

Stress On The Farm For Agricultural Women

BY LOU ANN GOOD

LANCASTER — Farm families face stresses that others do not. Carolyn Sachs, associate professor on rural sociology at Penn State University believes women often bear the brunt of strain brought on families as they cope with the daily pressures of farming.

During the 70th annual meeting of the Atlantic Dairy Cooperative held at Host Farm, Lancaster, on November 20, Sachs told women that the stress farm families face is unique since spouses both live and work together and they often work with their children too.

She said, "Women who work away can temporarily escape from problems at home or if she hates her boss and co-workers, she can find refuge during her off-working hours by confiding in her family." That is not true for the farm wife. For her, work and home are so closely intertwined that there often is no escape.

Sachs pointed out that farm family members have a mutual dependence on each other to make farming successful. While many other members of society attempt to solve their differences by separation and divorce, farm families tend to stay together despite tensions in order to keep the business a success.

The stress a farm woman faces today is in some ways greater than it was for their mothers or grandmother. Farming is becoming a

more stressful business with a greater chance of failure than in previous generations. In addition, in recent years women's roles have changed on the farm.

Studies show women are assuming more farm enterprise than the generation before them. Some women like it, others don't. Also, recent statistics reveal that 60 percent of men work off the farm and 40% of women work else where while trying to maintain the family farm. This causes torn allegiance. Where should the wife or husband put most of their energy? Does the paycheck go into the farm? Is farming worthwhile or not? The person working off the farm may resent pouring money into the farm.

A non-farm woman who marries into a farm family often feels she must prove herself to her in-laws. Also, she may feel the need to apologize to her own family for not being able to attend family functions that conflict with farm chores.

Children often add to women's stress levels. "A mother can't divorce her children," Sachs said. "Although there are rewards in raising children on the farm, there are definitely stresses. Not only is there a parent-child relationship but also a work relationship. If the child does not respond well to authority, women often feel called to work out tensions between a child and her spouse or between



The audience joined in the discussion on stress. Evidence of their resiliency, farm wives find something to laugh about even in their worst episodes of stressful living. From left, Thelma Ott, Bangor; Sarah Long, Tyrone; and Jane Babe, Tyrone.

herself and the child."

Problems with children don't end when they become adults, the problems just change. Then, farm families face tensions between generations. When is a son or daughter ready to take over a farm? If the two generations believe the farm should be managed differently, conflicts arise. In these situations, women often feel guilty. They believe working out conflicts is their responsibility. They chastise themselves with thoughts like "If I would say the right thing, everyone could get along fine."

Retirement brings new stress. When should a person retire or cut back? Inheritance decisions arise. Should the farm be split up, sold, or given to offspring?

Seasonal variations in work sometimes require long hours and little sleep. Tempers flare under the pressure of too much work.

Then there is the unpredictable weather that farming success is so dependent upon.

Financial stress from cash flow problems hound most farm families. A limited amount of money causes stress as husband and wife decide whether money should be spent on machinery or on children's needs. Mothers are often caught between wanting to be loyal to both husband and children's needs.

Income is unpredictable. Often government or industry controls add to the stress. Both partners may complain, "If it wasn't for government regulations, look how much more we would have." Sachs pointed out, "That disadvantage has some pluses since both spouses share a united complaint against someone outside the family.

Sachs encouraged the audience to share the stresses they experience. Many recounted the stresses of farm life and offered each other solutions.

Some women confessed they often feel non-farming families don't understand them. Unlike their contemporary counterparts, farm women cannot expect any help with the housework from their husbands. In fact, they often have to help out in the barn. Those women without any farm background also usually don't have any concept of the amount of work and time and money that goes with farm life.

One woman said that when she shares a home-cooked meal with others, they make comments like, "And to think this meal did not cost you a thing since you raised it all

yourself." Resentment arises at such comments because every farm woman knows very well how much cost goes into the meal in terms of time, energy, and labor spent growing, caring, harvesting, and preparing even the simplest of meals.

A neighbor once remarked to a farm wife with several children, "You're lucky you don't have to buy milk for your children." A fellow conference attendee suggested the farm wife tell the neighbor, "Go buy a herd of cows and

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Farm Work Stress Scale

Below are listed many of the events of farm work which have been known to cause stress in farm members. The rating of each event indicates how upsetting it is in the average farmer's life.* Since farm members vary in their tolerance for stress, and attitudes toward stress events, the Farm Work Stress Score should be taken as a rough guide only. Generally, however, the higher the score the greater the chance of a significant health change in the near future.

For each of the events below which you consider to have been stressful for you over the past 12 months, transfer its "Rating" to the "Your Score" column. Then add these for your Farm Life Stress Score.

EVENT	RATING	YOUR SCORE
Machinery breakdown at critical time.....	123	___
Disease outbreak in livestock.....	122	___
Becoming ill during planting or harvesting.....	120	___
Suffering a major personal illness.....	117	___
Finding a valuable animal dead.....	104	___
Loss of farm help or no help when needed.....	103	___
Sudden significant increase in debt load.....	102	___
Suffering production loss due to disease or pests.....	102	___
Having poor cash flow to meet obligations and budget.....	101	___
Serious weather-caused delay.....	99	___
Adjusting to new government regulations....	97	___
Faced with sudden drop in commodities.....	90	___
Sudden increase in pace of work.....	89	___
Livestock getting out of pens.....	87	___
Major decision over crop/livestock investment	79	___
Not being able to schedule time (unplanned interruptions).....	74	___
Major machinery or facility purchase.....	73	___
Deciding when to sell during rising market	69	___
Balancing work and family responsibility....	65	___
Significant change in size or level of operation	64	___
Failure to make cost saving decision.....	62	___
Increase in hazardous chemicals and machinery on the farm.....	61	___
Service problem with agri-business.....	60	___
Facing retirement from farming.....	56	___
Being involved in a parent-child operating agreement.....	54	___
Meeting with a loan officer for additional funds.....	53	___
Salespeople coming at inconvenient times...	51	___
Having to go for parts or run errands at unplanned times.....	48	___
Having to compete for additional land.....	41	___
Entertaining unexpected guests, help, a new neighbor.....	38	___
Farm Life Stress Score (Total).....		___

Test determined by Iowa State University and Adapted for use in Pennsylvania by James E. Van Horn.



Chairlady Susan Schnebly, Clear Spring, Md., talks with featured speaker Carolyn Sachs, Penn State professor, about dealing with stress.



Glayds Meyers, Mercersburg, said that non-farm people often believe that farmers eat free because they don't buy vegetables and milk in the grocery stores. Society does not take into account the huge expenses farmers carry to grow their own food.