

Stress among Farmers and Its Alleviation

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Abstract- Stress is a normal emotional response to abnormally high demands of life. Everyone experiences it; however, the results vary in intensity. There are various symptoms or signs of stress, when a person may need help. These signs can be observed by family members, friends, neighbors, school personnel, or health and human service workers. There are daily issues concerning balancing budgets, family life, keeping up with developments in the area, and planning for future. Social isolation and working for long hours can accentuate stress. The added pressures of managing a farm during a natural disasters, climatic extremes, and market fluctuations can be overwhelming. Keeping oneself fit to enjoy good times is very important. One should eat healthy and nutritious food, get adequate sleep, have regular sleep routine, keep physically active, make time occasionally to get away from the farm, find time for fun and frolic, have time to do something one enjoys, and keep socially connected.

Keywords: Causes of stress, depression, farmer stress, stress alleviation, stress symptoms.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian economy is agrarian, where agriculture is the predominant sector. More than 70% population depends on agriculture and allied activities for its livelihood. Farming is the cause of stress among rural farming families. Farming may be considered to be an isolated profession as farmers work for long hours, often alone and in bad weather. Stress may originate in physiological, social, and psychological conditions. It can disturb the psychological well being and functioning. Coping is a popularly researched area in contemporary psychology (Somerfield and McCrae, 2000) but very few researchers have applied it to farmers. Farmers face a lot of stress in day to day life for maintaining their farm and family.

Farmers are often affected by many kinds of stress, such as financial stress, heavy workload, and aberrant weather causing crop yield losses. Eustress is good for everyone as it increases the confidence to achieve goals in life. In distress, farmers do not sense ways for survival and are unable to withdraw from the burden of stress. These crucial conditions arise due to change in environment, lack of opportunities, weather constraints, and outdated farming practices.

1.1 Signs and Symptoms of Depression or Suicidal Intent

Forstadt and Jackson (2014) stated that when one shows the following signs of depression, professional help should be sought immediately: (1) sad face and slow movements, (2) feeling sad, hopeless, or discouraged, (3) negative thoughts such as 'I am a failure', 'I am no good', and 'no one cares', (4) reduced activity, (5) feel lonely, (6) physical problems such as troubled sleep and decreased sexual interest, and (7) guilt and low self esteem. Signs of suicidal intent are: (1) anxiety or depression, (2) withdrawal or isolation, (3) helplessness or hopelessness, (4) alcohol or drug abuse, (5) previous suicidal attempts, (6) suicidal plans, and (7) cries for help. Signs of stress in farmers and ranchers include change in daily routine, decline in care of farm or domestic animals, illness, increase in farm accidents, decline in appearance of farmstead, signs of stress in children, and decreased interest in farm and social activities (Texas A&M, 2018).

1.2 Stress and Response

Cox (1978) defined stress as a perceptual phenomenon arising from a demand of a person and his ability to cope with it. An imbalance in this mechanism gives rise to stress and stress response. Stress is the psychological, physiological, and behavioural response of an individual when he perceives a lack of equilibrium between the demands placed upon him and his ability to meet those demands, which, over a period of time, leads to ill-health (Palmer 1989).

Stress is an excess of demands on the individual beyond his ability to cope (Campbell, 2001). Farming is one of the most stressful occupations in the world and farmers experiencing a high demand work environment mixed with low social control and low social support can develop stress, depression, and mental health problems (Kolstrup *et al.*, 2013). Beehr and Newman (1978) expressed occupational stress as a condition arising from the interaction of people and their jobs indicated by changes within people that force them to deviate from their normal functioning.

1.3 Causes of Stress Among Farmers

Lazarus and Cohen (1977) reported that stress can originate from an opportunity, demand, constraint, threat, or challenge, when the outcome of an event is both important and uncertain. Generally things that are out of control and last for a longer period of time create the most stressful situations. Occupational stress is the negative effect on the individual from the sum of different factors in a work place. It is defined as a perceived imbalance between occupational demands and the individual's ability to perform when the consequences of failure are thought to be important. Farming is now identified as a dangerous occupation in a work environment that entails injuries, diseases, and stress due to hazardous situations and various biological, physical, chemical, psychological, and sociological factors. Stress results from an imbalance between demands and resources (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Fetsch and Schultz (1984) have shown that farm families live and work in the most dangerous and stressful

workplaces in the USA. Generally, the very nature of farming may cause strain for farm families. Farming can be an isolated profession, since farmers work traditionally for long hours, outdoors, and often in bad weather and alone.

A person experiences stress as determined by his appraisal of the demands made and the resources available to deal with the demands (Slee, 1988). Such conceptualization points out that stress depends mainly on what situations or events a person perceives as stressful. Eberhardt and Pooyan (1990) developed a measure for farm stress. Using factor analysis on data collected from 362 farmers, they concluded that life satisfaction, emotional strain, illness frequency, personal finances, and time pressures were the causes of stress. Among the five factors personal finances and time pressures were found to be the most significant predictors of farm stress. Financial worries included irregular and uncertain income and financial debt. Other worries were compliance with new government regulations and the attendant paper work required. Some farmers opted for additional jobs outside the farm to supplement their family income rather than selling the farm which was running at a loss (Fraser *et al.*, 2005).

Situations perceived to be unpredictable are farmers' lack of control over key stressors, such as unpredictable price fluctuations of farm produce, livestock losses, and paper work required for compliance with new government regulations. Other important stressors are isolation, personal relationship crises, hopelessness, powerlessness, lack of alternatives, financial problems, high workload, illness and disability, and low self esteem (Shaw, 1997). Doyle (2000) suggests that 'mastery' or a feeling of control was an important stress mediator. The issue of lack of control as stressor and the concept of mastery is linked to stress in farming communities.

McGregor *et al.* (1995) found that farming women experience higher levels of stress than their male counterparts. People's natural reaction to excessive pressure can be gauged by symptoms of stress which include depression, irritability, heart disease, high blood pressure, and the consequent behavioural and psychological changes (Phelps, 2001).

Meludu and Bajowa (2008) compared stress coping strategies for poultry and cassava farmers in Nigeria. Financial, weather, work, health, social, and psychological were the dimensions of stress taken for the study. It was suggested that farmers should be given training to cope with stressful situations. 08 South Australian dairy farmers, New Zealand orchardists, and share-milkers were found to have higher levels of stress than those in other occupations (Wallis and Dollard, 2008). Degree of stress was found to have positive correlation with work hours among South Australian dairy farmers.

At the individual farmer level, mental health problems such as stress, anxiety, depression, and psychological distress were identified as key risk factors (Gregoire *et al.*, 2002). Good physical health was identified as a factor protecting mental well being. Some factors at global and national levels are out of control of farmers. These include factors such as climate change, commodity markets, high interest rates, poor rural infrastructure, and social connectivity (Fraser *et al.*, 2005).

Kutner (2014) reported that in the USA farmers were twice as likely as the general population to commit suicide. In France a farmer dies every two days by suicide. Farmer suicide rate in the UK increased by ten times during the outbreak of foot and mouth disease and in Australia higher suicide rates were reported during severe drought.

1.4 Tips for Tough Times in Farming

Durst (2017) gave ten tips that may help the farmers facing tough situations: (1) taking responsibility, (2) focusing on solution to problems, (3) involving employees, (4) communicating with vendors and lenders, (5) penciling-out the consequences of changes (6) investing where returns are highest (7) taking a hard look at where money is being lost, (8) maintaining records, (9) seeking advice, and (10) keeping things in perspective.

There are times when things get too tough and farmers may need professional help (Texas A&M, 2018). Professional help is required when one has depression, changed sleeping pattern, abusive behaviour, suicidal thoughts, hallucinations, thoughts of marital status change, inability to express positive feelings, excessive alcohol intake, feelings of guilt, panic, and feels isolated or being overwhelmed.

1.5 Approach for Alleviation of Farm Stress

Some approaches for alleviation of farm stress are given below (Brotherson and Berg, 2017).

- (1) Assessing the needs of farmers and impacts of stressors that affect the individual, family, or farming community.
- (2) Identification of resources needed to manage the stressors. Resources may be tangible such as knowledge, creativity, and optimism or material such as money, land, and equipment.
- (3) Pursuing good quality decisions. Decision making involves assessment of available options, determining and strategizing response, and discussing the goals with family and friends of the farmer undergoing stress, and consulting professionals.
- (4) Connecting sources of support is an important aspect of stress alleviation. It is necessary to identify the type of support that is most helpful to pursue quality decisions: whether there is a need to talk to bank personnel in case of financial concern or meet a counselor, priest, or pastor. Decision should be done whether the support should be informal (close friends, neighbors, or fellow farmers) or formal (faith, community leaders, medical providers, or counselors).
- (5) Using effective coping strategies to overcome harmful addictions such as those of alcohol, drug, and tobacco, or to inculcate helpful habits such as exercise, playing games, watching movies, and engaging in family conversations. The coping strategy should match the identified need.

2. CONCLUSION

Stress can have diverse effects on a farmer. Many factors cause stress in the occupation of farming. Farmers as well as their families may be severely affected at times. Eustress is beneficial as it increases the confidence to achieve

goals in life. However, in distress farmers do not sense ways for survival and are unable to withdraw from the burden of stress. These critical situations arise due to change in environment, lack of opportunities, weather constraints, and outdated farming practices. Stress can be mitigated by proper sleep, exercise, reducing alcohol consumption, exposing to humour, interaction with friends and family, proper relaxation, taking choice food, and taking regular breaks for fun and frolic. It is important that one should talk to family, trusted friends, or a health professional about issues that are stressful.

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