

# Enough's Enough!

Stress is sometimes one of agriculture's many hazards.

by Janet Mayer

**S**ince the first domestic animal was raised and the first seed was sown, agricultural production has always involved uncertainty. A piece of machinery breaks down in the middle of a harvest necessitating a rushed trip to town to buy parts. A pop-up thundershower ruins a field of ready-to-bale hay. A heifer has calving problems. All are routine situations that can happen in any agricultural operation.

Add in problems with long working hours, low returns, weather-related issues such as flood and drought, fluctuating market prices, animals and crop diseases, government regulations, and loan repayments. All these circumstances can combine into a perfect scenario for job-related stress that could possibly build to total burnout or depression.

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), agricultural workers represent an occupational group with one of the highest levels of job-related stress. Further studies show these workers have the highest rate of death as a result of stress-related conditions, with heat stress, artery disease, hypertension, ulcers and nervous disorders topping the list.

## What is stress?

In information on stress management distributed through the Oklahoma State University and University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Services, stress is described as a person's physical and psychological reaction to anything overwhelming that could be considered a challenge or a threat. This, in turn, creates pressure and emotional strain, causing the body to "gear up" for action and the creation of extra energy to protect itself. If this energy surplus is not used, it creates an imbalance within the system, making the body circulate more blood while slowing down digestion to the point of stopping.

If not controlled, stress can become an endless cycle that can snowball into problems with family and work, as well as causing major health problems such as hypertension, cardiovascular disease, heart disease, ulcers, lung ailments, cancer and cirrhosis of the liver. Other less serious stress-related ailments include allergies, asthma, migraine headaches and sleeplessness.

## Identifying stress

Everyone differs in terms of what is stressful or potentially stressful. What one producer might see as a catastrophe may

be a minor setback for another. A positive or negative attitude often influences a person's reaction. Although some agricultural producers may inwardly recognize routine stressors, they feel that these circumstances have been faced and overcome by previous generations, and they fully expect themselves to handle them as well.

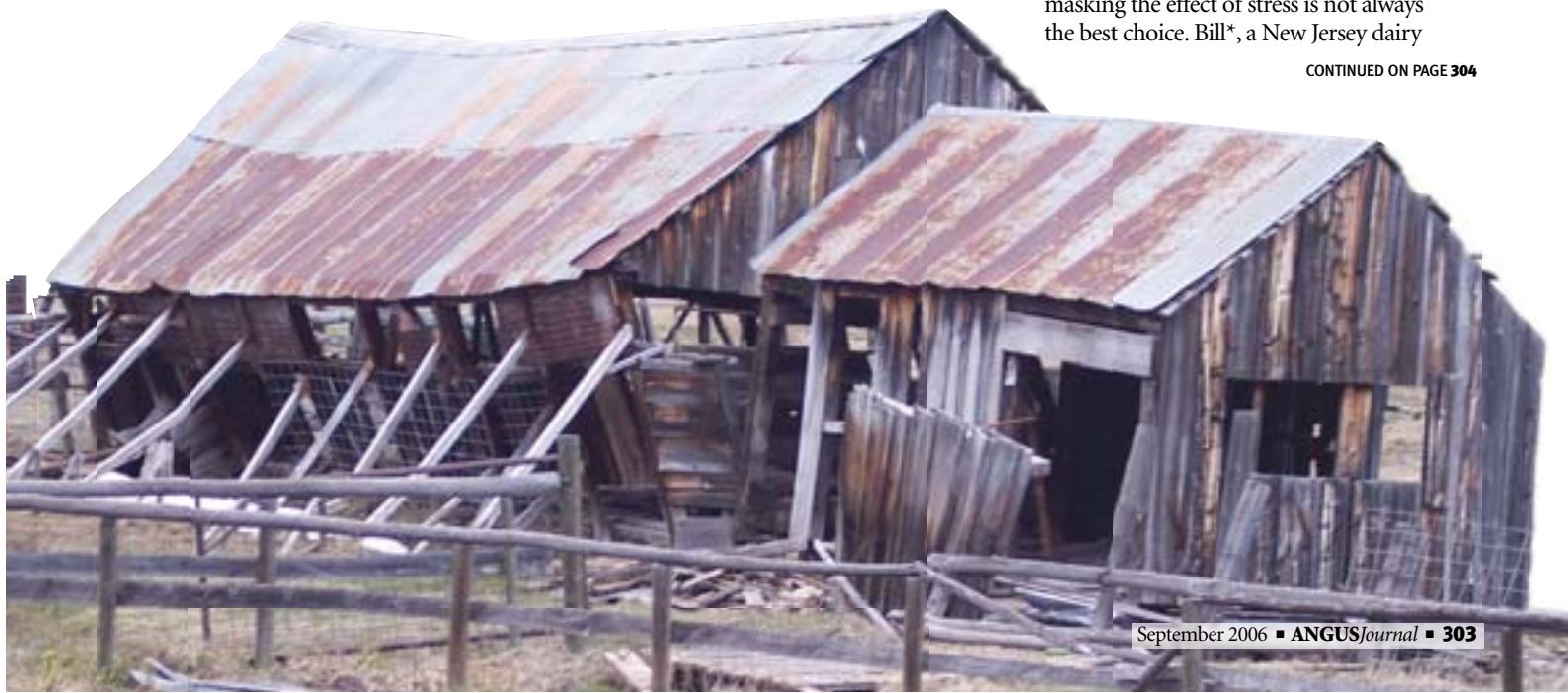
In stress management, the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service reminds producers that dealing with stress is a natural part of life, and most people thrive on a certain amount of stress. Too much or too little stress will limit effectiveness. The trick is to find the optimal level or the balance at which they are most motivated.

They advise that excessive stress may make someone a better, more efficient worker for a short time, but over the long haul, a person will wear down, becoming physically weaker and tire more easily, resulting in a lack of concentration that may cause poor management decisions. This can be especially dangerous when operating machinery and can cause accidents.

## How to manage stress

It is healthy to identify stress and to find constructive ways to deal with it, since masking the effect of stress is not always the best choice. Bill\*, a New Jersey dairy

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farmer, can attest to that fact when he ended up in treatment for clinical depression.

"I wouldn't admit I was having a problem handling problems on my farm because my father had handled them before me, and I thought it would show that I wasn't a very good manager," he says. "I would describe burnout as a quiet little thing that sneaks up on a person and has you feeling like the farm and or a job is the biggest hassle with the fewest rewards on the face of the earth.

"A sure sign that stress is getting [to be] too much," he continues, "is when you find you are unable to tell yourself to deal with a problem tomorrow and go to sleep, but instead lay awake tossing and turning and worrying all night and finally drifting off to sleep about the time the alarm clock does its thing."

Things that once were a challenge to conquer, became insurmountable, Bill explains. "I began making mistakes I had never made before."

When he finally went to the family doctor, he was diagnosed with clinical depression.

"With the help of prescription drugs and counseling, I have made a good recovery," Bill says, "and I now realize I can't control every aspect of my operation. I have learned to determine the source of my stress, and I try to consider ways to lessen the impact on myself and those who work with me."

The University of Delaware Cooperative Extension Service suggests the following stress management techniques.

1. Have a clear sense of goals and priorities and realize you cannot control the weather, interest rates, accidents, machinery break-downs and many other uncertain situations.
2. Keep your body healthy and strong by eating a balanced diet that is good for both physical and mental health. Food is fuel for the body — the better the input, the better the output.
3. Exercise vigorously on a regular basis. Physical activity makes a person feel better and eases tension. Take a 10-minute exercise break — it helps.

4. Use your energy to solve your problems rather than trying to escape from them. Think positive and turn problems into challenges.
5. Get plenty of sleep and rest to refresh the mind and body.
6. Balance work and play. Recreation can help a person enjoy work more besides being just plain fun.
7. Fertilize your mind by giving it mental nutrients for a healthy and positive attitude through reading. Choose a book with positive input to take your mind off your troubles of the moment.
8. Maintain a strong support group with your family and good friends.
9. If you need outside help, ask your physician, a trusted nurse or your pastor to recommend counseling or a group clinic. It is not a sign of weakness to ask for help.
10. Learn to recognize the fact that stress is a normal part of life, and it is common to everyone.

**\*Editor's Note:** Full identity not included to protect anonymity.

