

For Some, A Dark Harvest

Drought Has Some Farmers Coping With Anxiety And Depression

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

Harvest time is normally a welcome relief after a growing season of production concerns. It's a time for producers to reap what they sowed, tended to, and prayed for.

But this fall, farmers are anything but happy about what they're finding in their fields. And there is concern for their mental health.

Rural areas are notorious for their scarcity of proper mental health care, not only because of a lack of practitioners but also because of the cultural mentality of independence, self-sufficiency, and resiliency in hardship that prevents people from seeking help. But this drought is a situation likely to bring on anxiety and depression that is too serious to ignore by farmers facing weak yields, poor pastures, debilitating feed costs, and flooded livestock markets.

Extension educators, clergy members, families, and friends all need to be on the watch for troubling signs that the drought is getting to be too much for area producers to handle.

"There is not a time when there is not a deadline, when there is not something to get done, something in the field, something out," said Roberta Schweitzer, assistant professor of nursing at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind. In fact, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health ranks production agriculture in the top 10 most stressful occupations.

"Stress can be very sudden, such as a combine breaking down, or it can be longer term, one problem after another. Drought doesn't get as much attention as a bad storm or tornado, because the damage is less visible, but with a drought situation, significant stress can go on for months or have a lasting effect for years," Schweitzer said. Family farmers are unique in that they not only have to manage the business but also family finances, relationships, as well as weather the typical ups-and-downs of the weather, markets, and costs. "And soon, they're feeling out of control," Schweitzer added.

But, "just as we take care of our fields and crops and livestock on our farms, so we need to take care of ourselves," she said. "There is no operation with the operator."

Schweitzer collaborates with the National AgrAbility Project to teach mental health first aid to rural community members who are most likely to find themselves serving as lay first responders to sufferers of depression and anxiety, alcohol and substance abuse, eating disorders, and more serious mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

"If a person doesn't know how to manage stress, it turns into depression or anxiety disorder," Schweitzer said. Because of this year's drought severity, many producers may already find themselves battling anxiety or depression, and this can lead to alcohol or substance abuse and other unhealthy behaviors as they seek out a coping skill. Producers with pre-existing conditions such as bipolar disorder can struggle significantly, leading to suicidal thoughts.

"There is always stress, but a drought puts on extra stress," Schweitzer said. "And, yes, we have had bad years, but this is a really bad year."



PHOTO: RITA BRHEL

FIRST STAGE: EMOTIONAL STRESS MOUNTING

When the realities of a drought hit a farmer, compounding his already-stressful life, he will experience feelings of shock and disbelief, rage and panic, and may begin to experience a sense of loss of his identity. This vulnerability leads to unhealthy coping skills.

Besides learning healthy coping skills, the best way that people can prevent anxiety and depression is to develop insight into their emotions and corresponding behaviors. Basically, this means that a person needs to pay attention to how he feels and how stress is affecting him, and then be ready to take measures to manage that stress.

This is easier said than done, though, Schweitzer said, as emotional stress can manifest in many ways. For example, "when we go to the doctor, 80 percent of the cases have an emotional tie," she said. "This doesn't mean that you're mentally ill, but your emotional stress is reflected in your body, such as through headaches, aches and pains, and ulcers. Especially if your symptoms don't easily resolve through medication, it's time to look for an emotional cause."

That, and it's often easier for others to notice changes in a person's demeanor than for that person to notice it himself.

"Kids are amazing as they are the barometer of the family, and if there are any changes, they can sense that," Schweitzer said. If they're older, children may ask the person what's wrong. But younger children often act-out with tantrums or clinginess.

Here are signs that a person could demonstrate if they're having difficulty dealing with stress:

- Change in routines
- Less care of the farm
- More complaints of physical illness
- Eating irregularities, sleep problems, and exhaustion
- More careless mistakes (because of preoccupation with worry)
- Sad, angry, worrisome, passive-aggressiveness, or simply more serious with a lost sense of humor
- In some people, acts of violence or alcoholism
- Social withdrawal
- Difficulty with memory, concentrating, and making decisions
- Low self-esteem expressed through comments like "I'm a failure" or "I blew it" or "Why can't I...?"

Ultimately, depression and anxiety develop when stress causes a person to feel out of control, leading to doubt about his abilities. That confidence translates into self-esteem.

"Self-esteem is a tenacious thing that can make us feel really good or really low," Schweitzer said. "And as they say, depression is anger turned inward."

SECOND STAGE: CLINICAL DEPRESSION/ANXIETY

When a person experiences low self-esteem for too long, it changes the brain chemistry, causing depression and anxiety — a very uncomfortable mindset, Schweitzer said.

Here are signs that a person's stress may have gotten the better of him:

- Feelings of being trapped
- Easily confused
- Feelings of emptiness
- Feeling of chaos and being out of control
- Doubt about abilities
- Feelings of guilt
- Constant worries, sadness and lack of motivation and tiredness, angry outbursts inconsistent with the severity of the transgression, and mood swings between hopefulness and hopelessness
- Recklessness, as if the person no longer cares about his safety.
- In some people, suicidal thoughts.

This is the time when a sufferer is most likely to experience depression serious enough to lead to physical harm or neglect. What is frightening is that there may be more than one person in a farm family feeling this way, and this then becomes a family emergency.

But, "suicide is preventable," Schweitzer said. "Life is always changing. Things never, ever stay the same. If things seem insurmountable right now, they'll change. It will get better."

But, she said, a person in the throes of depression are unable to comprehend this fact. They have lost all hope that things will ever get better. Many times, they are unable to remember how life was before their depression; they think that they have always felt terrible. They want to live but don't see any other alternatives at the moment. This is when the risk for suicide is at its greatest, Schweitzer said, adding that suicide completion is higher in farmers than in any other profession. However, not everyone who is suicidal will say so, or even know so.

Here are signs of suicidal intent:

- Suicidal thoughts or plans
- Substance abuse
- Feelings of purposelessness
- Anxiety
- Feelings of being trapped
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Social withdrawal
- Anger
- Recklessness
- Mood changes.

"There is a myth that if you talk to someone about suicide, that you'll cause them to do it," Schweitzer said. "This is absolutely not true. It is actually the other way around."

Suicidal intent is an emergency situation that requires a 911 call; however, for less severe signs of

depression or anxiety, here are strategies to provide short-term relief until a doctor visit can be made:

- Praise for sharing feelings and encouragement to continue reaching out for help
- Undivided attention
- Active listening, which means reflecting back and validating the person's feelings as a normal reaction to stress without trying to fix the situation, judging, blaming, ignoring, interrupting, insulting, name-calling, or stating opinions such as religious perspectives as facts.

The goal of these gestures is to help the sufferer begin to process his own emotions, to disentangle from the feelings of confusion and failure.

Emotionally healthy friends and family members tend to try to fix the problem or to tell the person to "snap out of it," but these intentions make people feel unheard or as if they're failing, which compounds the problem for someone with low self-esteem, Schweitzer said.

"We're uncomfortable, we want to do something, we want to fix it and make it right," she said, understandingly. "But in this case, it's not the thing to do, and that's very hard."

The next step is for the emotionally healthy friend or family member to make a sensitive referral, which is not often easy as farmers are reluctant to reach out for help and may not have health insurance that covers mental health care. Schweitzer said calling a crisis line for the person may work out the best. Accompanying the person to a visit with the local clergy or a health clinic can also help.

3RD STAGE: HEALING

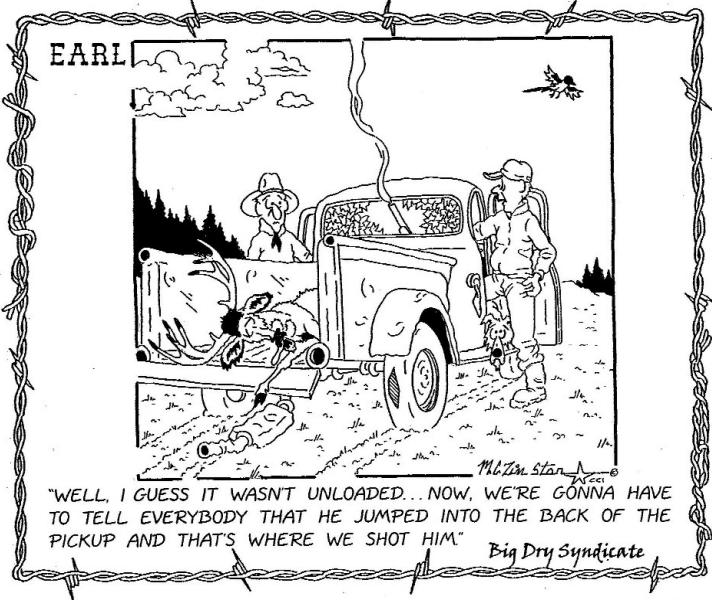
Active listening and undivided attention are the same relationship skills used when helping a person heal from depression and anxiety, once they're under the care of a doctor. The sufferer will learn new ways of managing stress and how to develop insight to recognize when those coping skills need to be used.

Healing from depressive and anxious tendencies is a long-term process, and at some point, the caregiver may develop signs of stress overload herself.

"Listening to farmers' stories of stress, anxiety, and frustration can be difficult. Even professional counselors can be affected by clients' emotional pain," Schweitzer said. "Take care of yourself, so you can continue to help others without burnout and update your own stress management skills."

If there is one hint she can offer to farm families is that they do not become socially isolated, that they continue to go to church, community clubs, meet with their friends for coffee at the gas station, visit family and friends. Social support networks help to buffer the effects of stress.

"Rural communities have carried on and survived, because they do look out for each other," she concluded.



Opinion | Rita Brhel

Drought Fears Are Increasing Among Livestock Producers

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

Today, my husband and I made a tough decision regarding our flock of sheep. It was to either greatly reduce the number of animals we have or sell the whole lot. We had been teetering on the edge of this decision all summer. And we very literally made the final decision a moment before the livestock trailer pulled off our property, sorting a selected number of ewes back into the dry lot.

A drought like this, where there is no historical model except perhaps Dust Bowl fears, makes for hard farming decisions. Would we have enough pasture to last through the fall so that we didn't use up our hay stores before the spring growth began? As are most farmers, I have an emotional investment in my livestock as much as a financial investment.

I didn't want to let the pasture sit idle when it could be feeding animals, and I'm rather attached to my sheep, which has also been profitable the past few years. Well, until the last few weeks when fat lamb prices dropped into the 70-cent range. I'm glad that we grass-finish, because grain-finishers aren't going to make a dime.

But I also didn't want to make a decision to keep ewes if, by our pasture quality, it was just ridiculous. Looking out into the pasture, they don't look bad — we've tried to be really smart about reducing stocking rates and increasing rest periods in our rotation system — but walking out there, we noticed that there was a lot of crunching from dried-up grass under our shoes. So, I conferred with my father, who is on the Board for the Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition, so he knows a little of what he's talking about, and he said that, yes, the pastures should hold up if we're careful with the rest period and stocking rate. So, we kept some of our sheep that we were going to send down to the sale barn.


Did we make the right decision? I don't know. It depends on how

much longer this drought holds up. We should be good through the usual green-up next April, but the big question is, what will this winter look like and what if the drought continues? I was never a big believer in whole doom-and-gloom forecast of global climate change; I had always figured it was all a part of the natural cycles of weather. But now, I'm hearing more from scientists about how this drought is only the beginning and that the whole climate of the Midwest is going to change. I wonder if we'll look back at this time in 50 or 100 years and remember when we used to plant corn and soybeans, while we're looking at some new crop that can withstand hotter, drier temps. Funny, there are end-of-the-world scenarios that has the apocalypse rooted in drought — doesn't make as a great of a movie as asteroids and volcanoes, I guess.

I can tell that our pastures must look really good compared to most in the area, because we've had a number of inquiries about whether we'd consider renting out our pasture for horses or cattle. The immediate cash flow is inviting, but I worry about what that could do to our pasture quality. The other day, I drove past a herd of cows grazing and, at first glance, thought they were dairy cows! They were so skinny to be beef cows.

My parents, whose ranch runs several hundred head of sheep, cattle, and goats, are downsizing as well. Most of the goats have been sold, and while they usually grain-finish their lambs to about 120 pounds, they're cutting them short in the feedlot to save on feed. They did decide to keep their replacement heifers, however, while they are not planning to keep replacement ewe lambs. They usually have a waiting list for their replacement ewes, but not so much this year.

People are scared. They don't know how long pastures will last, whether hay will be affordable or available, how high grain prices are going to go, or how market prices will hold up under all this pressure. Do you?



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