

Your Work as an Ag Professional: Helping Tame Farm Stress

My “Top 10” List

John Shutske, Professor and Extension Agricultural Safety and Health Specialist at the University of Wisconsin–Madison

- 1 **Understand** the basic physical, chemical and physiological workings of the stress thermostat, including the effects of cortisol (and other chemicals) on thinking, memory, distractibility, health, communications and relationships.
- 2 **Help others** regain a sense of control by seeing their situation concretely and realistically. Write down (or encourage them to write down) numbers, goals, next steps, timelines and resources to contact. Know that if you only talk about concepts and ideas in an abstract way and rely on memory, little will happen.
- 3 **Encourage others** so THEY set goals on paper. Your clients should participate and then write down goals, ideally following the SMART goal framework*:

S	M	A	R	T
SPECIFIC	MEASURABLE	ACHIEVABLE	REALISTIC, RELEVANT	TIME-BASED

- 4 **Have patience** as you walk through decisions and plans with your clients. LISTEN. You may have a grasp on the objective reality of a situation, but because of the real and measurable impacts of stress on our perceptions, your client will likely not see the situation as clearly.
- 5 **Help others** tap into and fully use the social support systems they have around them. These systems could include Extension, technical college staff, churches, schools, trusted and experienced advisors and elders in the community. It’s also very helpful when farmers can reach out to and learn from other farmers. Peer learning and support is enormously helpful as people share concerns, accomplishments and solutions.
- 6 **Know that all healing takes time.** Many people may need to simultaneously focus on physical and mental wellbeing. Making changes and looking toward the future takes physical energy. Know that some individuals and families might choose to focus on things that you may not see as the highest priority. Or worse, you might view their number-one concern as irrelevant. Do not dismiss their concerns, as they might be overwhelming the emotions of your client.
- 7 Dealing with stress requires a holistic approach, meaning a team is needed. Make sure to **involve people with appropriate expertise** considering issues of finance, production and other technical specialties. Do not overlook the roles of health professionals including mental health. Technical skills are important, but so is the ability to listen.
- 8 **Help others see their stress response as a call to action.** In her popular “TED Talk,”** Dr. Kelly McGonigal says, “Stress gives us access to our hearts. The compassionate heart that finds joy and meaning in connecting with others...your pounding physical heart, working so hard to give you strength and energy. And when you choose to view stress in this way, you’re not just getting better at stress, you’re actually making a pretty profound statement. You’re saying that you can trust yourself to handle life’s challenges. And you’re remembering that you don’t have to face them alone.”

Top 10 - continued

- 9 **Follow up with clientele** in a pre-planned, scheduled manner. We all need support, and regular check-ins create a sense of reliability and help others achieve goals they've set. Be positive. Recognize and celebrate progress. Listen. Be patient. It might take multiple tries to make significant progress. All forward progress is good progress. And slippage backward, when properly framed, can be a great learning opportunity.
- 10 Finally, **take care of yourself**. For professionals, this heavy-duty work can sap energy, and for many it can be just as stressful of an experience as it is for those whom you are serving. Get support from others doing similar work. Listen with the intent to connect. Seek help and lean on other team members. Take time away. And know when you need a break.

*SMART Goals are based in part on original work by:

Doran, G. T. (1981). "There's a S.M.A.R.T. way to write management's goals and objectives". *Management Review*. AMA FORUM. 70 (11): 35-36.

**Dr. Kelly McGonigal is a health psychologist and lecturer at Stanford University. She is also the author of the book cited below. To view her 2013 "TED Talk, How to Make Stress Your Friend," go to: https://www.ted.com/talks/kelly_mcgonigal_how_to_make_stress_your_friend

McGonigal, K. (2016). *The upside of stress: Why stress is good for you, and how to get good at it*. London, United Kingdom: Penguin.

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