

Stress and Coping Related to Drought For Rural Families

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Nebraska, as well as other states in Central US, is experiencing extreme or exceptional drought and water shortage. Compared to other natural disasters such as floods or pests, drought conditions are more long-term and more difficult to cope for farmers and their families (Bosch, Griffin, Meek, & Rossman, 2002). Farm and farming means an income, a lifestyle, and a home to many farmers (Cloke, 1996), but prolonged drought has put an increased risk on farm sustainability for farmers and families. The loss of a farm can be a traumatic experience and means a major change in lifestyle, place of residency, and the end of family business (Boeckner, Bosch, & Johnston, 2003). As Bosch and colleagues suggested, farmers and their families are affected by drought in many ways - financially, emotionally and physically.

Financial stress and coping strategies

Farmers and their families are often faced with financial stress caused by prolonged drought. At the beginning of the drought, financial stress can be acute, but as the drought continues and farmers experience huge loss of their income or even farm business, financial stress can become chronic. Also, tension may be building between partners and between parents and children due to financial stress (Boeckner et al. 2003). Boeckner and colleagues (2003) listed several coping strategies to help rural families deal with financial stress. They recommended that open and honest communication among family members including children is the most important way for families to lessen the adverse effect of financial stress (Boeckner et al., 2003). The following are the specific coping strategies:

- Talk about values and money. Family members get together and talk about each one's values and attitudes toward money.
- Set guidelines for your financial discussions. Each family member states their individual wants and needs and is willing to compromise and negotiate on financial goals and spending habits.
- Set goals and priorities. Given the current situation, set realistic standards to accomplish what you want with your money. Set a time line including short-medium-and long-term objectives and make changes on the plans due to any uncertain weather patterns, earning capability and economic times. For example, if you have planned to buy farm equipment and it will cost a considerable amount of your savings, you may have to put it off due to the hardship related to drought currently.
- Make a pending plan. Write down your spending plan and list your most important expenses. Avoid unnecessary and impulse buying.
- Keep your business and living expenses separate. In order to gain a clear view of your financial situation, farmers should keep personal and farm business expenses separate.
- Think twice about quick fixes or offers that are too good to be true. Consider carefully when low introduction rate credit cards or low interest home equity or farm equipment loans are offered. They may look like a quick fix, but make decisions carefully before taking on more debt.
- Seek professional help when you need it. Seek help from professional financial services

and communicate with your lender and creditors to discuss solutions to help alleviate your financial problems.

- Parents in rural families can plan ahead for future generations, that is, encourage their children to leave the farm to gain new skills (Caldwell & Boyd, 2009). The new knowledge and skills may benefit farming in a long run.
- Farmers can increase ability to be diverse in farm practices, such as planting wheat, corn, hay, dairy cattle..... it may be better for the farmers who rely on one crop or farm animal. (Caldwell & Boyd, 2009).

Physical reactions and coping strategies

When people encounter stress, the body will start a complex chemical reaction that prepares people to “fight off” the stress. Physical reactions will cause blood pressure to go up, heart to beat faster, digestive system to slow down, and blood to clot more quickly (Shutske, Schermann, & Rasmussen, University of Minnesota Extension). These responses to stress can be very damaging to physical health. Coping strategies may be to:

- Adopt a healthy life style that include
 - Preparing balanced meals more at home (healthy and low cost)
 - Getting enough sleep
 - Drink enough fluid to keep you refreshed.
 - Getting exercise and keeping your routine
- Spending time with family and friends
- Trying to discover new hobbies and new things you enjoy doing.
- Monitor any signs of health problems, and when you notice the signs, check with your doctors right away.

Psychological or emotional reactions and coping strategies

A prolonged drought tends to bring major life changes and crisis for rural families. Prolonged uncertainty increases anxiety and stress within the household and the rural community. A series of normal emotions related to a drought, including feelings of being out of control and at the mercy of the weather and markets, fear of future lack of finances to continue providing the family and farming practices, strong emotions such as frustration, anger, helplessness and disappointment, regret for decisions made /not made, blaming others or yourself, social isolation, grief and despair associated with various losses such as farm land or herds of stock, sadness associated with livestock or crops suffer and/or die (CentreLink, 1997; Grant, et al., 2004; Lazarus, 1999). Ineffective and negative coping and stressful events have a reciprocal relationship. For example, negative coping may strain spouse and partner relationships, and generate more stressful events in children and family, and life. Depression of parents is highly associated with depression and maladjustments of their children and adolescents (Langrock, Compas, Keller, Merchant, & Copeland, 2002). Following are specific strategies to strengthen your family relationships and your own mental health.

- Prolonged drought often compels the farmer families to make agonizing decisions. It is better for the partners (especially women) both involved in mutual decision-making process and reaching a consensus. This strategy shows improved family functioning,

family satisfaction, self-esteem, and family coping levels (Colorado State University Extension, fact sheet No. 10.256).

- Express your affection to your partner and make your relationships positive. Explain the drought and related problems in simple terms to your children. Receive support from partners and children (Fetsch, 2012; Caldwell & Boyd, 2009).
- Plan family fun times each week (Fetsch, 2012).
- Reach out to extended families, friends, and the community to seek emotional and institutional support you need.
- Reframe the problems, stay positive and hopeful. Resort to religion and spiritual practices.
- Avoid substance use to cope, such as drinking more alcohol, smoking, and illegal drug use, which can only make your situations worse.
- Monitor and identify the signs related to depression and other emotional or behavioral problems within yourself and family members such as feeling numb and empty, having difficulty sleeping, and feeling “on-edge” most of the time. If you notice the signs, ask for professional help immediately.

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