



Agricultural Producers & STRESS

Learning to Relax

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Roger holds down a job in town to supplement income from the family ranch. He is up before everyone else in the house on most days, and his schedule and lack of adequate sleep often have him feeling as if he does morning chores in a stupor. Although he is able to recognize stress signals, Roger sometimes feels powerless to address them. “There just isn’t any extra time in my day,” he says.

Roger’s statement about lack of time is probably all too familiar. Many ag producers can relate to this feeling. What needs to be considered, however, is the time that stress eats away from each task—feeding the livestock takes an hour when you are alert; it takes 90 minutes when you are battling stress and fatigue.

Practicing relaxation may seem too time-consuming or even like a waste of time for many ranchers and farmers. But in the overall scheme of things, the benefits will make you more effective throughout each day. So listen to your body’s signals, and take some action to reduce stress through relaxation techniques.

Relaxation can occur in various ways and in many places. You may want to set aside time once or twice each day for relaxing. The following techniques can be used at times during the day when you take breaks, as well as when you find yourself in a stressful situation. Keep in mind that a successful relaxation technique should be enjoyable and easy, but that it may take time to perfect.



Meditation as a form of relaxation (relaxation response)

Meditation is more than concentrating on a concept; it is the process by which you gain mastery over your reaction to external information (stimuli). Successful meditation involves a temporary shut down of the information processing mechanisms of the brain. The result is known as the relaxation response. Once you learn it, you can induce the relaxation response whenever you are confronted with a stressful situation.

There are four components standard to most relaxation response strategies. First of all, find a place that is quiet and distraction-free. Second, concentrate on a selected word or phrase in order to clear the mind. The third requirement is a passive attitude, both mentally and physically. Fourth, assume a comfortable position, but one that is not likely to induce sleep.

The relaxation response was developed through the pioneering work of Herbert Benson. To use the relaxation response, take the following steps:

1. Sit quietly and in a comfortable position.
2. Shut your eyes.
3. Relax all muscles, beginning at your feet and moving up to your face. Keep them relaxed.
4. Breathe through the nose, becoming more and more aware



of your breathing. When breathing, say the word “one” silently to yourself. Breathe “one,” in... “one,” out, and so on. Your breathing should be easy and natural.

5. Continue the process for 10 to 20 minutes. You may check the time, but do not use an alarm. When you finish, sit several minutes more, at first with your eyes closed and later with your eyes open. Do not stand up right away.
6. Do not worry about achieving a deep level of relaxation. Rather, use a passive attitude to permit relaxation to occur at its own pace. With practice, the response should come. Use this technique once or twice daily, but not within two hours of a meal, since the digestive processes seem to interfere with the relaxation response.

Everyone can elicit the relaxation response, whether through Benson's method or by some other approach. The American Heart Association also recommends meditation, as stress is a risk factor in heart disease, cancer, and other illnesses.

Muscular relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation.

Developed by Edmund Jacobsen, this technique involves a series of sequential physical exercises. Beginning with the lower extremities of the body, the first muscle group is tensed for 7 seconds and then completely relaxed for 20 to 60 seconds. The tension-release pattern is repeated in the original group and then in different muscle groups, moving upward toward the head. Current research confirms that if you relax your muscles through focused physical exercises, mental relaxation will follow.

Mini stretch. Try to touch your ears with your shoulders. Hold the position for a count of four. Let your shoulders drop, and then rotate each shoulder separately toward the rear. Rotate each shoulder five to ten times. Then do both shoulders together.

Shaking. This is a quick way to relieve tension and relax tight muscles. With arms hanging loosely by your sides, begin to shake your hands. Then move up the body to include your arms and shoulders. Gradually slow down the shaking. Next, sit and do the

same thing with both legs. Be careful not to shake too vigorously.

Diaphragmatic breathing

Normal breathing is usually an unconscious act. Diaphragmatic breathing, in contrast, requires a conscious decision to focus your attention on this basic physiological function. As you slowly breathe in, let your stomach expand.

Think of it as a balloon you are filling with air. As you exhale, let the air out of your "balloon" slowly. Place your hands on your stomach; you should feel it raise and lower as you breathe.

Diaphragmatic breathing requires concentration. You can minimize external distractions by practicing this technique in a quiet place. Your mind, however, may create internal distractions. When you notice distracting thoughts, allow them to pass and then refocus your attention on breathing. To reduce stress at any time or place during the day, occasionally take three to seven full breaths of air. Remember to relax while doing this.

Relaxation "vacations"

Escape for a while. Sometimes the best idea is to get away from the stressful problem and take time for a quick trip, a book, a game, or a movie. "Stand there and suffer" is a form of self-punishment and not a way to solve the problem. Recover and come back to deal with



the difficulty when you are better prepared.

A good way to escape is to literally get away. This can mean taking a break from work or, when time permits, physically leaving the day-to-day stresses of agricultural production. One of the most common stresses ag producers face is balancing work and personal life, so it just makes sense to spend vacation time away from the ranch or farm to gain the maximum level of rest. Several times during the year, spend a weekend or even a day visiting a new place.

Intrinsically rewarding experiences can also be great escapes. An intrinsically rewarding activity is one that you enjoy for its own sake and that takes you away from your troubles for a while. A hobby is a good example, but other activities can be less structured. Taking a drive, reading a book, or going for a walk are other simple ideas. Try doing things that you do because you want to, not because you have to, on a regular basis. This is particularly important when you feel tense, overworked, or stressed.



For those times when a literal escape is not feasible, try some uninterrupted quiet. Sit comfortably for 15 to 20 minutes with your eyes closed. Create a restful mental picture, perhaps of a favorite mountain stream. You might be fishing from the bank on a warm afternoon. Imagine a leaf that drifts slowly along on the water before it passes out of sight. Re-

peat this scene several times. It will help you practice letting thoughts, like the leaves, come and go without getting “stuck” as you relax.

Find what works for you

There are many other relaxation techniques. Each person should develop an activity that suits them and that gives them the best rest and recovery, whether it's prayer, listening to music or relaxation tapes, yoga, massage, or one of the techniques listed here.

People vary in their reactions to relaxation techniques. Some ranchers or farmers may feel very relaxed soon after trying the exercises outlined above. If you receive immediate results from these techniques, so much the better.

Other producers may notice relatively little change in their stress level, especially the first few times. If you expected immediate results from these relaxation techniques and did not receive them, you may feel discouraged or want to give up. But don't cheat yourself. Keep trying a variety of techniques until you find one that works for you!

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