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Families Together Through Mediation



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"Yesterday as you saw the mailman driving up the county road you wondered if there would be a letter from one of the children. When he drove in the yard to deliver the certified letter from a creditor, your heart began to beat rapidly.

As you read the letter, you discovered it was a notice of the creditor's intent to take collection action, and that you have a right to mediate before further action is taken. Crisis has entered your life."

Every family knows it is inevitable that they will experience crisis in their life. However, most families do not plan for it. Just as the terminally ill person holds the hope a cure for their disease will be found in time to help them, the farm family hopes the solution to their farm financial problem will be discovered before it is too late. When the certified letter arrived, this hope was shattered.

As your family goes through the farm financial crisis, it is important to remember that it affects your family as well as the farm business. As you discuss your farming options and look at the farm financial picture, remember that communication within the family and with friends is important. The feelings you experience are normal, and are all part of the grieving process that people experience in a crisis or loss. Although family living expenses seem insignificant when compared to the total farm debt, it is important to know what your family living needs are, and what resources are available to the family. In times of stress and crisis, family living expenses often can create more conflict within the family than the entire farm debt. Having control of things closest to you will help you feel more control over other areas as well.

This publication include information on family communication, the grieving process, family living costs, and available resources. More details can be obtained from your county extension agent in home economics.

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Crisis results when a person or family is faced with an important problem or task which cannot easily be handled by normal problem-solving approaches or tactics. It includes, or results from, an event or circumstance (such as a creditor's notice), and the family's reaction to the problem. Up to this point, you probably have denied the problem, or hoped that a solution could be found. When the certified letter from the creditor arrives, this is a turning point - for better or worse. Your situation will probably not be the same again. Now you must deal with the situation.

TAKE TIME TO GRIEVE

Most of us are able to deal with our emotions when there is a death of a loved one. Few are aware that people go through a similar grieving process when experiencing other losses. As you go through farm financial crisis, the feelings of denial, anger, blame, depression, and guilt are normal.

In her research on death and dying, Dr. Kubler-Ross has developed the following stages of the grieving process.

DENIAL: Before the creditor's notice arrives, and immediately after, many farm families deny there is a problem. If you do not do a financial analysis on paper, it is easy to avoid facing the problem. Some families continue to operate as if it's "business as usual." It isn't! The denial stage is important because it serves as a buffer when receiving the shocking news.

ANGER: When the first stage of denial cannot be maintained any longer, it is replaced by anger, blame, and resentment. The anger is expressed to spouses, children, parents, creditors, the community, yourself, or others. Just when families need each other the most, each person's pain makes it difficult to be sympathetic. Additional problems arise when individuals within a family are at different stages in the grieving process.

One of the most destructive aspects of blame is if you begin to blame yourself for the farm problems. While some self blame is natural, it is unhealthy to dwell on guilt and failure. Do not ignore the fact that problems may have been due to factors beyond your control.

BARGAINING: This is the start of acceptance of a problem, but individuals look for bargaining chips. A feeling of panic often accompanies this stage. Within the mediation process you will develop several options to present to your creditors. Do not confuse realistic options with bargaining. The latter might include proposing options that are totally unacceptable, or playing games to prolong the process or retaliate against a creditor.

DEPRESSION: At this stage, individuals realize that their farm and lifestyle is in trouble and will not be able to go on as usual. At this stage people have a "don't care" attitude. They withdraw from activities in the community and family. This is a time when friends and family are needed to listen and to give support.

ACCEPTANCE: This is the final stage which starts the recovery process. It does not mean that you accept the loss of the farm, but it means that you accept things as they are and will look for the best alternative for yourself or your

family. It might mean reducing acreage, renting the farm back from the creditor, or changing careers. In some cases it may mean leaving the farm.

In the book Living When A Loved One Has Died, Earl Grollman states, "You cannot plant an acorn in the morning and expect to sit in the shade of the oak tree that afternoon." In a similar manner, it takes time to work through the emotional process.

Some people come out of a crisis weaker, more susceptible to trouble, and in a poorer state of mind, while others are stronger, with a better sense of renewal. What makes the difference? The person with the problem or crisis must recognize, admit, face up to, and actively search for a solution. Those who do so emerge stronger. Persons who emerge weaker are those who ignore the problem or belittle its importance, or have not sought help and support from others.

FAMILY FINANCES THROUGH MEDIATION

During mediation or economic hard times on the farm, family living expenses continue. The family's need for food, clothing, shelter, insurance, heat, medical expenses, etc., do not go away. You may need to reduce your family expenditures, but they cannot be ignored.

Throughout the mediation time, the lender and creditors must allow enough money from the sale of farm products to cover on-going farm expenses and for family living expenses at a basic level. This will vary with each case and will be determined at the first mediation session. You can visit with your county extension agents if you have questions on this issue.

Family financial management can be defined as the way a person or family manages their resources. Since there is not a perfect way to handle finances, it is a matter of personal preference. But, there is a need to manage family finances in such a way that it provides all family members with a sense of "being in control." Once you know how much is being spent on family living, you can establish an internal control, and it is easier to make decisions with confidence and bargain with creditors. As stated earlier, having control over the closest areas of ones life helps to face other problem areas and to begin to move forward in your life.

The importance of the plan cannot be overstated. The spending plan is like a roadmap. It can tell you where you are at, where you have been, and how to proceed. The old saying "If you don't know where you are going, you might end up somewhere else" is a statement which applies to setting up a family financial plan. A plan can outline the total financial picture of the family.

Money can play various roles within the family. It can represent power, love, security, managerial skills, responsibility, or a sense of well-being to name a few. Money is necessary for survival and for the quality of life. Determining the amount needed by families for living expenses is so important to the total well-being of all individuals involved.

The challenge for each family member is to accept the responsibility for trying to improve the family financial situation. In times of reduced or limited income it is important to involve everyone in the family in trying to

set priorities, and to make the best use of all resources. Here are some steps you can take to financially survive the situation:

- DO NOT PANIC

- Make a list of the resources of the family. Examples include time, money, skills, energy, and attitudes.

- Make a list of community resources such as extension service, family services, community action programs, food shelf, nursing service, WIC, etc. Contact your county extension agent in home economics for a more detailed list.

- Immediately have each family member set spending priorities and use these in determining family priorities.

- The family living spending plan can help you in communicating your needs to creditors.

- Plan a place to live. You may or may not be able to maintain your current way of life.

- Adopt techniques to help manage the stress.

- Make use of available resources to meet your family's needs.

Many farm families have fluctuating incomes in that you do not rely on a set dollar income on a weekly or monthly basis. If you are in this type of situation, here are some things to consider when setting up a plan for your family:

- Always underestimate income and overestimate expenses.

- Keep careful records. Keep track of where the money goes in the family.

- Review records and adjust spending plans accordingly.

- Buy "extras" from accumulated funds, not from current income.

- Set aside income for the "unexpected."

- Keep household funds in a separate account from the farm business funds.

- Write checks for as many expenses as possible. It helps with record keeping.

- Select a recordkeeping system that helps account for expenditures.

- Decide what should be spent for family living and what to reinvest in the farm business. Often farm and home compete for available cash or income.

- Be open and honest with everyone in the household about the current financial situation. Children, no matter what age, need to know the financial status of the family. Depending on the age of the child, you may have to interpret what it means. Leveling with children can help relieve stress in the

whole family, and they will probably be able to offer creative ways to deal with the financial situation.

The household expenses are small when compared to the total farm operation expense. This leads many people to believe that it is unimportant; however, remember that gaining control of your life in one area, helps you to feel that you can gain control in other areas as well.

FAMILY DECISIONS TO BE MADE

When the creditor's notice arrived, it may or may not have been expected; but you probably did not realize how painful it would be when it actually arrived. At first, you probably did not talk about the financial problem, hoping it would go away. Then when you talked about it, you argued and blamed each other, family members, lenders, the government, or anyone else you thought of. Your family probably tried everything to avoid the situation you now face. One spouse may have taken a job in town, you probably worked longer hours on the farm, and maybe even borrowed money from another family member. Each of you became more depressed, withdrawing from church and other community activities. Now with the mediation notice in hand, you realize that you must talk about the problem and seek other options in your life.

The decisions you and your family will make are some of the most important of your life. They are not easy because they do not just affect the farm and its operator, but the entire family.

As you approach mediation, recognize that you are in crisis and are searching for solutions. Like many families who actively try to find suitable solutions, you should try to emerge stronger from it as a family. Families who do not face the crisis may experience even greater pain because of the scars created by not communicating about the problem presently facing them.

When you care so much about something like the farm and your family, it is very difficult to look at your life objectively. You have the strength and the power to find those things in your life you can control. When you feel some control, you are better able to make other decisions regarding your life.

Here are some guidelines to help you get started making some of those difficult decisions. If you would like more help, please feel free to contact your local county extension agent in home economics.

DEFINE THE PROBLEM: In times of crisis it is important that everyone in the family is clear on what exactly is the problem the family is working on. One of the first steps will be to identify the problem and the decisions related to it. What is the problem? Have each family member describe it. (Writing it down individually helps us organize thoughts.) It might be whether or not to go through mediation, seek off-the-farm employment, or leave the farm.

Compare descriptions together. How does each family member feel about the problem? Ask each family member to share feelings. Most of us have not had much experience describing our emotions, so this may feel uncomfortable at first. It helps to start by beginning with the words "I feel" and then follow these with words describing the emotions you are feeling such as sad, scared,

unhappy, angry, lonely, etc.

Discuss what you and your family would do if the worst possible thing happened. Then discuss together what a satisfactory solution might look like. What part or parts of the problem can you as a family control or change? What parts are uncontrollable? Do you want to work toward a solution together?

Identify what part of the problem must be dealt with now. For example, if the decision is to go through mediation, it may include tasks like getting farm and family financial records together.

ALTERNATIVES: Now that you've identified the problem, what can be done in the short run to achieve the desirable outcome you described above?

For the next ten minutes have each family member identify three things they or the family could do to work toward resolving the problem. Have them write the three things on paper. If the problem is lack of cash for family living, family members might identify things like selling personal or household items that are no longer used, or cutting back on less important purchases like new clothing. Share ideas and make one written list. Keep in mind, no idea is wrong.

CONSEQUENCES: Once you've chosen desirable alternatives, think through how they might affect the family. How might each family member contribute?

What outside assistance would you need? Where can you get it? Who can help you find it? (Your local extension office might be a place to start.)

ACTION: From the alternatives chosen, ask each family member to identify ways they would like to help.

Take time when the family can get together to discuss what is happening and make changes if necessary.

SUPPORT FROM OTHERS:

During crisis, families receive support from relatives, neighbors, and friends. The need for this emotional support is as strong when faced with the possible loss of the family farm as it is in the death of a loved one. However current research indicates that people may not be as supportive, or feel as supported, during the farm crisis.

When we experience a death in the family, there is a ritual that helps neighbors and friends show support. When people are in danger of losing their farm, there is not a ritual for people to follow. People know the exact time of a death. The farm crisis is more ambiguous. The moment of loss is not absolute, thus making it difficult to know when to offer support as well as what type of support to give.

During farm economic crisis it is important to seek the support of others. Openly communicate with family, trusted friends, and neighbors. You might feel a desire to withdraw for reasons such as you want to avoid people talking about you, it's your way of controlling your emotions, you want to avoid taking your blame and anger out on others, or you're putting all of your time and energy

into saving the farm. Keep contact with others.

Try not to judge others who seem to draw away from you during this time. Your perceived nonsupport from them in reality might be their way of dealing with the situation. In some, cases neighbors and friends might feel they are helping you by staying away; in other situations, they are unsure of how to deal with your situation. If they see you seeking support and help, they will be there.

You will need:

Tangible Support: Sharing of time, equipment, resources, etc.

Psychological Support: Someone to talk to and listen to your concerns. Maintain community contacts such as coffee at the local cafe or church.

Information Support: Someone to discuss farm option, legal/tax advise, and explore family options.

As you go through mediation, visit with others who have been there. They can help you to understand what you are about to experience.

Extension agents can also listen and direct you to support groups and other community resources.

Do not go through it alone!

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