



Agricultural Producers & STRESS

When Do You Need a Counselor?

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Ben and Lois have been ranching for 15 years. The last few years, they have struggled financially. If prices are low again this year, they could lose the ranch. Ben has always been known as a responsible and outgoing member of the community. But now, under this level of financial stress, he looks tired and withdrawn. He's been forgetting appointments, neglecting his livestock and skipping church.

Neighbors Peggy and Mike are concerned, especially for Ben. Peggy and Mike have lived in this small ranching community all their lives and know the value of self-reliance as well as anyone. But they still suspect that Ben needs more than friendly advice. They think Ben should talk with a professional counselor to work out his problems and have been considering how to encourage Ben to seek the help he needs.

Looking at this scenario as an objective outsider, it is likely that you would agree with Peggy and Mike's assessment. If you were to observe the severe financial stress in Ben and Lois' family and Ben's subsequent change in behavior, isn't it true that you'd encourage your neighbor to seek help?

Blocks to seeking outside help

How attitudes change when the need for outside help becomes personal! If a friend or neighbor has an emotional or physical problem, rural people are likely to drop what they are doing and make sure the person gets the help they need. But when it comes to seeking care for themselves, roadblocks pop up at every turn:



- “I don’t need to see a counselor; I can solve my own problems.”
- “I don’t trust psychologists.”
- “Why should I tell a stranger the intimate details of my life?”
- “Even if little else is left, I still have my privacy.”

When someone suggests seeing a counselor, these are often the reactions. Although most people can relate to all of the above statements, the last on the list is most instructive. Upon close reading, do you notice that the word “privacy” could be exchanged with the word “pride?”

No one should say that it is a sign of weakness to seek help. In fact, the opposite is true. It takes incredible strength. To disregard or overcome the pride that blocks you from reaching out is a tremendous act of will. It may take all the willpower you can summon!

Clues that it may be time to see a professional

Both because of the blocks listed above and because of a lack of awareness, many people wait too long to go to a professional for help. If you are now experiencing “hard times” stress as in the example of Ben and Lois, this may be the first time that your own coping methods are not enough. You may be unaware of the signals that outside help is needed. Here are some common crisis signs:

- panic attacks with a high pulse rate and difficulty breathing

- poor concentration
- excessive drinking
- thoughts of suicide
- constant crying
- constant fatigue
- physical fighting where one spouse hits, shoves, or kicks the other
- physical discipline of children that leaves marks or bruises
- constant criticism of one of the children
- neglect of personal or parental responsibilities because of an inability to cope
- uncharacteristic behavioral problems in children

If you notice any of these signs, it may be time to seek help.

How to choose a counselor

Most counselors receive new clients when people already in counseling recommend them to friends. If a friend has had a positive experience with counseling, that’s a good place to start. Although personal recommendations are valuable, don’t give up if you don’t like the recommended counselor or if you’re the first of your friends to seek professional help.

If a personal referral is not available or doesn’t work out, scout out the other counseling possibilities in your area. The yellow pages of the telephone book list professionals in private practice, as well as public services (hospitals and mental health centers). The online

resource www.therapistlocator.net provides information on private counselors within a geographic range specified by the user. Also consider talking with local clergy. They counsel frequently, and some are certified counselors.

When considering a professional, check out his or her training and affiliations with professional organizations. This will guarantee certain minimum standards: completion of a degree in a relevant field, two or three years of supervised counseling experience, and continuing education requirements.

When you decide on someone, make an appointment. At that first session, discuss what you expect from counseling and find out what the professional can offer. If counseling is not doing what you want it to do, say so. Good counselors will refer you to someone else if their approach or personality doesn't work for you.

Take an active role in your counseling. Take notes, tape-record sessions, and read books about your situation. The more involved you are, the better chance you have that counseling will help. It's a mistake to think the counselor will solve your problems. But he or she will help you learn how to help yourself.

A final note

In many rural communities, the norm is to seek support from friends and family members. And it is certainly true that a caring

friend or relative can often provide a listening ear when you're hurting. It's hard for those close to the situation to be objective, though. Keep in mind that non-judgmental listening is as important to your mental health as having a caring person listen.

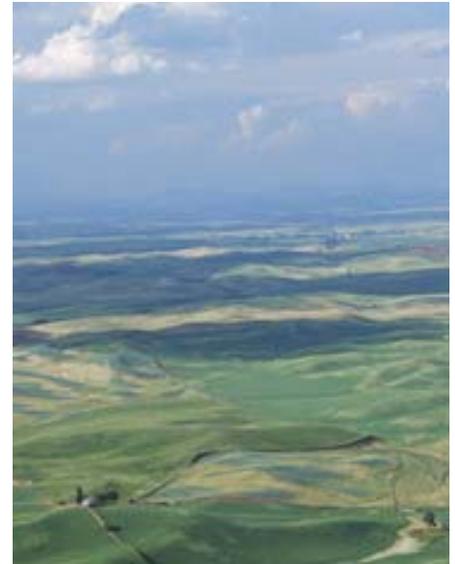
Remember that seeking outside help is a sign of strength. It takes courage to admit things aren't going well and to reach out for help. When stress levels are high and you realize you can't resolve some of the problems on your own, when your life feels out of control, or when you've tried reading or talking to others but can't seem to turn things around, it is time to seek professional help.

For your own sake and that of your family, don't let your life get too far out of control. Pay attention to your feelings, and go to a mental health professional if you are hurting. Getting to a professional early may help you avoid having to make some wrenching changes in your life.

Revised and adapted from:

Iowa State University. Cooperative Extension Service. *Stress Management Media Packet*. Ames: Iowa State Cooperative Extension Service, 1984.

Iowa State University. Cooperative Extension Service. *Take Charge in Changing Times: Encouraging a Friend to Seek Professional Help*. Pm-1214. Ames: Iowa State Cooperative Extension Service, 1985.



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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Glen Whipple, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming 82071.

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