Understanding and Responding to Rural Stress: The Role of Extension and Land-Grant Universities

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D., Extension Family Science Specialist (NDSU Extension)
Dec. 11, 2018
Georgia Rural Stress Summit
My grandfather used to say that once in your life you need a doctor, a lawyer, a policeman and a preacher but every day, three times a day, you need a farmer.

- Brenda Schoepp
Farming ranks in the top ten most stressful occupations in the United States.
Cooperative Extension’s National Framework for Health & Wellness

Increase the number of Americans who are healthy at every stage of life.

Based on the National Prevention Strategy Action Plan, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
Key Messages on Rural Stress

• Your **health is your most important asset** as a farmer, rancher or agricultural worker.

• Farmer and farmworker **health and safety is the most important priority in managing any farm or ranch operation.**
Key Messages on Rural Stress

- Increased stress levels can negatively affect and damage one’s:
  - Physical health
  - Mental health
  - Behavioral health
  - Relational health
  - Occupational health

- **Good stress management is good farm management!**
2) Rural Stress Conditions: What’s the Story?
Expectations for Economic Conditions in Farming/Ranching in ND - 2017

Expectations for Economic Conditions

- Significantly Worse
- Moderately Worse
- Slightly Worse
- About the Same
- Slightly Better
- Moderately Better

24% Significantly Worse
24% Moderately Worse
21% Slightly Worse
19% About the Same
10% Slightly Better
2% Moderately Better
Expectations for Family Stress Levels in Farming/Ranching in ND - 2017

- Significantly Down: 76%
- Moderately Down: 24%
- About the Same: 26%
- Slightly Increase: 26%
- Moderately Increase: 5%
- Significantly Increase: 2%
Why So Much Stress?

- King Kong-size Sources of rural stress
- **Weather** – drought
- **Prices** – crop prices drop by a third to half
- **Other?**
## North Dakota Marketing Year Average Price: Range 1997-2006 and Years 2007-2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Spring Wheat</th>
<th>Soybean</th>
<th>Corn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997-2006</td>
<td>2.76 - 4.49</td>
<td>4.05 – 6.62</td>
<td>1.59 – 2.77</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>7.45</td>
<td>9.63</td>
<td>4.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>7.19</td>
<td>9.71</td>
<td>3.74</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>9.26</td>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>6.78</td>
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<td>5.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>8.17</td>
<td>11.90</td>
<td>5.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>-34% 8.19</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>6.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>-34% 6.50</td>
<td>-32% 12.40</td>
<td>-48% 3.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>-32% 6.42</td>
<td>9.49</td>
<td>3.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>8.49</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>8.97</td>
<td>3.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Spring Wheat Costs per Acre
Red River Valley, MN and ND Farm Management Education, 2002-2016

- Overhead
- Cash Rent
- Other Direct
- Repair
- Fuel
- Fertilizer
- Chemical
- Seed
- Gross Return
Farmers & Suicide – Current Key Issue

• Attention to the issue of farm stress and suicide rates among farmers – CDC study
• “CDC study says suicide rate of farmers higher than any other occupational group” – August 2016
  • People engaged in agriculture – 84.5 per 100,000 persons (5-8 x higher than avg.)
  • Construction/extraction – 53.3 per 100X
  • All – 12.9 per 100X

• NDSU Extension news work – AgWeek TV interview
Media Attention to Rural Stress

• Attention to the issue of rural stress and health concerns across varied media sources
  • Los Angeles Times
  • Christian Science Monitor
  • Thomson Reuters
  • China US Daily
  • Washington Post
Agricultural Stresses Impact... 

- Farm/Ranch Management & Options
- Family Financial Security
- Individual Health and Well-Being
- Family Well-Being
Implications of Rural Crisis Perceptions for Mental Health

- Most surveyed attribute the crisis to factors beyond their control (weather, market price, farm policy).
- Factors beyond one’s control may create a sense of challenges beyond resolution.
- Resulting feelings = helplessness, victimization, anger, isolation, depression.
- What kind of recipe for mental, emotional, behavioral and relational health?
3) How to Assist Those Dealing with Rural Stress Concerns?

Support Sources – What can we do?

"THEY MAINTAIN THEIR TRACTORS, THEY MAINTAIN THEIR PUMPS AND EVERYTHING BUT THEY DON’T MAINTAIN THEMSELVES."

Harry, male farmer on farmer's mental health in Judd, et al, 2006

#ElevateTheConvo
Photo Credit Derek Gavey
Why is Rural Stress Hard on Individuals?

- Individual levels of stress are linked to how a person perceives the source of stress - their orientation to the stressor.
- Many persons see it not as a change of job, but as a loss of self.
- Many practice the 11th Commandment orientation - “Thou shalt farm!” (agrarian imperative)
A family is more than an economic unit with needs to be met. A family is a set of individuals bound by love, blood ties, and loyalty across generations. When families are rooted in the context of farming or ranching for their livelihood, then economic crises concern much more than making ends meet. For families who have chosen farming or ranching it is more than a means of making money, it is a generational way of life. Thus, when it comes to the impact of a farming or ranching economic crisis on families and communities, it is about more than making money, it is about the continuance of a generational way of life that is rooted in history.
Responding to Rural Stress

- **Willingness to Seek Assistance** - Does the family put up barriers to seeking assistance or accessing available resources? How can this be minimized? What strategies will encourage outreach?
Ethic of Some . . .

• “We need markets and prices—not assistance.”

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

- Margaret Wheatley
Responding to Rural Stress

- **Development of Social Support** - Does the family take steps to build social support both internally and externally? How can this be fostered?
  - Within-family social support
  - Other sources of informal social support
  - Formal social support
Where Do Farmers Get Social Support?

- Parents
- Spouse
- Children
- Relatives
- Friends
- Neighbors
- Church
- Lenders
- Community
- Social Services
- Farm Organizations

Mean Self Report-Contemplators

3.0  3.5  4.0  4.5  5.0  5.5
Extension/Land-Grant Universities and American Agriculture
4) Resources for Responding to Rural Stress

- Educational Lesson Plans – Direct to farm/ranch populations
- Thematic Resource Pages Online on Farm Stress & Related Issues
- Educational Resources & Publications – brochures; fact sheets; poster sets; etc.
- Professional Development Seminars – mental & behavioral health, etc.
- Creative Delivery of Farm Stress Resources
1) Educational Lesson Plans – Direct Awareness & Education

- **Key Lesson Plan (NDSU Extension)**
  - Managing Stress and Pursuing Wellness in Times of Tight Margins

- **Four Additional Brief Lesson Plans**
  - Depression
  - Suicide
  - Mindfulness
  - How to Refer for Assistance

- Available currently on eXtension
  - [https://campus.extension.org/enrol/index.php?id=1482](https://campus.extension.org/enrol/index.php?id=1482)
Managing Stress and Pursuing Wellness in Times of Tight Margins

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D., Extension Family Science Specialist
Lindy Berg, B.S., Extension Agent
Managing Stress and Pursuing Wellness in Times of Tight Margins

Brief Lesson 1

Understanding Stress and Depression

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D., Extension Family Science Specialist
Lindy Berg, B.S., Extension Agent

NDSU Extension Service
Managing Stress and Pursuing Wellness in Times of Tight Margins

Brief Lesson 2
Understanding Suicide and Depression

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D., Extension Family Science Specialist
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NDSU Extension Service
Managing Stress and Pursuing Wellness in Times of Tight Margins

Brief Lesson 4
What Can I Do to Help?

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D., Extension Family Science Specialist
Lindy Berg, B.S., Extension Agent

NDSU EXTENSION SERVICE
Michigan State – Farm Stress Management Summit

- Training in Mental Health First Aid
- Two deliverable workshops
  - Communicating with Farmers Under Stress
  - Weathering the Storm in Agriculture: How to Cultivate a Productive Mindset
- Set for Jan. 24-25, 2019
What other types of direct educational lessons or approaches should we explore for addressing the topic of rural stress?
2) Links to Further Information Online - Facilitator

- NDSU Extension – Related Websites
  - Farm/Ranch Stress
    - [https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/farmranchstress](https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/farmranchstress)
  - Drought Stress
    - [https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/drought](https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/drought)

- Mental and Behavioral Health Resources
  - [https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/cff/resources-for-emotional-and-mental-health](https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/cff/resources-for-emotional-and-mental-health)
Key Resources – Stress and Farming

- eXtension – Production agriculture and Stress resources

- Live Your Life Well Campaign, Mental Health America –
  www.mentalhealthamerica.net/live-your-life-well

- Farms.com – Dr. Val Farmer, “Mind Over Matter” video series (10 videos) –
  www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL89017F264C488BC5

- Calm in The Storm mobile stress app –
  http://calminthestormapp.com/
Key Resources – Mental and Emotional Health

• **Call 2-1-1** – Statewide 24-hour helpline, health and human services information and referral

• **Refer to a local health-care provider or mental health professional.** If you or someone you know needs help, contact and connect with a local professional such as a clergy member, medical professional, law enforcement, school counselor or social worker.

• **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-8255 (TALK)
Brainstorming

What kind of online or technology-based resources should we explore for addressing the topic of rural stress?
3) Educational Publications and Resources on Rural Stress

- “Stress Management Series for Farm/Ranch Families” (FS282, FS283, FS284, FS285, FS286, FS287)
- “Farming and Ranching in Tough Times” (FS1804)
- “Responding to Distressed People” (FS1805)
- “Working With Distressed Clientele” (FS1789)

Links:
www.ag.ndsu.edu/cff/resources-for-emotional-and-mental-health
Stress Symptoms

Before farm/ranch families can do much about managing stress, they have to know when they are experiencing it. Much of the time, people do not know or give attention to what is going on in their bodies and in their relationships with others.

Many people learn to screen out unpleasant circumstances. For example, they deny their problems. One farmer insisted, “Everything is fine – just fine.” The truth is his net income had dropped 20 percent that year and 15 percent the year before. He was denying reality. Sometimes we blame others. One farmer who was feeling totally helpless because of an upcoming loan payment blew up at his wife for suggesting they take a vacation “Tell you go again talking about ways to waste money.” At other times, people try to escape reality through eating binges, spending sprees, or using alcohol and other drugs.

Through such avoidance efforts, you attempt to screen out any unpleasant, uncomfortable stress alarms. But early warning signals are like a flashing red light on the dashboard of your car when the engine is overheating. If you ignore it long enough, the engine will blow. Rising blood pressure, rapidly beating heart, clenched teeth, aching neck and shoulders, sweating hands and feet, churning stomach, excessive fatigue or dropping sexual interest is helpful. You and your family can take steps to reduce stress and to regain health and self-esteem by noting and managing stress symptoms.

Reviewed by
Sean Brotherson
Family Science Specialist
NDSU Extension Service

NDSU Extension Service
North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota
February 2016

FS283 (Revised)
“How to Cultivate a Productive Mindset” – Mindfulness

- This Fact Sheet is on the MSU website: www.msue.msu.edu/managingfarmstress
- You can print the PDF for free.

There are many factors in agriculture that farmers have no control over. Beyond the uncertainty of the weather, destructive crises such as disease outbreaks and short-term incidents such as machinery breaking down or accidents can and do occur. One powerful factor that we always have the opportunity to control, however, is our mindset.

Farmers and those within the agricultural industry have a tendency to be eternal optimists, but with all of the variability in agriculture there are times when we can become overwhelmed and stressed more than normal. Having the right mindset can help increase productivity and resiliency, so we are better prepared when times are tough, and more able to manage our farms and take care of our families and ourselves.
Why is stress management useful for farmers?

Video also available on the
www.msue.msu.edu/managingfarmstress

Use the video and the fact sheet together for short presentations at market update meetings
# Managing Stress and Pursuing Wellness in Times of Tight Margins

## Strategies to help you cope

### Physical
- Get a medical checkup
- Eat a healthy breakfast
- Drink four to eight glasses of water daily
- Eat more fruits, vegetables, and healthful snacks
- Exercise at least 20 minutes daily (walk, swim, ride a bike, etc.)
- Get at least seven to eight hours of restful sleep
- Receive a neck or back massage
- Take a relaxing bath or shower
- Hug a loved one or friend
- Practice deep or slow breathing
- Abstain from alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs
- Do gentle stretching during a break or to warm up or cool down

### Mental
- Talk with a counselor or spiritual leader
- Reach out to someone for support or help
- Spend 10 minutes to plan your day and priorities
- Take regular five-to-10-minute breaks in your day to relax and recharge

### Emotional / Spiritual
- Tell a loved one what you appreciate about him/her
- Play with a child or grandchild
- Volunteer to help with a cause important to you
- Go out for a meal with a friend or loved one
- Reflect on and forgive yourself for mistakes
- Share concerns with a counselor or other professional
- Explore your spiritual life and activities
- Pray or meditate
- Do random acts of kindness
- Express “thank you” to someone daily (send a note, call, etc.)
- Write down three things you are grateful for daily
- Go for a walk or drive in nature

### Personal / Relational
- Organize or prioritize your personal space(s)
- Reflect on and write down your goals
- Spend time with a pet
- Take 15 minutes each day to have uninterrupted conversation with a spouse or family member
- Spend time playing games with family members
- Learn more about your family history
- Begin or renew a friendship
- Get involved or stay connected with a group of friends
- Express “thank you” to someone daily (send a note, call, etc.)
- Write down three things you are grateful for daily
- Go for a walk or drive in nature

### Work / Professional
- Focus on tasks you can control in your work
- Take time for lunch and a “work break” daily
- Plan your next day at the end of the work day and set priorities ahead of time
- Be flexible with time and tasks as things come up
- Set boundaries and do not overcommit yourself
- Say “no” more often
- Do not let the farm operation intrude on all other aspects of life
- Talk to other farmers about their strategies
- Attend a seminar and learn new ways to handle issues
- Seek feedback on your farm operation and ways to grow and improve
- Schedule time away from work to relax and then take the time
- Minimize and resolve conflicts with others

## NDSU Extension Service

www.ag.ndsu.edu/cff/resources-for-emotional-and-mental-health
Handouts

- Church Bulletins
- Coffee Shops, Cafés
- Display Handout
- Etc.
Brainstorming

What other types of educational resources should we explore for the topic of rural stress?
4) Professional Development Seminars – Spreading the Word & Partnering

Key Issues
- Expanding awareness of farm stress, mental and behavioral health resources, and approaches to dealing with stress concerns

Target Audiences
- Community leaders
- Agricultural workers
- Community professionals – clergy; health care workers; counselors; mental health professionals; law enforcement; extension workers; etc.
NDSU Extension’s Response to Rural Stress

- Summer 2016 notice that farmers were under more financial strain, related farm stresses
- Offered Managing Farm Stress Webinar – June 2017
- Offered Life Beyond Breaking Even – Farm Stress and Economic Summit – January 2018
- Agricultural Extension Staff
- Agricultural Industry Stakeholders
- Mental and Behavioral Health Workers
Prairie St. John’s, in cooperation with the NDSU Extension Service, offers the following training

**Behavioral Health IVN for Your Family and Community**

**Thursday, March 29, 2018**

9 a.m.-noon (CDT)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:30-9:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Roll Call of sites (only site coordinators need to be present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-10:00 a.m.</td>
<td><strong>Geriatric Mental Health:</strong> behavioral health warning signs, barriers to care, risk factors, resources, care strategies and mental health concerns facing our aging population.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-10:15 a.m.</td>
<td>Break/Activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:15-11:15 a.m.</td>
<td><strong>Substance Use Issues and Concerns:</strong> current substance use trends in ND, signs and symptoms of substance use, prevention efforts and ways to address substance use in your community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:15 a.m. - noon</td>
<td><strong>Farm Stress:</strong> stressors related to the farm crisis, warning signs related to a behavioral health crisis, skills to communicate support and resources to access help for individuals of concern.</td>
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**Presenters:**

**Jeana Scheffler, LAPC, Geriatric Mental Health**
Jeana is an adult inpatient therapist at Prairie St. John’s. She completed a B.S. in Emergency Management at North Dakota State University and a M.S. in Clinical Mental Health Counseling at Minnesota State University Moorhead.

**Beth Brantner, LPCC, LAC, Substance Use Issues and Concerns**
Beth is a licensed clinical counselor and a licensed addiction counselor at Prairie St. John’s.

**Monica McConkey, LPC, Emotional Stress on the Farm**
Director of Business Development, Prairie St. John’s
Monica has more than 20 years of experience in the behavioral health field as a counselor, program supervisor and administrator. Her work has primarily been with the child and adolescent populations. Monica’s focus throughout her career has been to increase access to, and remove the stigma often attached to mental health services. Monica grew up on a farm in northwestern Minnesota and has intimate understanding of the dynamics leading to farm stress and its impact on farm families.
Life Beyond Breaking Even:
Farm Economic Summit 2018

Join us for a two-day event on the farm economy, farm management options, managing stress and pursuing wellness in times of tight farming margins!

- Monday, Jan. 29th, 10 am-4 pm—Farm Management Workshop (pre-conference)
- Monday, Jan. 29th, 1 pm-6 pm—Managing Stresses in Farming, Families & Finances (pre-conference)
- Tuesday, Jan. 30th, 8 am-4:30 pm—Farm Economic Summit

Bismarck State College, Bismarck, ND
Monday & Tuesday, Jan. 29-30, 2018

Questions?
Contact:
Dave Ripplinger
david.ripplinger@ndsu.edu
701.231.5265
Sean Brotherson
sean.brotherson@ndsu.edu
701.231.6143

Agenda and register at:
www.ag.ndsu.edu/farmranchstress

Communicating with Farmers Under Stress
Best Practices - Webinar

Date:
December 11, 2017

Time: Noon-1:30pm EST

To Register:
https://extension.zoom.us/j/376966433

Farmers and those within the agricultural industry have a tendency to be eternal optimists, but with all of the variability in agriculture, there are times when they can become overwhelmed. The North Central Region- Rural Support Network Team has developed programming material specially designed for people who work with agricultural producers and farm families. Extension staff can learn ways to approach and communicate with those in need. We will share materials and lessons learned with the participants of this webinar.

The webinar will include:

- Extension Specialist and Educators from five North Central Region teams

https://learn.extension.org/events/3209
Online Farm Stress Management Course (MSU)

Online course helps manage stress from farming

Weathering the Storm: How to Handle Stress on the Farm

This free online course offers simple tools you can use to handle stress and cultivate a productive mindset. Learn to help yourself and others by understanding the signs and symptoms of chronic stress. Access the course at any time. It usually takes 1 to 2 hours to complete – do as much or as little at one time as you like.

To find out more details or to register for a class, visit www.msue.msu.edu/onlinefarmstress.
Brainstorming

- What other types of professional development resources and approaches should we explore for addressing the topic of rural stress?
5) Other Approaches for Our Toolbox

• Agriculture is a field that makes progress as people:
  • Learn Best Practices from Others
  • Practice Innovation and Sustainability
  • Other Ideas and Approaches Being Used in Rural Stress Programming...
# Farmstrong - grounded in farmer experience

**What is Farmstrong?**
Farmstrong is a rural wellbeing programme designed to help farmers manage the ups and downs of farming. The main idea is that the most important asset on any farm is the farmer. Farmstrong’s goal is to support farmers to take action to improve their health and wellbeing. It provides farmers with practical strategies, tools and resources to live well, farm well and get the most out of life.

**Why do we need Farmstrong?**
Research shows that farmers are often great at looking after their stock and equipment, but many are not so good at looking after themselves.

**The Farmstrong research project**
An online survey to inform the development of our rural wellbeing programme and establish the key information needs of farmers was completed in late 2014. The findings have helped shape our strategy and resources.

## Who was surveyed?

<table>
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<th>400 Farmers</th>
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<tr>
<td>315 randomly-selected FMG clients</td>
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<td>The rest were farmers who filled out the survey after hearing about it via our media release</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

## Who responded?

| 50% wore boot/|
| sheep farmers |
| 46% were dairy |
| farmers |
| 81% were owners or part owners |
| 64% were male |

## Nationwide Experienced

| 65% aged 50 years and over |

## Number one issue: Worklife balance and getting more time off the farm

### Nearly half the farmers 47% wanted to learn more about this topic.

**Farmer insights into managing time off/stress**
Through the survey, extensive verbatim comments were collected on the things farmers said they did to help them manage the ups and downs of farming. We will share these farmer insights, tips and advice in our programme resources, because farmers told us they were interested in what other farmers are doing. Our research also told us that farmers make changes in the way they farm based on advice from other farmers they trust and respect.

### Examples of feedback

- **Learn to empower your staff to take over and trust them.** Male dairy farmer, 70 years and older, Wairarapa
- **Go and help someone else.** It’s very refreshing to find out most people worry about the same things. Male beef/sheep owner, 50-59, Canterbury
- **A farmer’s health is pivotal to the ongoing success of the farm.** Male dairy farm owner, 50-59, Hawkes Bay

## Keen interest in Farmstrong

There was a high level of interest — 88% of farmers surveyed wanted to be involved in the rural wellbeing programme in some way.

## Best way to introduce Farmstrong ideas to the rural community

Farmers’ preferred means of delivering the programme was through local farm discussion groups. They also suggested linking in with existing rural events, such as Dairy NZ and Beef & Lamb field days and meetings.

## Launching Farmstrong

Farmstrong’s official launch is 3 June 2015.

The aim is to make a positive difference to the lives of at least 1,000 farmers in the first year.

The research project has informed the development of resources for Farmstrong. Key wellbeing research and literature has been summarised into topic areas that will be available on our website Farmstrong.co.nz.

**Please visit the website** where you can download a full copy of the online survey research report. On the website you can also find out more information about the things we are doing this year and how you can get involved.
Peer Support Efforts

• Farmer to Farmer Discussion Groups
  • Proactive emphasis on marketing, management, integrating wellness into management practices
Programs at a Distance

• Wellness Coaching (THRIVE Montana)
• Telehealth options
• Podcast series (Seeds of Health – NDSU Extension Pilot)
Public Service Campaigns
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhxddrr5s-l&feature=youtu.be
New Mini-Resource
Couple Retreats

- Plowing New Ground was a series of intensive 3-day therapeutic retreats for distressed farm couples
- Average of 10-15 couples per retreat event, 3 events each year
- Designed by Val Farmer, PhD, rural psychologist for MeritCare Health Systems
Program Delivery Strategies

- Media Campaign
- Publications/Newsletters
- Audio or Video Materials
- Computer List-Serve & Web Page
- Educational Workshops
- Therapeutic Retreats
- Community Support Groups
- Are We There?
Further Creative Ideas, Approaches, Partners?

- Rural Stress is a challenging topic to address – what other creative ideas, approaches, or partners should be considered?
Support Sources – What can we do?

• Sean Brotherson, Ph.D., Extension Family Life Specialist
• Email: sean.brotherson@ndsu.edu
• 702.231.6143