

RECOGNIZE THE SIGNS OF STRESS, DEPRESSION



Look for the signs and
know what to do about them.

BY MEGAN PIERCE

THERE IS NO DENYING THAT DIFFICULT TIMES are upon us. Many dairymen are losing \$100 to \$150 per cow per month — some more, some less. This financial stress can be overwhelming, making it difficult to see beyond the losses.

The current economic crisis is taking its toll. Calls to seven Sowing the Seeds of Hope, crisis hotlines for farmers and ranchers in the Midwest, have gone up 40 percent over the last several months, says Mike Rosmann, an Iowa farm operator and clinical psychologist who heads up the hotline. Reported suicides among dairy producers have also gone up recently.

In some instances, this tragedy could be prevented, if you know what to look for. “I know farmers who are alive today because their friends and neighbors knew what to look for and what to do,” says Robert Fetsch, an extension specialist in human development and family studies at Colorado State University.

Here are signs you can look for:

Look for a change in routine or behavior

A change in behavior can be a good indicator of stress or depression, says Randy Weigel, extension specialist at the University of Wyoming. Sadness, loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed, change in appetite or weight, difficulty sleeping or oversleeping, physical slowing or agitation, energy loss, difficulty in thinking or concentrating, and withdrawing from family and friends are all signs of depression.

Stress decreases our ability to cope physiologically and psychologically, and can cause depression. You may not even realize you’re suffering from depression because you don’t know what you’re experiencing, Fetsch says. Notice, if a person or family stops attending church or no longer stops in at the local coffee shop or feed mill, says Fetsch. This change in routine is a good indicator that something might be wrong.

Also, watch for someone who has been depressed, but has a sudden change of mood. “There is a point when people appear to be coming out of the depression when they are at the highest risk for suicide,” says Fetsch.

Depression does not discriminate, although suicide takes a greater toll on men, says Weigel. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that three to four million men in the United States suffer from clinical depression at any given time, and the rate is rising.

Many men define themselves by what they do. If a man sells his herd, becomes unemployed, foreclosed on or retires he may think, “I’m nobody now.” This, combined with the fact that many men were raised to be John Wayne types, taught not to ask for help or show emotion, puts them at a greater risk for suicide, says Weigel.

Watch for an increase in illness

Watch for physical ailments, such as chronic headaches, ulcers, backaches, eating irregularities, sleeping disturbances, frequent sickness or exhaustion.

Severely depressed people may experience more upper respiratory illnesses, such as colds or flu, or other chronic conditions, such as aches, pains, or a persistent cough, notes Fetsch.

TALK TO THE PERSON YOU’RE CONCERNED ABOUT

If you have reason to be concerned about someone, make an excuse to stop and visit, says Robert Fetsch, an extension specialist in human development and family studies at Colorado State University.

Say something like: “Joe, how long have we known each other – 22 years? We’ve been friends and neighbors for a long time, and I have to say that I am worried about you. I see your sad face. I hear how hopeless you sound. When you say, ‘I’m calling it quits; let’s have a last cigarette together,’ I am afraid. I am afraid that you’re thinking about hurting yourself. Are you? Tell me about it. I have all the time in the world. Tell me what’s going on.”

Then listen without judgment. Do not try to cheer the person up. Do not say, “Toughen up, Joe!” Do not say, “You’ve got to look at the bright side” or “Snap out of it.” These types of comments can sound like criticisms to a depressed person, making him or her feel worse. Joe may put up roadblocks and stop talking to you.

Instead, Fetsch recommends paraphrasing what you hear. For instance, “Sounds like things have gotten so bad financially that you don’t know what to do next and you’re thinking that maybe your family would be better off without you. Am I getting it right? What’s going on?”

Urge them to get professional help. Offer to go along if doing so will help. And, if you think a person is at high risk, you can take them to an emergency room, call the police or a suicide hotline.

MYTHS ABOUT SUICIDE

A common myth about suicide is that you should not talk about suicide with depressed people, as it might tip the scales or push them over the edge. Suicide is seldom a new idea to depressed people, and they are often relieved to have permission to talk about it, says Randy Weigel, an extension specialist at the University of Wyoming. The greater risk is that the topic is passed over. At worst, an inquiry about suicidal thoughts can produce a puzzled look. At best, it can encourage a person to get help.



HELP IS AVAILABLE

If you recognize signs of depression and suicidal thinking in a family member, friend or yourself, call (800) 784-2433 for help and local resources.

Other resources include:

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at (800) 273-8255
- TherapistLocator.net is a good resource for finding marriage and family therapists in your area at <http://therapistlocator.net>
- Farm Resource Center at (800) 851-4719
- Illinois Farm Resource Center at (877) 633-3372
- Iowa Concern Hotline at (800) 447-1985
- Kansas Rural Family Helpline at (866) 327-6578
- Minnesota Crisis Connection at (866) 379-6363
- Nebraska Rural Response Hotline at (800) 464-0258
- New York Farm Net at (800) 547-3276
- North Dakota Helpline at (800) 472-2911
- South Dakota Rural Helpline at (800) 664-1349
- Wisconsin Farm Center at (800) 942-2474

“GOING FOR THERAPY BEATS THE HELL OUT OF THE HELL THE FAMILY GOES THROUGH AFTER A FAMILY MEMBER COMMITS SUICIDE,” SAYS ROBERT FETSCH, AN EXTENSION SPECIALIST IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY STUDIES AT COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY. “SUICIDE IS A PERMANENT SOLUTION TO A TEMPORARY PROBLEM.”

Look for a change of appearance

Look for both a change of appearance in a person and their operation. A person may appear sad, move slowly and have an unkempt look.

If a person no longer takes pride in the way his operation looks, this is a good indication that something is wrong, says Rosmann. What condition are the cows in? Are the cows being taken care of in the usual manner? If the cows are losing condition, appear gaunt or show signs of neglect, this is a good indication that something is wrong.

Is the equipment starting to look haggard? It can even be as simple as higher somatic cell counts, says Rosmann. These are all signs of stress.

See if the children show signs of stress

Watch how a child reacts. Often, children will be the “canaries” of the family, providing an early warning if something is wrong, says Fetsch. If there are young children in the family, watch to see if they act out. Is there a decline in their academic performance or are they increasingly absent from school?

Check their losses

How many major losses has this person suffered, such as the death of a child or spouse? One loss in a lifetime, and the chance of a major depression is 50 percent, says Fetsch. Two losses move it to 75 percent, and three losses move the chance of severe depression to 100 percent.

Listen for cries of help

Give serious attention to cries for help. Giving away a favorite dog or possession and writing a will are considered cries for help.

Listen for statements of hopelessness, such as “I’m calling it quits, maybe my family would be better off without me, nothing matters anymore, things will never get better.”

If your friend says a last line that raises the hair on your neck, don’t ignore it. Listen to his or her story, says Fetsch. A last cry means that person hasn’t made up his or her mind yet.

If you are concerned about someone, make note of the signs you see in him or her. Pay special attention to signs of suicidal intent or thinking. If you suspect someone may be depressed and suicidal, get help. See the sidebar to the left for resources. 🐄