

Identifying Stress in Family and Others

WHEN OUTSIDE HELP IS NEEDED AFTER A DISASTER

A feeling of helplessness is a normal reaction to a disaster. Personal coping methods like talking things out, accepting comfort and help from others, and taking things one day at a time help most people through the rough times. But when those methods fail, outside help may be needed. If you notice the warning signs of severe stress in a family member, neighbor or a friend, there are some things you can do.

SIGNS OF PROLONGED STRESS

When families or individuals are under stress for long periods of time they may experience a number of signs and symptoms. Watch for the following effects in people you see on a day-to-day basis.

- ◆ *Physical.* Headaches, ulcers, backaches, eating irregularities, sleep disturbances, frequent sickness, exhaustion.
- ◆ *Emotional.* Sadness, depression, bitterness, anger, anxiety, loss of spirit, loss of humor.
- ◆ *Behavioral.* Irritability, backbiting, acting out, withdrawal, passive-aggressiveness, alcoholism, violence.
- ◆ *Cognitive.* Memory loss, lack of concentration, inability to make decisions.
- ◆ *Self-esteem.* Comments such as, "I'm a failure," "I blew it," "Why can't I...?"

CRIES FOR HELP

The greater the number of signs or symptoms, the greater your concern should be. If someone is exhibiting the following signs of depression or suicide, it is important they get linked up with help as soon as possible. All cries for help should be taken seriously.

Signs of depression:

- ◆ *Appearance.* Sad face, slow movements, lack of interest in appearance.
- ◆ *Unhappy feelings.* Feeling sad, hopeless, discouraged, listless.
- ◆ *Negative thoughts.* "I'm a failure." "I'm no good," "No one cares."
- ◆ *Reduced activity.* "Doing anything is just too much of an effort."
- ◆ *Isolation.* "I don't want anyone to see me," "I feel so lonely."
- ◆ *Guilt and low self-esteem.* "It's all my fault," "I should be punished."

Signs of suicidal intent:

- ◆ *Anxiety or depression.* Severe, intense feelings of anxiety or depression.
- ◆ *Withdrawal or isolation.* Withdrawn, alone, lack of friends or supports.

MAKING A REFERRAL

- ◆ **Call the agency and ask to speak to the intake worker (if there is one). Identify yourself and your relationship with the person or family.**
- ◆ **State what you think the person's or family's needs are (immediate protection from suicidal acts, an appointment for counseling.)**
- ◆ **Provide the agency with background information (name, address and phone; age and sex; nature of current problem or crisis; any past history you are aware of.)**
- ◆ **Ask the agency what follow-up action they will take. Find out when they will act on the referral, whom you may contact later, cost of the service, etc.**

Make sure the person or family and the referral agency connect. Make one or more follow-up contacts with the agency if necessary.

Additional resources:

Your county family living agent; Farmers Assistance Hotline (for Wisconsin farm families), (800) 942-2474; health and human service workers; clergy; school personnel; financial and legal assistance agencies; UW Extension video "Managing During Tough Times," (VB0052)

Related publications:

UW-Extension publications—

"Managing Between Jobs—Controlling Stress," (B3459-11);

"Managing Farm Stress," (B2744-1).

- ◆ *Helpless and hopeless.* Sense of complete powerlessness, a hopeless feeling.
- ◆ *Alcohol or drug abuse.* There is often a link between alcoholism, drugs and suicide.
- ◆ *Previous suicide attempts.*
- ◆ *Cries for help:* Making a will, giving possessions away, making statements such as "I'm calling it quits."

FARM FAMILIES

Even without disasters, recent years have been difficult for farm families. Many are experiencing financial and emotional stress that is only heightened by disasters such as flood or tornadoes. There are several signs when a farm family may be in need of help. They include:

- ◆ *Changes in routine.* The farmer or farm family stops attending church or drops out of community groups.
- ◆ *Increase in illness.* Farmers or family members may experience more colds, flu, aches and pains.
- ◆ *Appearance of farmstead declines.* The farm family no longer takes pride in the way farm buildings and grounds appear.
- ◆ *Care of livestock declines.* Cattle may not be cared for in the usual way; they may lose condition, or show signs of abuse.
- ◆ *Increase in farm accidents.* The risk of farm accidents increases because of fatigue or loss of ability to concentrate.
- ◆ *Children show signs of stress.* Farm children may act out, experience academic declines or increased school absences; they also may show signs of physical abuse or neglect.

HOW TO REFER A PERSON FOR HELP

If you see signs that the person or family needs help that you can't provide (financial, legal or personal counseling), try to assess what agency or community resource would be most appropriate. Then discuss the referral with the person or family. You might say, "It sounds/looks like you are feeling _____. I think _____ could help you deal with your situation."

Explore the individual or family's willingness to initiate contact with the community resource. Ask, "How do you feel about seeking help from this person/agency?" If they are unwilling to take the initiative or there is some danger if action is not taken, you should call an agency for assistance. (See sidebar, above left.)