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## STRESSES ON MINNESOTA'S RURAL AND FARM FAMILIES

By  
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*Dr. William Field came to the University of Minnesota to do graduate work from New York State, where he was a vocational agriculture teacher. He has completed a doctorate and has been on the staff at Purdue University since September of 1977. Dr. Field became interested in stresses of rural people as he reviewed the literature and investigated the strengths and weaknesses of a vocational agriculture instructor as a career.*

All occupations have associated stress factors that affect those involved. Contrary to popular belief, agriculture is no exception. As the complications and speed of Minnesota's agriculture increases, the stresses and mental demands on farmers and farm families will become greater. It is not infrequent, according to physicians, that the farmer's strenuous efforts to keep up with the frequent changes and to keep ahead of the financial obligations of keeping up can result in symptoms such as sleeplessness, ulcers, colitis, hypertension, headaches, and changes in behavior such as temper outbursts and most commonly depression.

Traditional perspective of country living and farm life as being "tranquil" and "in step with nature" as compared to the fears, hustle, and complexities associated with life in the city are no longer as accurate when viewed in light of today's high powered, rapidly changing and risk filled world of "agribusiness."

Only recently with the influences from community based mental health legislation of 1963 and 1975 reaching the rural areas with the establishment of rural mental health facilities, has a clearer picture of rural stresses and their associated problems become available. Many medical professionals and mental health workers who practice in the rural areas are now suggesting that farm families and those living in isolated rural areas may suffer from as much depression, loneliness, and general dissatisfaction as those who reside in crowded urban areas. The significant differences may be that indicators of stress are often less visible since they are

dispersed over a greater area due to population distribution. Also, there exists a "rural value structure" that often causes individuals to suffer hardships stoically rather than dealing with them openly.

Stress associated with a livelihood dependent upon modern agriculture, with all its unpredictability of crop and livestock productivity, crop and livestock prices, and probably most importantly, the uncertainty of the environment can often have as great an impact on farmers and their families as any form of stress confronting urban workers and their families.

Considering the fundamental philosophy of vocational agriculture and the traditional role of the vocational agriculture instructor with respect to the farm family, it is believed that the increasing stresses associated with agriculture will have significant implications for future instructors. This will especially be true for those working directly with farm families through the adult farm management program.

When this study was initiated, the issue of rural stress and its influences had not been considered or even identified as a critical issue, especially with reference to the undergraduate program in agricultural education. Yet, as the study progressed, it became evident that first-year teachers and their spouses were being affected by not only the stresses associated with a new position and its responsibilities, a change in location and in some cases a new marriage, but also the influences of abnormal stresses on the families of students enrolled in their classes. It was observed that some students would reflect, at times, the high levels of stress at home through poor performance or unacceptable behavior while in the classroom. Though this observed relationship cannot be supported with objective data, it is probable, based on the information acquired from the first-year teachers and informal observations, that stress in the home had much to do with the identification of student behavior problems as being the most significant problems with which first-year teachers had to deal.

Even several experienced teachers who were questioned on this matter were aware of the impact that high levels of stress in the

home resulting from financial difficulty, major decisions making, marital problems, and problems of productivity had on student performance. Adult instructors were highly sensitive to the stresses that many of their cooperating farmers were under, due to the drought, poor prices, debt loads and demanding managerial decisions. In some cases, instructors had observed noticeable behavior changes and three first-year teachers indicated that during the course of the year there had been at least one suicide attempt by an adult with whom they had been directly involved.

In all frankness, this overview of rural stress lacks the major effort that it fully deserves. As the study was progressing, it became evident with the increasing number of references to problems and situations that appeared to be associated with high levels of stress that additional information sources were necessary. The remainder of this section is a summary of interviews and conversations held with five mental health professionals working in widely scattered areas of rural Minnesota. In addition, three rural sociologists with interest in this topic of rural stress were also interviewed.

Denny Clark, Program Director of the Southwestern Mental Health Center at Luverne, suggests that many rural professionals, including many physicians, have stubbornly maintained a "hide your head in the sand attitude" concerning mental health in the rural areas. He believes that evidence of such an attitude is reflected by the lack of adequate research which became obvious when a search of the available literature was made.

Clark points out that the implications of stress for farmers and their families are great if allowed to build and remain unattended. He adds that "while in a depressed state or high anxiety state, often the result of abnormal stress over a long period, people are more apt to have accidents". Furthermore, while in a "depressed state or under abnormal stress" individuals are often "unable to measure empirically their thought process" and eventually lose track of what is happening or become unable to account for their actions. The consequence is that those in this state of health gradually "lose their ability to manage effectively." In other words, depression or other psychological problems brought on by a variety of stressful influences (personal conflict, decision making, interpersonal

problems, financial difficulties, etc.) can lead to not only irrational or unsafe behavior that may physically injure the farmer, a member of his family or someone with whom he works but also result in actions that may place in jeopardy the present security or future success of the farm business.

Robert Whalen of the Range Mental Health Center at Virginia believes that the unique thing about agriculture is that farm people "are so dependent on the environment." As conditions worsen and the feelings of hopelessness increase, "less attention is paid to safety, personal health, and sound management practices. "Often the intensity of anger increases", states Whalen, due to the frustration caused by the inability to control what is happening. The Pierce County Syndrome is an example of this behavior. In this mental state a son may resent the "hired man" relationship he has with his father. The son, in an indentured rather than a partnership position, exhibits his frustration and anger through undesirable and often self abusing behavior.

Whalen went on to say that based on his observations, the problems associated with drug and alcohol use among farmers and their families have increased during the last few years. These indicators may be a reflection of stresses associated with the drought, especially when observed in farm families and their agribusiness counterparts in the western and southwestern areas of the state where its impact on livestock and crop production was the greatest. He felt that there was "no question" that "many rural people have problems with being heavily reliant on chemicals, whether it be booze or pills".

Confronting a farmer with these issues is often extremely difficult, explains Whalen, because of their tendency to "protect themselves through the use of their physical environment". Discussion rarely strays from the traditional topics of crops, weather and livestock. Generally, rural people and farmers in particular, "do not wish to discuss their human environment".

Whalen suggests that maintaining good rural mental health calls for a broad based, open, community approach where rural professionals, including vocational agriculture instructors are:

1. Oriented to the problems and willing to recognize that mental health problems do exist in the rural areas.

2. Aware of the local and state level resources that exist and how these resources can be utilized to provide effective community based services for those with mental health problems.
3. Aware of the hazards and pitfalls that can result from high levels of stress. (As indicated, many mental health problems are caused, at least in part, by the individual's environment.)
4. Able to recognize the warning signals of excessive stress (and be willing to risk involvement in order to provide assistance.)

On a related issue concerning the stresses on young people, Whalen points out that he views learning disabilities of rural youth to be the primary reason that causes them to become turned off to formal education. In his words, "It is still the attitude of many (in education) that because a student doesn't conform, he is a dud rather than because he was unable to learn properly."

Dr. Roger Kollmorgen of the Five County Human Services Program and the University of Minnesota Hospital, indicates, as all others interviewed on this topic have, that there appears to be "no significant difference between rural and urban incidents of mental health problems . . . they just take different forms". He also believed that Minnesota's drought has been a primary factor causing abnormal stress on many of the state's farmers. An interesting illustration he provides is that "on marginal land with marginal income the difference between 26 and 24 bushel soybeans per acre may determine whether or not a youngster in the family will go to college." This type of uncontrollable situation places tremendous stress on the entire family.

From his experience, Kollmorgen suggests, that there does appear to be a "positive correlation between economic stability (good land, consistent water supply, productive management practices, etc.) and the incidents of depression." In other words, marginal land, stony soil, drought conditions, and poor management practices that often result in failure, place greater stresses on the farm family, thus leading to depression and other mental health problems, including earlier described classroom behavioral problems.

Kollmorgen had noticed in his area of practice that during the strongest grip of the drought, there were fewer cases involv-

ing rural young people and drugs which he felt could possibly be the result of limited financial resources to support that type of activity. This may also be the factor behind increased alcohol consumption during these periods due to its greater accessibility and lower costs. Evidence of drug traffic is unquestionable in rural areas which is a further indicator of emotional instability. Nearly all of the first-year teachers indicated that problems existed in their schools and classrooms with drug use.

The farm wife, even though not traditionally considered a significant client of the vocational agriculture program, is often the greatest victim of pressures associated with operation of the farm business. Kollmorgen and many of the others interviewed, concerning rural stress, suggested that the incidents of unhappy marriages may be as great among rural people as is found in urban areas. Superficial appearances may reflect otherwise due to traditional values, peer pressure and religious influences. Isolation and loneliness are often tremendous stresses that the farm wife may have to deal with. Nicknamed "cabin fever" and referred to as a "Red River Valley or Northwest Minnesota Farm Wife's Syndrome" by mental health professionals, the results can be extremely destructive to the individual, her family and to the farm business.

The unique feature of a husband-wife farm operation, like that of any small business, is that it is usually a "joint economic venture". A major investment in the business, a loss or significant decision will usually affect the individual or economic goals of the wife as much as those of her husband. This situation in which, at times, the partnership may be as much out of necessity as it is out of choice will place additional stresses on the marriage relationship and often have a significant impact on the children. From observation, it seems well founded to suggest that an unstable marriage or one that dissolves can have as great an impact on the farm business as any market, managerial, or environmental factor. Though not a scientifically based observation, it appears to be one that deserves greater attention if indeed vocational agriculture is to continue to be concerned with family goals in addition to improving the total farm business. As one Cornell University Farm Management Professor, C. A. Bratton, puts it, you need three things to be successful in farming:

- Good Land
- A Good Wife
- A Desire to Farm

For a farmer, (or vocational agriculture instructor, in his or her dealings with a farm family), to be insensitive to the goals of the wife and the stresses that may result if she fails to obtain them, is in itself practicing poor management.

Stress also affects the farmer's health as indicated by Dr. Robert Butler, Coordinator of the Washington County Human Services Center. "Masked depression" brought on by continuous stress leaves an individual complaining of a lack of energy, poor appetite, and generally not feeling well. "Often a doctor who confronts a farmer with complaints of physical problems will treat them as if they actually had depression and their condition improves."

Butler provides the example that when crops or crop growing conditions are poor, tension may build up. The farmers cannot sleep, they worry, neglect their diet and may become seriously depressed or physically ill.

When asked what he felt vocational agriculture instructors should know concerning rural stress and other mental health problems, Butler responded with suggestions similar to those made by Robert Whalen earlier:

1. Vocational agriculture instructors should be able to recognize the symptoms or warning signals of mental health problems.
2. They should know what and where resources are available.
3. They should be aware of the fact that mental health problems do exist in the rural areas and have incident rates equivalent to those found in urban areas.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS IN VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE**

1. The vocational agriculture instructor will confront increasing levels of stress in farm families, especially those families on less productive land and with limited potential for expression.
2. The vocational agriculture instructor may have to deal with more student behavioral problems that may directly reflect high levels of stress in the home due to both farm and family related problems.
3. Traditional farm management decisions (incorporation, father-son partnership, introduction of new technology, etc.)

may result in more stress for all those involved including the vocational agriculture instructor due to the higher risks, costs and social implications for the family.

4. Students, both at the secondary and adult levels, may seek the counsel of the vocational agriculture instructor in order to obtain assistance in dealing with personal mental health problems resulting from stresses in the farm business, family or other causes.
5. Addressing the mental health needs of the community may become a viable activity for FFA chapters.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER PREPARATION IN AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION:**

1. Undergraduate programs in Agriculture Education should provide students with an orientation to the mental health problems that exists in the rural areas.
2. Instruction should be provided in Agricultural Education on the types and availability of mental health resources.
3. Students in Agricultural Education should be provided basic, non-therapeutic resource materials to assist them in identifying warning signals of stress, depression, or other potential mental health problems.
4. Continued emphasis should be placed on the "total student" approach to teaching vocational agriculture. Students in preparation to be teachers should be encouraged to look beyond the boundary of the classroom in their efforts to prepare a youngster for life.
5. Vocational agriculture instructors should continue to be prepared and selected to not only effectively deal with the technical needs of their clients but to have the maturity, stability and sensitivity to address the personal needs of those with whom they work.

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