

Managing Stress – The Essentials

Watch out for the signs of unhealthy stress. A mixture of feelings can happen such as feeling overwhelmed, losing control or getting wound up. One of the biggest signs of stress is irritability. People lose their tolerance and little things start to bug them a lot more. Other signs are when our thinking becomes a bit jumbled and intrusive with our thoughts jumping from one topic to another. Often we repetitively think about outstanding tasks or concerns e.g. “How am I going to get everything done.” That intrusive kind of thinking can be draining. On the physical side of things it often means we’re not sleeping well or waking up during the night thinking about what we’ve got to do the next day.

Make a plan. If you’ve got bit on your plate or have a busy time coming up it’s about being proactive and coming up with an action plan. Instead of trying to do everything, ask yourself what are the one or two top things I need to work on right now. Is it de-stocking, fertiliser, getting extra staff on – what’s going to make the biggest difference? Focus on the top two things and park everything else. Once you are feeling back in charge your stress levels will go down.

Look after yourself. When people are under pressure the things that go out the window are often the factors that keep us well. Things like exercise/sport, leisure activities, sleep, healthy eating, taking breaks, socialising with others and contributing to the community. These are the things that build resilience and help us cope with pressure. If you want to stay on top of your game, you’ve got to be proactive about your health. If there is a situation where you feel really wound up, take yourself off for a quick break and do something distracting – reducing the chance that you will ‘lose your cool’ at someone or something.

Build in recovery time. If you want to stay productive and sustainable as a person on your farm, you’ve got to have breaks and inject recovery periods. Think of the All Blacks in the World Cup, how they built up to compete each week. They wouldn’t go out and play another game two days later. Within each week, tournament or World Cup they built in recovery periods to their schedule. It’s no different

with farming. Getting off the farm – whether its hunting, a catch up with mates, motocross or kids sport – gives you respite and recharges your body.

Reduce your arousal level. When your body is under threat from being too busy or mentally pressured, it releases stress hormones that increase your arousal level, pepping you up and making it hard to relax or sleep well at night. To bring this arousal down again, try exercising (in the day), deep abdominal breathing and other relaxation techniques.

Use helpful thinking. Helpful thinking is about catching negative thoughts and then thinking about the situation in a more helpful way. An example of helpful thinking would be, ‘Yes, it’s a tough year with drought, but the long range forecast is more promising and every farmer in this area has been through this before and got through ok. We’ve just got to tighten the reins and learn what we can for next time.’ Helpful thinking gives you better balance and helps contain distress.

Talk to others, stay connected. If you are struggling to cope with stress that’s when it’s good to talk to others about it. Surround yourself with people who are upbeat, pragmatic and able to give you a different perspective. That can change the way you look at a situation. Connections with family and friends, professionally and in your community, are a big part of staying well. Everybody needs to be able to call on extra resources from time to time.

Communicate as a couple. Managing stress as a couple is about talking through issues together, formulating a plan and sharing the load to get things back on track. It’s all about awareness, realising when you or your partner is under pressure and coming up with a plan. Make breaks and time off farm part of your business plan. Don’t think of recovery time as a luxury, think of it from a business perspective. ■



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