation can be good for all involved. However, it is also important that you give to yourself, mind your own wellbeing and to think about your own needs. It is not selfish. Be kind to yourself. Keep these five ways to wellbeing as part of your daily routine of self-care.

HELPFUL SUPPORT OPTIONS

- Teagasc Advisors and Farm Consultants are available to farmers to advise on farm management issues. Farming organisations offer services to their members.
- A person's family Doctor should be consulted regularly and when needed.
- A range of both Local and National Support Groups are available.

Your Mental Health

(HSE) 24/7 Information Line
Freephone 1800-111888

Samaritans:

(24/7) A free, non-judgmental listening support available 24/7.
Freephone 116123 or email: jo@samaritans.org

Pieta:

Offers free therapeutic support to people in suicidal distress and those who engage in self-harm.
Freephone 1800-247247 or visit www.pieta.ie

Text About It (24/7) Text free 50808

St Patrick's University Hospital, Dublin

provides a Support and Information Service staffed by experienced mental health nurses 9am-5pm Monday to Friday with an answering and call-back facility outside hours.

You can contact the Support and Information service by calling **01-2493333**.

Two booklets are available on the Teagasc website and in Teagasc offices, as follows:

'*Staying Fit for Farming – A Health Booklet for Farmers*' and '*Coping with the Pressures of Farming*'.

To learn more, check out the
Mental Health Ireland website:
www.mentalhealthireland.ie

or

Teagasc website: www.teagasc.ie

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