

Staying Up in a Down Economy: Farming in a Depressed Environment Without Getting Depressed

By Roger T. Williams

The past 25+ years -- with low commodity prices, rapidly escalating farm expenses, shifting global markets, and extreme climatic problems including drought, floods, cold springs, hot summers -- have been challenging for Wisconsin farmers. Gross farm income has been down and farm expenses have escalated. Many farmers have struggled “to stay up in a down economy” and “to farm in a depressed environment without getting depressed.”

You can use a number of approaches to stay up in a down economy, including the following eight strategies. Try one or two strategies today...the more you use, the greater your likelihood of dealing with stress.

Watch what you ingest

Farmers don't always eat right, especially during spring planting season and harvest times when they are in a hurry to get the work done...while the sun is shining or before the snow flies. Coffee and rolls or soda and candy bars frequently become the norm during these crunch times. A diet of empty calories like this can result in caffeine and sugar “highs” and the “lows” that follow. If you find that you need more and more coffee, donuts, soda, candy bars and chips to “keep your energy up” you are probably addicted to these empty calories. You should consider a major change in your diet. Some simple guidelines are in order: get a good breakfast and at least one other balanced meal each day, cut back on caffeine and highly refined carbohydrates, cut back on saturated fats, get plenty of fruit and vegetables and include fiber in your diet. This diet will result in sustainable energy levels rather than the “peaks and valleys” that will eventually cause “energy crashes” and depressed moods.

Get regular exercise

Farmers frequently say “I get plenty of exercise on the farm,” and there was a time when farmers did get plenty of exercise. But today, farmers use barn cleaners, silo unloaders, mechanical feeding equipment, gravity-fed grain handling equipment, and tractors for moving large hay bales. In short, a lot of the backbreaking exercise that was a normal part of farm life has been replaced by mechanized technology. A lack of exercise can cause headaches, backaches, depressed moods, anxiety attacks and insomnia. Fortunately, there are fairly simple ways to get more exercise:

1. Walk whenever you can. Walk from the farmstead to the field and from the far end of a parking lot to your church or implement dealer's door. Take a walk with your spouse in the early morning or after lunch.

2. Do stretching exercises to stretch out all of the muscles between your head, neck, shoulders and lower back. Tense muscles cause many headaches and backaches and stretching exercises can prevent this problem.
3. Jog, swim, go for a bike ride, shoot buckets, or do other kinds of exercise that help you keep your body fit and your mind sharp.

Use positive self-talk

When we find ourselves in difficult or stressful situations, negative self-talk or chatter usually kicks in immediately. Mastering the fine art of transforming negative self-talk into positive self-talk can be one of the most powerful strategies we have for staying up in a down economy. The first step is to **recognize the negative self-talk** when it occurs. Five of the most common forms of negative self-talk are using four-letter words, “shoulds” and “oughts,” catastrophizing, putting yourself down and blaming others. If you hear any of these things going through your head, **say: “STOP!”** Then **reframe the self-talk** using more positive language. When you use positive self-talk, you allow yourself to accept the situation (you don’t have to like it!), nurture yourself, view the situation as a challenge, and act with courage. Positive self-talk might sound like this: “This is part of the challenge of farming...but I don’t have to worry. I’m a skilled person and I can rise to the challenge. If I do _____, I’ll be on my way to dealing with the situation.”

Practice the art of relaxation

When we are stressed out, our blood pressure rises, our heart rate accelerates, our metabolism speeds up, our muscles tense up, and our breathing becomes fast and shallow. In short, we are experiencing the **“fight or flight” response**: our bodies are gearing up to fight or to flee the situation. In addition, we often **freeze**: we become paralyzed or immobilized and simply can’t act. Practicing the relaxation response on a regular basis can help farm family members get past the fight, flight or freeze response. The relaxation response requires four things: a quiet environment, a comfortable position, a passive attitude and a mental device. In practice, it amounts to getting comfortable in a peaceful, quiet setting; closing your eyes; taking a few deep breaths; letting your muscles relax completely; and then visualizing yourself in a peaceful, relaxed setting for a brief period of time. This activity, if practiced daily, can help farm family members feel more relaxed and centered—better able to take action, rather than being immobilized by stressful situations. Try to find a time—early morning, lunch time, before bed at night—when you can take five minutes to find the peace relaxation can bring.

Talk with family members

When we experience stress, we often “clam-up” and fail to talk with the most important people in our lives. It happens for many reasons: we may be embarrassed by the situation; we may feel we have failed as family “providers;” or it may be we simply don’t know what to say or how to say it. But chances are family members already know there are problems...the tension tells them so. It’s better to talk openly with family members:

it will help **you** get concerns/frustrations off your chest and you may be able to solicit **their** help in resolving issues. Your children can assist by pitching in to help with the work or by cutting back on family expenses (fewer or less expensive purchases). Adult brothers and sisters can assist by providing labor, offering an operating loan or extending the provisions of a farm purchase agreement. Parents can also help if they know the situation you are facing. So, summon your courage and share your situation in an honest way that is sensitive to the concerns family members may have. It could be one of the most helpful conversations you can have.

Build a positive support system

One of the most common responses when farm families find themselves in long-term stressful situations is to withdraw or pull back from their social support system—family, friends, neighbors, church, school, and farm organizations. This is a **common** response but it's not a **healthy** one. Family, friends, neighbors and other people or organizations provide us with one of the best buffers for stress. They allow us to vent feelings or get things off our chests, to solve problems and explore options and to identify resources that can be helpful in difficult situations. You don't want to share your problems with everyone you meet (the grapevine works quite well in rural communities!) but it can be helpful to share problems and concerns with people in a position to be helpful: a trusted friend, your pastor, your veterinarian, your University of Wisconsin-Extension agent or technical college farm training specialist, your DHI representative, your artificial inseminator or your local feed dealer. Build a support system that works for you by building a trusting relationship with people who are in a position to help you succeed in farming.

Learn to deal with conflict

Farmers can find themselves in conflict with creditors, farm inspectors, power plant representatives, state food safety staff, natural resources staff, and any number of other people. If a farmer responds in a heated, off-the-cuff way to creditors or regulatory staff, the sparks can fly and the farmer may later regret his impulsive action. A few guidelines are in order for dealing with conflict:

1. Talk directly with the other person. Don't avoid or go around the person you are in conflict with or it will make the situation worse. If you have overdue bills, talk to your creditors, share your situation with them and offer to work out a repayment plan.
2. Choose a time that works for both of you. Be considerate of the other person's schedule and find a time when you can truly focus on the issues to be discussed.
3. Take a listening stance into the conversation. The other person will be **more likely to listen to you** when you have demonstrated that you've heard what he/she has said.
4. Be assertive but not aggressive. Make sure you help the other person **understand your perspective** on the issue and assert your needs in the situation.

5. Talk it all through. Don't avoid the big, uncomfortable issues or they will come back to haunt you.
6. Identify mutually agreeable solutions. Strive for win/win solutions and keep talking about options until you find one that will work for both of you.
7. Reach out for help if you need it—there are mediators available to help settle difficult conflicts so seek out help if you reach an impasse with the other person.

Take time to laugh and play

When times get tough, farm families tend to work harder—they farm more acreage, add more livestock, start a new enterprise/business, seek an off-farm job or do all of these things. When they do this, they may become exhausted and lose their sense of humor and perspective. It's important to take time to laugh, to play, and to engage in fun activities or recreation. Fun activities don't need to be expensive. It can be as simple as getting together with other farm families for a meal, a movie or a rousing game of cards. By getting together with other farm families you are also strengthening your support system. Both things are important during tough times!

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