



Finding ways to 'take five'

Give yourself permission to relax

themselves. We know from research that people who don't take good care of themselves, don't live as long."

Also consider this: A farmer's job is never done. "Farmers and farm families work very hard," adds Don Bower, Department Head, Child and Family Development at the University of Georgia. "But there's always something more to do regardless of how many hours you work."

Relaxation is relative

The evolution of farming and of American work habits in general, have progressed to the point where time for relaxation is a scarce commodity. Studies have shown that Americans have added the equivalent of seven weeks to their annual work schedule since 1970 through longer work hours and less vacation time.

"These are some troubling statistics, so it's important to find some balance in your life," says Bower. "There is clear evidence that over time, stress reduces your body's physical resilience. You're less likely to be able to withstand infections and injuries if your body is not renewed by relaxation as well as good nutrition and exercise."

Wendell Joyce, farmer and current Executive Director of the Canadian Farm Business Management Council, notes that farm safety can also be at risk. "When I reflect on it, all the close calls I've had have been when I

was under pressure or overtired," he says. "There's a very definite correlation between the two."

Before you insist that you can't possibly take five minutes out of your schedule to do nothing, consider that relaxing isn't simply being idle.

"Relaxation is relative," says Joyce. "It doesn't have to be sitting on a beach or in a rocking chair. Relaxation can be sitting on a tractor. I find making hay is as relaxing for me as sitting in a rocking chair in the living room. Checking calves with my son is also relaxing. Relaxation is more of a state of mind than a physical location. It can be defined in many different ways."

Elaine Froese, motivational speaker, author and farm business coach in Boissevain, Manitoba, defines relaxation as enjoying a cup of tea and a good laugh with friends around the kitchen table. For her husband, it's calling his mother who lives three hours away but wants to remain connected to the farm. Her 80-year-old father who still farms relaxes by taking a 10-minute power nap after lunch. "I haven't learned the art of napping," she admits. "But it's a great way to take a break and build more pauses into your life. It's really wherever you go in your mind, body and spirit where you lose all track of time and you become renewed."

Here are some guidelines to help you find balance by learning to incor-

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If there were 25 hours in a day, how would you spend that extra hour – would you cram in another hour of work or would you take time for yourself and relax?

Before you answer, consider this: According to studies conducted on stress and its polar opposite – relaxation – those who are less stressed and more relaxed live longer with fewer health problems.

"Relaxing is a very important part of farming successfully," says Robert Fetsch, professor and State Extension Specialist in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Colorado State University. "Ag production is such a high-stress, high-tension occupation that it's important for everyone to take care of

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porate relaxation and “pause” into your day:

Determine what makes you stressed – Pay attention to how your body reacts to certain situations. Notice when you feel tension in your neck, shoulder or jaw. Stress causes other physical changes in your body as well, such as increased heart rate and chemical imbalances, notes Bower.

Learn the difference between problems and predicaments, encourages Fetsch. Predicaments are forces over which you have less than 50% control, such as the weather, commodity prices, etc. Problems are factors over which you have at least 50% control. “When I ask people to list their top 10 stressors, weather almost always makes the list, so do commodity prices and equipment costs,” says Fetsch. “But these are all predicaments over which you don’t have control. Rather than focus on these, focus on aspects over which you have control such as when you’ll turn on the irrigation water.

“The same rule applies to relationships with people. You probably don’t have a lot of control over what Mom and Dad thinks,” he continues. “Instead of



focusing on their reaction, focus on how you can be the best farmer, husband, wife, etc. you can be.”

Control your reaction to stress – Fetsch defines stress as a response to a perceived threat. Rarely are our threats truly dangerous, but threats against our plans – especially those involving time, money or relationships – are the basis for most of our stress.

For example, what is your reaction to a rainy morning if you had fieldwork planned?

“Instead of letting it stress you out, focus on work that can be done in the

barn or the office,” says Bower. Making it a productive day will reduce the stress.

“Make a conscious decision to reframe an unplanned circumstance as an opportunity to do something else,” he says. Rather than obsess about them, train yourself to let go of those things you can’t control.”

Your perception of a stressful event is a key variable between those who handle stress well and those who don’t, explains Fetsch. For example, it may not be so much a financial condition as what that financial condition means to you.

“If you think you’re going under, you’ll

Randy Weigel

*Extension Specialist
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Find a technique

If practicing relaxation seems too time-consuming, recognize that stress takes time away from every task you do. For example, even basic chores can take longer when you are battling stress and fatigue. In the overall scheme of things, the benefits will make you more effective throughout each day.

Meditation is one form of relaxation. It’s more than concentrating on a concept. It’s a process by which you gain mastery over your reaction to external information. When you are successful, it involves a temporary shut-down of the information processing mechanisms of

the brain. The result: relaxation. Once you learn it, you can induce the relaxation response whenever you are confronted with a stressful situation. Here’s how: Sit quietly and comfortably, relax your muscles and breathe through your nose while you say the word “one.” Continue for 10 to 20 minutes. Don’t worry about achieving a deep level of relaxation. Rather, use a passive attitude to permit relaxation to occur at its own pace.

Relaxation can occur in various ways and in many places. Successful relaxation should be enjoyable and easy, but it may take time to perfect. Don’t be discouraged if a relaxation technique doesn’t work right away. Keep trying a variety of techniques until you find one that works for you.

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Reconnect

It’s important to build a counterbalance to pressing for performance. So many people have tremendous workloads and enormous expectations of how quickly they’ll accomplish them. In response, people tend to have one of two experiences: crash and burn, or “blur and endure” where they blindly go through tasks without harvesting the satisfaction of completing something. You move immediately on to the next task, and you don’t get any relief because there’s a constant flow or more things coming your way.

I try to encourage a rhythm of renew-

have a lot higher stress and depression than if you think you have some way to manage it," he says. "It may help to consider that at other times in your life you may have lived with less income, or maybe a spouse can get a part-time job.

"If you look at positive actions, it will help your stress level and depression and will help you stay healthier with better family functioning. It's like a card game – it's not so much winning or losing, but how well we deal with the hand we're dealt."

There are several physical and mental activities that can release tension and promote relaxation. Physically, Fetsch suggests that you do stretching exercises every morning, especially if you plan to do a physically strenuous activity during the day.

"Periodically throughout the day take some time for deep breathing. Roll your head to the left and right a few times and close your eyes for a second or two," he notes. "It's a relatively simple thing to do that doesn't take much time. It's best to be able to relax for 20 to 30 minutes, but even a minute or two is better than nothing."

Emotionally, Fetsch says to focus on things that are pleasant to you, such as family. "There is real value in getting physically removed from the operation,"

adds Joyce. "But on those days when you can't do that, you can do it in your mind."

Take some time off – Try setting aside one day a week where you don't plan any farm work. "Having a day with no real fixed agenda can be beneficial," Froese says.

Stay connected with neighbors and the community – Joyce indicates that in just one generation we've gone from a society that enjoys a friendly visit to one that hopes no one stops when they spot us outside.

"The culture has shifted," adds Froese. "Drop-in visits just don't happen anymore. The gift of a visit, a good meal and having fun together are becoming lost rural arts. They used to give people a lot of renewal and relaxation. But we can regain some of it. Most of us have a cell phone. Call your neighbors and ask if it's OK to drop in. They have the opportunity to say yes or no, and you haven't lost anything by asking."

Staying connected also helps identify neighbors and friends in crisis. "Keep an eye out for who is withdrawing," says Froese. "Some people's response to financial and time pressures is to pull back from the community. Pay attention to who isn't coming

to the auctions and special community events. Most people don't even realize that they are disconnecting."

Let go of hostility – Research indicates that those who are not only stressed but are also hostile about it, are at greater risk for health issues. "There's a difference being stressed and being stressed with hostility," says Fetsch. "When there's anger and blame toward the government, family members, the neighbor, etc., at some point these people will likely have health problems."

Give yourself permission to pause – Don't confuse relaxing with being lazy. It's a good thing.

"Everybody has the same 24 hours a day and everybody makes decisions about what to do with them," Bower says. "Think about other people who depend on you. If you feel you're being selfish by taking a few minutes to relax, consider that it's an investment in your family. It's an investment for being around to see your children and grandchildren. Farmers in particular are very concerned about appearing to be selfish, but consider that by relaxing, you're doing something for someone else. Give yourself permission to take care of yourself." ■

al. It doesn't have to be a sabbatical or a three-week holiday. Instead, the biggest gains are made moment by moment throughout the course of the day. Use common tasks, such as heading through a door or turning the key in the ignition, as triggers for renewal. Stop for a minute, take a breath and look around. For just that moment in time, be a little more thoughtful about your intentions.

That's the starting point about developing a more mindful presence about what's going on in your life. These days we tend to be disconnected with others. Ask yourself, "When was the last time I was actually present with my children or my spouse? When was the last time I looked them in the eye and had a real conversation with them?"

There's a lot to be said for productivity, and the things we accomplish do make a difference. But in the end, it's not what you can accomplish; it's the presence of people who are important in our lives.

Reconnect with the reason why you do the things you do and recapture the spirit of doing them. It can be as simple as watching the sun rise over your grain bins. Remember that as you go throughout the day, the things you're doing as an agriculture producer are the things that mean other people have food on their table. Tap into what's below the tip of the iceberg. You're not just harvesting corn or milking cows; you're doing something far more significant.

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Breathe deep and relax

Relaxation can be any healthy mental, physical or social break away from worry or fatigue. It can come from even a brief change – a minute of concentrated deep breathing, three minutes of stretching or a 10-minute talk with a family member.

For a quick relaxer when you begin to notice tension and fatigue, try deep breathing. Focus on just your breathing by inhaling through your nose while you count slowly to six. Slowly breathe out; again, counting to six. Continue breathing using this technique for several minutes. You'll find that you can feel recharged to continue with the tasks at hand.