

Good Health Habits Aid Stress Management

NEWARK, Del. — All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, as the saying goes. Actually, working too hard too long does more than make you dull — it can also make you sick and miserable. On the farm, constant worry and long hours of work without let-up can

cause such fatigue and tension that you make costly mistakes, leaving yourself open to tragic accidents. Modern equipment, ideal weather, reasonable prices and accurate record-keeping won't guarantee a successful farming operation if you're not mentally

and physically prepared to handle the pressures that go with this highly-stressful occupation. Farmers who manage stress well have learned to take good care of their bodies so they have the strength and stamina to deal with not only daily hassles but bigger problems that come along. They eat well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, get enough sleep, and take time to relax when things get tense.

If you suffer from chronic fatigue and tension, look closely at your health habits, advises University of Delaware extension family specialist Dr. Patricia Tanner Nelson. Do you eat breakfast on the fly? Bolt your lunch in less than 15 minutes? Rush through dinner in half an hour or less? And does the food sit heavily afterward?

What about exercise? Do you spend all day on a tractor, then numbly pluck yourself down in front of the TV until bedtime? Do you spend all your waking hours thinking and talking and reading about farming? Are you so busy with farming you don't have time for church or civic activities? Or for outings with your family?

Doctors say patients suffering from persistent fatigue and tension often have poor health habits. They tend to hurry through meals, average six hours or less of sleep a night, seldom schedule time to relax, smoke heavily, drink two or more cocktails before dinner or drink large amounts of beer, rely on sedatives to sleep and on tranquilizers to quiet their nerves.

A change to healthier habits would bring significant relief to

most of these victims of tension. "If the pressures of farming have got you down, one way to feel more in control is to take better care of your body," Nelson says. "Start by eating right. A well-nourished individual can withstand and recover from stress better than someone who's poorly nourished."

Does this mean you need extra vitamins and minerals when you're under emotional stress? Probably not. "Manufacturers of

stress supplements certainly would like you to think so, especially regarding vitamin C, the B vitamins and zinc," says extension nutrition specialist Dr. Sue Snider. "But to date, scientists have not established that emotional stress increases our nutritional needs beyond the Recommended Dietary Allowances." In other words, there's no magic pill or vitamin to relieve stress. Nutritionally, your best defense against the effects of stress is to eat moderate amounts of a variety of foods.

Unfortunately, stress often has a negative influence on eating habits. Under pressure, some people overeat while others under-eat. In the long run, stress-response eating only adds to your problems. Skipping a meal or two, for example, reduces your ability to concentrate. This in turn makes it harder to function effectively under pressure. Overeating can lead to weight gain, which is itself stressful.

Reacting to stress by either undereating or overeating starts a vicious cycle," Snider says. "To break the cycle, consistently eat moderate-sized, well-balanced meals."

Regular exercise is also important. When you feel tense and worried, do your muscles burn? Do you find yourself cutting corners, making mistakes which could lead to accidents? Learn some simple exercises to relax these muscles.

Farmers who take a rest break of at least 10 minutes in mid-morning and again in mid-afternoon find this relaxes them and helps relieve tension. Some enjoy an energy-producing snack such as fruit, vegetables, or cheese and crackers.

Nelson also suggests reading a page or two of an interesting magazine during your break. Most farmers benefit from reading about something other than far-

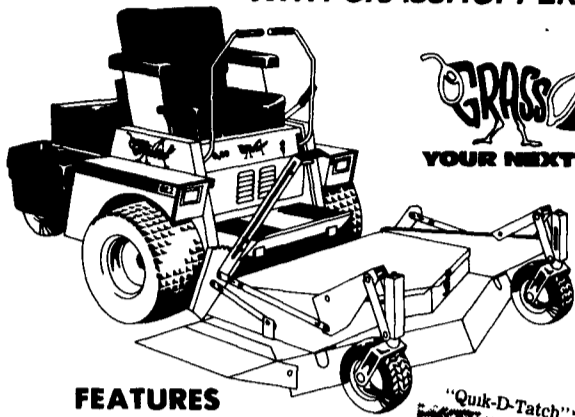
ming, she says. One keeps his monthly woodworking magazine handy and plans his next project.

If you're feeling particularly tense, stretch out on the ground for a few minutes. Don't think about anything. Just relax. If you can't stop your mind from racing, draw yourself a mental picture — a pleasant, familiar object or scene like a flower, or the view from your duck blind each fall.

Lose yourself in the picture or your reading for a few minutes. As you relax, your head will clear, tight muscles will ease. When you go back to work, you'll feel refreshed and in control again.

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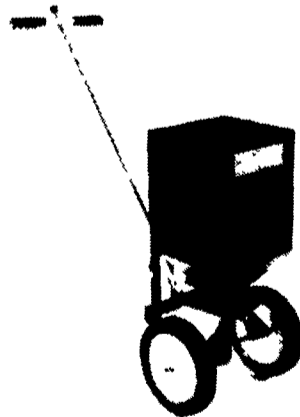
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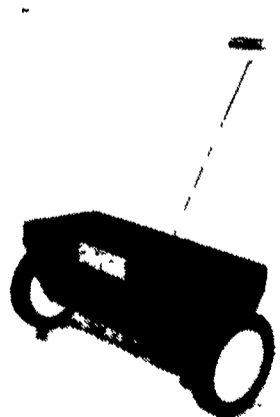


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