

KANSAS STATE
UNIVERSITY



Objectives



Photo: Copyright iStock.com/MichaelBurrell

- Build awareness around potentially stressful conditions affecting some farmers.
- **Learn stress triggers, identify signs of stress and review helpful techniques for responding.**
- **Learn techniques for identifying, approaching and working with farmers who may not cope with stress effectively.**
- **Learn where to go for additional help.**



Informal Survey

Who among you

- Are life-long, multi-generational farmers?
- Are in this business because you love it?
- **Know of a least one farmer who is currently under great stress because of the economic uncertainties of this business or because of a medical-related matter?**
- **Believe that this farmer has adequate support from the existing social and economic safety nets?**
- **Are prepared to identify and deal with a stress-related emergency affecting another farmer?**



Photo: Copyright iStock.com/PeopleImages



Farm Stress – What We Know

Farming is a stressful, high-risk profession.

- In 2021, 453 farmers and farm workers died from a work-related injury (fatality rate: 19.5 deaths per 100,000 workers) (CDC, 2023)
- Opioids are an issue in rural areas: 3 of 4 farmers say it would be easy to access opioids (Morning Consult, 2017)
- Inadequate medical presence in most rural communities



Farm Stress – What We Know

Agrarian Imperative: "...impels farmers to hang onto their land at all costs. The agrarian imperative instills farmers to work incredibly hard, to endure unusual pain and hardship, and to take uncommon risks" (Rosmann, 2010, p. 72).

*"The land means everything to farmers. . . .
Losing the family farm is the ultimate loss. . . ."*
(Rosmann, 2008, p. 39).



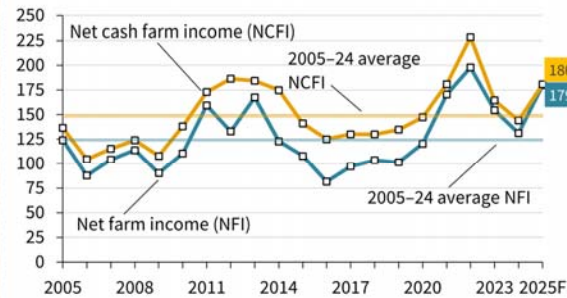
Net Farm Income and Net Cash Farm Income 2005-2025

Legend:

- Boom years 2011-2013
- Record high in 2022
- In 2025, is forecasted to increase

U.S. net farm income and net cash farm income, inflation adjusted, 2005-25F

2025 dollars (billions)



Note: F = forecast. Values are adjusted for inflation using the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Gross Domestic Product Price Index (BEA API series code: A191RG) rebased to 2025 by USDA, Economic Research Service.

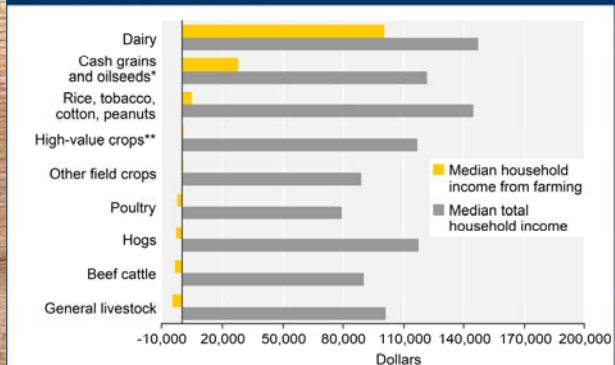
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, Farm Income and Wealth Statistics. Data as of September 3, 2025.



Median Farm Income By Ag Sector

- Total household income and portion of household income from farming both vary by commodity.

Median farm income and median total income of U.S. farm households by commodity specialization, 2023



*Includes corn, sorghum, soybeans, wheat, and other cash grains.

**Includes fruit, nuts, vegetables, greenhouse, and nursery.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service and USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Agricultural Resource Management Survey. Data as of December 3, 2024.



Weather-Related Losses

FLOODING



DROUGHT



FIRE



Photos: Copyright istock.com/Maxim, Edgar-G-Breit, David-Parsons

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION | COMMUNICATING WITH FARMERS UNDER STRESS
Copyright 2019 Michigan State University Board of Trustees



Summary

Price volatility will continue to exist, and many agriculture markets are bearish for the near future.

Many farms are struggling to cover cash flow.

Year over year earned net worth is negative for many in multiple sectors of the agriculture industry.

Many farms are in financial distress

- Putting farm families under prolonged stress.
- Causing mental and physical health issues.

Photo: Copyright istock.com/JackieNix

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION | COMMUNICATING WITH FARMERS UNDER STRESS
Copyright 2019 Michigan State University Board of Trustees



Identifying and Managing Stress In Ourselves, and Helping Others

STRESS IN YOURSELF

- The stress response
- Readily identifiable signs of stress
- Techniques for managing it
- Getting help

STRESS IN SOMEONE ELSE

- Signs of stress to look for in someone else
- Approaching farmers
- Active listening
- Develop a game plan
- Getting more help

Photo: Copyright istock.com/roman023

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION | COMMUNICATING WITH FARMERS UNDER STRESS
Copyright 2019 Michigan State University Board of Trustees



What Is Stress?

A need or demand people confront, that is perceived as burdensome or threatening, and can lead to physical or mental health problems

(Pearlin 1989, Thoits 2010, Dimsdale 2008, Chen & Miller 2007, Keller et al., 2012).

Photo: Copyright istock.com/aldomunillo

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION | COMMUNICATING WITH FARMERS UNDER STRESS
Copyright 2019 Michigan State University Board of Trustees



MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension

Weather

Large debt loads

Government regulations

Machinery breakdown

High interest rates

Crop yield

Livestock illness

Commodity prices

Disagreements with family members

Photos: Copyright iStock.com/Ruslan_Gaberds, cnybz2.evgovorgv, cnythzt, JulianneGenay, monkeybusinessimages, Pashaglanatov, baker

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION | COMMUNICATING WITH FARMERS UNDER STRESS
 Copyright 2019 Michigan State University Board of Trustees.

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension

Stress and Our Bodies

<https://ed.ted.com/lessons/how-stress-affects-your-body-sharon-horesh-bergquist> (Bergquist, n.d.)

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION | COMMUNICATING WITH FARMERS UNDER STRESS
 Copyright 2019 Michigan State University Board of Trustees.

Explaining Cortisol



MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION | COMMUNICATING WITH FARMERS UNDER STRESS
Copyright 2019 Michigan State University Board of Trustees.



What does stress look like?



Photo: Copyright iStock.com/DimeDra68

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION | COMMUNICATING WITH FARMERS UNDER STRESS
Copyright 2019 Michigan State University Board of Trustees.



Signs of Stress

Physical	Emotional	Behavioral	Cognitive	Self-worth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headaches • Ulcers • Backaches • Eating problems • Sleeping problems • Frequent sickness • Exhaustion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sadness • Depression • Bitterness • Anger • Anxiety • Loss of spirit • Loss of sense of humor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irritability • Backbiting • Acting out • Passive-aggressive behavior • Anger • Increased drinking • Taking drugs • Isolation • Violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memory loss • Lack of concentration • Difficulty with simple decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feel like a failure • Can't do anything right • Not being able to fix things

Photo: Copyright iStock.com/roman023

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION | COMMUNICATING WITH FARMERS UNDER STRESS
Copyright 2019 Michigan State University Board of Trustees.

Source:
Williams, R. T. & Fetsch, R. J. (2018). Farm and ranch family stress and depression: A checklist and guide for making referrals. Department of Human Development & Family Studies, 410 Behavioral Sciences Building, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523-1570.



Signs and Symptoms of Chronic, Prolonged Stress

- Change in routine
- Care of livestock declines
- Increase in illness
- Increase in farm accidents
- Appearance of farmstead declines
- Children show signs of stress

Photo: Copyright iStock.com/roman023

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION | COMMUNICATING WITH FARMERS UNDER STRESS
Copyright 2019 Michigan State University Board of Trustees.



How to Handle Stress

- Deep breathing
- Self-talk
- Meditating
- Exercise
- Connect with people in your social network
- Speaking with a mental health professional



Identifying Your Social Support System

In a sample of 190 farmers and ranchers, lower levels of social support resulted in higher depression scores.

Providing social support:

- Promote effective communication with others.
- Organize and promote social support opportunities (for example, social events, coffee talks).
- Break down the stigma related to mental health treatment.

Source: Bjornestad, A., Brown, L., & Weidauer, L. (in progress). *Rural mental health: The impact of social support on depression symptoms in farmers*. South Dakota State University.

Photo: Copyright iStock.com/aholbydave



Working With Farmers Who May Be Struggling With a High Level of Stress



Photo: Copyright iStock.com/RGTimeline

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION | COMMUNICATING WITH FARMERS UNDER STRESS
Copyright 2019 Michigan State University Board of Trustees



Approaching a Person Who Is Under Chronic Stress

- Preparing for a discussion
- Active listening
- Dos and Don'ts
- Preparing an action plan



Photo: Copyright iStock.com/LivingImages

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION | COMMUNICATING WITH FARMERS UNDER STRESS
Copyright 2019 Michigan State University Board of Trustees



Thinking and Planning Ahead

Ask yourself some questions:

- Why are you going?
- Who are you meeting?
- **What might you encounter?**
- What can you help them with?
- **How much time is needed?**
- **How much time are you willing to commit?**
- **Do you have resources?**
- What is their preferred method to receive information? (Book, short paper, phone, internet website)
- How can you be of value to them? (Short- and long-term goals)



Photo: Copyright istock.com/ferntig



Proper Mind Set

- **Do you have empathy?**
 - They don't need sympathy.
- **Do you know all of the answers?**
 - What is the likely response if you do?
- **Can you help them think, discover and live with possible outcomes of decisions to be made?**
- **What decisions need to be made?**



Photo: Copyright istock.com/ZerantZerant



Goal: Open, Honest Dialogue

1. **Preserve the relationship.**
2. **Create safety – listening.**
3. **Develop a shared purpose – resolving.**

Remember, these are skills that require practice!



Phrases You Might Use In Active Listening

- I can see that the current situation is hard for you. What changes would you like to see?
- I am eager to help you; I know you are going through some tough challenges. Tell me what I can do to help.
- I hear you saying ____.
- It sounds like you are thinking that ____.

Photo: Copyright iStock.com/Jeylio



Stressful Situations – What to do

- I know of several farms in similar situations.
- Every situation is a little different. **Help me** understand better.
- Have you thought about _____?
- I could maybe help with _____.
- I think that if **we** _____.
- This new idea might _____. What do you think?
- Let's **write down** some of the pros and cons.



Stressful Situations

- People under stress typically don't process things as well as expected. They are easily overloaded.
- Be sensitive to help people organize information in a way that will enable them to remember and process what was discussed, and the consensus that was reached.
- Timely follow-up with a written communication reviewing the discussion is critical.



More Dos

- Follow up if you said you would.
- Follow up even if you **did not** say you would.



Photo: Copyright istock.com/valentinrusakov



What, In Your Current Role, Can You Do?

Don't promise what you cannot individually do.



Photo: Copyright istock.com/PeopleImages



Relationship Between Chronic Stress and Suicide

Photo: Copyright iStock.com/helpcrmpain

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION | COMMUNICATING WITH FARMERS UNDER STRESS
Copyright 2019 Michigan State University Board of Trustees



Suicide Warning Signs:

- Talking or writing about suicide or death
- Feeling hopeless, trapped, or like a burden
- Giving away prized possessions
- Making a plan, acquiring means
- Saying goodbyes
- Isolation from others
- Loss of interest
- Mood change

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION | COMMUNICATING WITH FARMERS UNDER STRESS
Copyright 2019 Michigan State University Board of Trustees



Suicide Warning Signs: Examples of Statements

Clear to friend: "I'm going to kill myself."

Coded to son: "Don't be surprised if I die in a tractor rollover."

Clear to banker: "If you foreclose, you'll be seeing my obit next week."

Coded to friend: "If I should pass away, I want you to have my old Winchester 12-gauge."

Coded to financial advisor/loan officer: "What happens to my debt if I die?"

Compliments of the QPR Institute (Question, Persuade, Refer [QPR] for Farmers and Ranchers)



More Suicide Warning Signs: Examples of Statements

To doctor: "Is this enough medicine to kill someone?" (indirect/coded).

To dentist: "When I can't sleep like this, I don't give a _____ about life."
(indirect/coded)

To adult son: "I'm going to be leaving you nothing I'm afraid, just my burdens."
(indirect/coded)

To adult daughter: "You'll need to look after your mother when I'm gone."
(indirect/coded)

To a best friend and pastor: No warning signs sent

To his wife: "Why don't I just shoot myself and let the bank have this place?"
(direct/uncoded)

Compliments of the QPR Institute (Question, Persuade, Refer [QPR] for Farmers and Ranchers)



How Do I Ask Someone about Suicide?

Ask directly:

- Are you having thoughts of suicide?

Asking directly does **not** increase risk of suicide and may provide the person with relief that someone sees their struggle.

What if someone says “yes”?

- Do not leave the person alone.
- Call for help and/or take them to a hospital or healthcare provider.



Suicide Prevention Resources

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention <https://afsp.org>



<https://988lifeline.org/>



Photo: Copyright iStock.com's lewismcgee



Important Resources

- K-State Research and Extension Stress and Resiliency Team - <https://ksre-learn.com/stress-management>
- Kansas Agricultural Mediation Services: <https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/kams/>
- Kansas Agrability: <https://agrability.ksu.edu/>
- Kansas Farm Management: <https://agmanager.info/kfma>
- AgKansitions, Office of Farm and Ranch Transition: <https://www.agkansitions.org/>
- North Central Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network: <https://farmstress.org/>
- Kansas Ag Stress Resources: kansasagstress.org
- Center for Rural Affairs: <http://www.cfra.org/news/180130/10-helpful-resources-farmers>
- National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: 988. Chat: Text 988
- Veterans Crisis Line: 1-800-273-8255, Press 1 (website also has a chat option) <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/>



Review

- Farmers can have stress due to experiencing extreme economic conditions, weather-related emergencies, and other reasons, and may not seek help, in part due to lack of medical resources.
- Chronic stress is a common response to the challenging economic conditions farmers face.
- Listening empathetically is the most helpful thing you can do for someone going through extreme stress.
- Positive self-talk, mindful breathing and acceptance are proven coping skills.
- Never leave a distressed person alone. Call a friend, family member or even 911.



Survey

Please fill out our survey and leave it on the table.



Program Name: Communicating with Farmers Under Stress

Survey Name: Farm Stress Management Workshop (MSU Farm Stress)
Use the link or QR code to the left to take this survey

<https://bit.ly/4omd06l>



Recommended Resources

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention website. (2018). *About suicide*. <https://afsp.org/about-suicide/>
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. (2006, 2010). *What to do if you think a person is having suicidal thoughts*. <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/risk-assessment-suicide-prevention-lifeline-wallet-card.pdf>
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. (2018). *Suicide warning signs*. <https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SVP11-0126/SVP11-0126.pdf>
- Drovers.com. <https://www.drovers.com/>
- Michigan State University Extension. (2016). *How to cultivate a productive mindset*. https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/how_to_cultivate_a_productive_mindset (handout)
- Michigan State University Extension. (n.d.). *Opioids in rural farming communities*
- Michigan State University Extension. (2018). *Weathering the storm: How to handle stress on the farm* online class. https://www.canr.msu.edu/managing_farm_stress/online_course_how_to_handle_stress_on_the_farm
- OK.gov. (2018). *Ag4Life: A resource for Oklahoma farm & ranch families*. <https://www.ok.gov/ag4life/>



References

- American Farm Bureau Federation and National Farmers Union. (2017, Dec. 8). *Survey shows massive opioid impact in farm country; farm groups call for dialogue, action*. <https://farmtownstrong.org/2017/12/08/survey-shows-massive-opioid-impact-in-farm-country-farm-groups-call-for-dialogue-action/>
- Bechtel, W. (2018, April 6). \$2.6 billion in aid available for 2017 hurricane, wildfire ag losses. *Drovers*. <https://www.drovers.com/article/236-billion-aid-available-2017-hurricane-wildfire-ag-losses>
- Bergquist, S. H. (n.d.). *How stress affects your body*. [Video]. TedEd. <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/how-stress-affects-your-body-sharon-horesh-bergquist>
- Bjornestad, A., Brown, L., & Weidauer, L. (in progress). *Rural mental health: The impact of social support on depression symptoms in farmers*. Brookings: South Dakota State University.
- CDC. (2018a). *Agricultural safety*. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Atlanta, GA: CDC. <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/aginjury/default.html>
- CDC. (2018b). *Table AI-4. National estimates of agricultural work-related injuries to adults (20 years and older) on US farms by age group: Occupational Injury Surveillance of Production Agriculture (OISPA) Survey*. Atlanta, GA: CDC. <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/aginjury/oispa/injtabls.html>
- Chen, E., & Miller, G.E. (2007). Stress and inflammation in exacerbations of asthma. *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity*, 21(8), 993-999.
- Dimsdale, J. E. (2008). Psychological stress and cardiovascular disease. *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, 51(13), 1237-1246.
- Fetsch, R.J. (2011). *Farming, ranching: Health hazard or opportunity?* (Rev. ed.). (No. 10.201). Fort Collins: Colorado State University Extension. <http://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/consumer/10201.pdf>



References

- Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). (2019). Table 2. Health professional shortage areas: Rural/non-rural classification as of December 31, 2018. *Designated Health Professional Shortage Areas Statistics*. Rockville, MD: HRSA. https://ersrs.hrsa.gov/ReportServer?/HGDW_Reports/BCD_HPSA/BCD_HPSA_SCR50_Qtr_Smry_HTML&rc:Toolbar=false
- Herbert, J. (2012). Cortisol and depression: Three questions for psychiatry. *Psychological Medicine*, 43(3), 449-469.
- Hiller-Sturmhöfel, S., & Bartke, A. (1998). The endocrine system: An overview. *Alcohol Health & Research World*, 22(3), 153-164.
- Kandhalu, P. (2013). Effects of cortisol on physical and psychological aspects of the body and effective ways by which one can reduce stress. *Berkeley Scientific Journal* 18(1), 14-16.
- Keller, A., Litzelman, K., Wisk, L. E., Maddox, T., Cheng, E. R., Creswell, P. D., & Witt, W. P. (2012). Does the perception that stress affects health matter? The association with health and mortality. *Health Psychology*, 31(5), 677-684.
- Kumari, M., Badrick, E., Ferrie, J. Perski, A., Marmot, M., & Chandola, T. (2009). Self-reported sleep duration and sleep disturbance are independently associated with cortisol secretion in the Whitehall II Study. *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*, 94(12), 4801-4809.
- Lundberg, U. (1999). Coping with stress: Neuroendocrine reactions and implications for health. *Noise & Health*, 1(4), 67-74.
- Lundberg, U. (2005). Stress hormones in health and illness: The roles of work and gender. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 30(10), 1017-1021.



References

- Manenschijn, L., Schaap, L., van Schoor, N. M., van der Pas, S., Peeters, G. M., Lips, P., Koper, J. W., & van Rossum, E. F. (2013). High long-term cortisol levels, measured in scalp hair, are associated with a history of cardiovascular disease. *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*, 98(5), 2078-2083.
- Michigan State University Extension. (2016) How stress affects you. RELAX: Alternatives to anger.
- Michigan State University Extension. (2016) RELAX: Alternatives to anger.
- Morning Consult. (2017). *American Farm Bureau Federation: Polling presentation. October 31, 2017.* <https://1vix7b4f3jvk2x4eqy1byl1n-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2017/12/171015-AFB-Opioids-LE.pdf>
- Newman, K. L., Leon, J. S., & Newman, L. S. (2015). Estimating occupational illness, injury, and mortality in food production in the United States: A farm-to-table analysis. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 57(7): 718-725.
- North Dakota State University. (2016). *Responding to distressed people*. Fargo, ND: NDSU Extension. <https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/casscountyextension/pdfs/fs-1805-responding-to-distressed-people>
- Pearlin, L. I. (1989). The sociological study of stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*. 30(3): 241-256.
- QPR institute. (2017). *Question, persuade, refer (QPR) for farmers and ranchers.* <https://qprinstitute.com/>
- Rosmann, M. R. (2008). Behavioral healthcare of the agriculture population: A brief history. *Journal of Rural Mental Health*, 32 (1), 39-48.
- Rosmann, M. R. (2010). The agrarian imperative. *Journal of Agromedicine*, 15, 71-75.
- <http://www.agriwellness.org/Newsletters/AWPPartners/AgriWellnessPartnersMay2010.pdf>
- RSA (Producer). (2013) *Brené Brown on empathy* [Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ewvqu369Jw>



References

- Schoorlemmer, R. M., Peeters, G. M., Van Schoor, N. M., & Lips, P. (2009). Relationships between cortisol level, mortality and chronic diseases in older persons. *Clinical Endocrinology*, 71(6), 779-786.
- South Dakota University Extension. (2017). *A five-step approach to alleviating farm stress.* <https://igrow.org/up/resources/04-1004-2017.pdf>
- Staufienbiel, S. M., Penninx, B. W., Spijker, A. T., Elzinga, B. M., & van Rossum, E. F. (2013). Hair cortisol, stress exposure, and mental health in humans: A systematic review. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 38(8), 1220-1235.
- Thoits, P. A. (2010). Stress and health: Major findings and policy implications. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 51(S), S41-S53.
- USDA, Economic Research Service. (2018). *Charts and maps about your state.* <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/farm-income-and-wealth-statistics/charts-and-maps-about-your-state/>
- USDA, Economic Research Service. (2018). *Farm income and wealth statistics.* <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/farm-income-and-wealth-statistics/>
- USDA, Economic Research Service. (2018). *Farm sector income forecast.* <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-sector-income-finances/farm-sector-income-forecast/>
- USDA, Economic Research Service and National Agricultural Statistics Service. (2017). *Commodity specialization.* <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-household-well-being/farm-household-income-historical/>
- USDA, Economic Research Service and National Agricultural Statistics Service. (2017). *Type of farm determines primary source of household income.* <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-household-well-being/farm-household-income-historical/>



References

- USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service. (2018). *Milk prices received for milk by month*. https://www.nass.usda.gov/Charts_and_Maps/Agricultural_Prices/pricemk.php
- Wichtner-Zoia, B. Peterson, G., & Vandenberg, L. (2016). *Communicating through conflict*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Extension.
- Williams, R. T., & Fetsch, R. J. (2018). *Farm and ranch family stress and depression: A checklist and guide for making referrals*. Department of Human Development & Family Studies, 410 Behavioral Sciences Building, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523-1570.



MSU is an affirmative-action, equal-opportunity employer. Michigan State University Extension programs and materials are open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, sex, gender, gender identity, religion, age, height, weight, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, marital status, family status or veteran status.

