


An aerial photograph of a farm. In the foreground, there is a white house with a dark roof and a red garage door. To the right of the house is a large, rectangular garden bed with various plants. A dirt road or driveway runs from the house towards the background. In the middle ground, there is a large red barn with a black roof and a white fence. Behind the barn, there are several smaller buildings and a large field of golden-brown crops, possibly corn, that has been harvested. The background shows rolling hills under a clear sky.

**DIFFICULT  
TIMES:**

**STRESS  
ON THE FARM**



*“Things have gotten real bad around here.  
My husband and I fight all the time,  
he can’t sleep,  
he complains about headaches  
and stomach aches.  
The kids are cranky and yesterday  
I almost hit my youngest  
for fighting with her sister.  
We’re behind in our payments  
and we have a meeting  
that involves our creditors in two weeks.  
I don’t know how we’re going to make it.  
Talk about stress,  
we’re up to our eyeballs in it.”*

*Saskatchewan farmer*



## DIFFICULT TIMES: STRESS ON THE FARM

This resource has been produced by the Agricultural Health and Safety Network after evaluation through questionnaires and focus groups of the Rural Stress Toolbook (2000) by farmers and health professionals.

### THE NEED:

Farmers have a strong tradition of being independent. The tendency is not to openly talk about problems or ask for support until things are absolutely desperate.

### A Way...

**This resource is a way of  
enabling farm families to understand stress, its impact,  
and learn skills  
to help balance stress when farming  
in difficult times.**

## THE SITUATION:

Farmers face tremendous pressure as they work to balance farm and off-farm work and struggle to have the farm support itself.

Many factors that influence a farm's viability are out of a farmer's control. Often what we cannot control causes us to feel the most stress:

Factors affecting stress on the farm:

- The weather
- Increased input costs
- Large debt loads
- Animal disease outbreaks (BSE and Avian Influenza)
- Erratic markets
- Increased government regulation and complicated paper work
- Long working hours
- Disagreements with other family members in the farm operation
- Uncertain crop yield and forage production
- Machinery breakdowns
- Handling dangerous goods

Stress for farmers continues as rural communities shrink, schools close and fewer services are conveniently available. As members of these communities, farmers work to fill the gaps in attempts to keep their communities functioning. Rural communities in turn are affected by the high stress farm environment.

*Give yourself credit for the tough times  
that you have survived.*

**STRESS:**

- Stress is the human response to any change that is perceived as a challenge or threat.
- Changes that cause worry, frustration and upheaval, and seem beyond our control can cause stress.
- Attitudes, perceptions, and meanings that people assign to events determine a large part of their stress levels.

**Not all stress is bad:**

When we are excited about an event in our lives, we feel anticipation. Anticipation helps us get mentally and physically ready for a task. This energizing stress is called eustress. Eustress helps us work long hours to finish a job. Eustress keeps us going during seeding and harvest.

**Distress:**

Distress occurs when we suffer from increased amounts of stress for a long period of time. Distress can threaten our physical and mental health.

Experiencing ongoing distress for months or years leaves our bodies all geared up with no place to go. High levels of adrenalin and other stress chemicals, meant to be used for short term response to challenges, are harmful when they continue with no relief. The results can be high blood pressure, heart disease, a weakened immune system and depression.

## EFFECTS OF STRESS?

Stress overload changes the way we think. We get tunnel vision and have difficulty exploring options. We grow paranoid, thinking people are criticizing or making fun of us. We have difficulty handling anger because stress reduces our tolerance and resilience.

Keep in mind stress can:

- Occur suddenly with no warning
  - ▶ hail destroys your quarter of lentils
- Build rapidly
  - ▶ one thing after another goes wrong in a day
  - ▶ the cows are out, the ATV has a flat tire, can't find any fencing staples, cell phone keeps ringing.....
- Snowball
  - ▶ over weeks and months
  - ▶ poor cash flow, high debt, and personal worries escalate

Consequences of “too much stress” for a farm family can widely vary from tension in family relationships

→ to poor operational decisions

→ to death from a farm incident

***BALANCE***  
***is the key to effectively dealing with stress and***  
***we all need to find our own***  
***BALANCE.***

## SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Stress can surface in the form of physical, emotional and behavioural changes depending on the person and situation.

Check the symptoms of STRESS you are presently experiencing.

Physical	Emotional	Behavioural
<input type="checkbox"/> Headaches	<input type="checkbox"/> Increased angry blow ups	<input type="checkbox"/> Overeating/neglect diet
<input type="checkbox"/> Stomach problems (constipation or diarrhea)	<input type="checkbox"/> Frustration	<input type="checkbox"/> Increased smoking/alcohol drinking
<input type="checkbox"/> Chest pain	<input type="checkbox"/> Impatience	<input type="checkbox"/> Change in sleeping habits
<input type="checkbox"/> Rapidly beating heart/change in blood pressure	<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty controlling emotions	<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty relaxing; restlessness/lack of concentration
<input type="checkbox"/> Grinding/clenched teeth	<input type="checkbox"/> Low self-esteem	<input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawn from others
<input type="checkbox"/> Fatigue	<input type="checkbox"/> Depression	<input type="checkbox"/> Trouble adapting to changing circumstances
<input type="checkbox"/> Drop in sexual interest	<input type="checkbox"/> Suicidal thoughts	<input type="checkbox"/> Forgetfulness
		<input type="checkbox"/> Procrastination
		<input type="checkbox"/> Short tempered
		<input type="checkbox"/> Sarcastic arguments
		<input type="checkbox"/> Impulsive buying/gambling

*Everyone views stressful situations differently and has different coping skills.*

*No two people respond exactly the same way to a given situation.*

*Understanding ourselves and our reactions to stress, allows us to learn how to handle stress more effectively.*


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## DEALING WITH STRESS

People vary in their ability to handle stress. What may be tolerable to one person may be a challenge to another.

Farmers who are *aware* of stressors know some are out of their control, and they *accept* that. These farmers then concentrate on directing their energy towards problem solving and *coping* with stressors that are within their control. Farmers demonstrate control with *actions* - controlling tempers, keeping farm records, and **practicing** safe productive farming skills.

Learning to cope successfully with a particular stressor once makes it easier to cope the next time.



*Just as people differ in the way they perceive and react to stress, people differ in how well they manage stress.*

## HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH STRESS?

### Awareness

**Yes**   **No**   Can you name three recent situations that have caused stress in your life?

**Yes**   **No**   Can you list three symptoms (physical, emotional or behavioural) that you suffer when you are under stress?

### Acceptance

**Yes**   **No**   Can you maintain a positive or neutral attitude when dealing with “little things” in life?

**Yes**   **No**   Can you talk yourself out of feeling stressed?

### Coping

**Yes**   **No**   Do you know and use relaxation techniques like deep breathing and meditation?

**Yes**   **No**   Do you ever use exercise to get rid of stressed feelings?

### Action

**Yes**   **No**   Do you make a list and prioritize tasks to keep yourself from feeling overwhelmed by all there is to do?

**Yes**   **No**   When conflict arises can you express your feelings and communicate them to others effectively?

**Yes total** \_\_\_\_\_

**No total** \_\_\_\_\_

YES  
Less than 7: Any effort made to improve your ability to recognize and deal with stress will help promote balance in your life.

YES  
7 or more: You are on the right track! Share your ability to balance farm stress through difficult times with friends, family and colleagues. Be aware there can be a big difference between knowing what to do and doing it.

**AWARENESS****Farm Stress Inventory**

Farming has ongoing situations that cause stress. Common farm stressors are finances, daily hassles, and lack of control over the weather, heavy work overloads, and conflict in relationships. **Complete the following inventory to identify your stressors.**  
**1 = low stress; 5 = high stress.**

- |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1  | Sudden and significant increase in debt load  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2  | Significant production loss due to disease or pests                                   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3  | Insufficient regular cash flow to meet financial obligations or for daily necessities | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4  | Delay in planting or harvesting due to weather  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5  | Media distortions of farm situation   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6  | Low commodity prices  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7  | Significant changes in type or size of farming operation                              | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8  | Meeting with loan officer for additional loan   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9  | Purchase of major machinery, facility or livestock                                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10 | Not being considered part of the farm business by others                              | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11 | Taking an off-the-farm job to meet expenses   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12 | Prolonged bad weather   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13 | Problems with weeds or insects  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14 | Machinery breakdown at a critical time  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15 | Not enough time to spend with spouse  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16 | Crop loss due to weather  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17 | Illness during planting/harvesting  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

18	Deciding when to sell	1	2	3	4	5
19	Rising expenses	1	2	3	4	5
20	Government policies and regulations	1	2	3	4	5
21	Concerns about the continued financial viability of the farm	1	2	3	4	5
22	Having a loan request turned down	1	2	3	4	5
23	Farming-related accident	1	2	3	4	5
24	Government free-trade policies	1	2	3	4	5
25	Government “cheap food” policies	1	2	3	4	5
26	Metric conversion	1	2	3	4	5
27	Breeding or reproductive difficulties with livestock	1	2	3	4	5
28	No farm help or loss of help when needed	1	2	3	4	5
29	Need to learn/adjust to new government regulations and policies	1	2	3	4	5
30	Spouse doesn’t have enough time for child-rearing	1	2	3	4	5

**AWARENESS**

**Farm Stress Inventory: Continued**

31	Increased workload at peak times	1	2	3	4	5
32	Unplanned interruptions	1	2	3	4	5
33	Use of hazardous chemicals on the farm	1	2	3	4	5
34	Dealing with salespeople	1	2	3	4	5
35	Long work hours	1	2	3	4	5
36	Few vacations away from the farm	1	2	3	4	5
37	Feeling isolated on the farm	1	2	3	4	5
38	Having to travel long distances for services, shopping and health care	1	2	3	4	5
39	Pressure of having too much to do in too little time	1	2	3	4	5
40	Keeping up with new technology and products	1	2	3	4	5
41	Worrying about market conditions	1	2	3	4	5
42	Having to make decisions without all the necessary information	1	2	3	4	5
43	Being expected to work on the farm as well as manage the house	1	2	3	4	5
44	Worrying about owing money	1	2	3	4	5
45	Worrying about keeping the farm in the family	1	2	3	4	5
46	Not seeing enough people	1	2	3	4	5
47	Not having enough money or time for entertainment and recreation	1	2	3	4	5
48	Death of a parent or member of immediate family	1	2	3	4	5

49	Death of a friend	1	2	3	4	5
50	Problems balancing work and family responsibilities	1	2	3	4	5
51	Problems with relatives in farm operating agreement	1	2	3	4	5
52	Divorce or marital separation	1	2	3	4	5
53	Problems with a partnership	1	2	3	4	5
54	Daughter or son leaving home	1	2	3	4	5
55	Trouble with parents or in-laws	1	2	3	4	5
56	Conflict with spouse over spending priorities	1	2	3	4	5
57	Major decisions being made without my knowledge or input	1	2	3	4	5
58	Having to wear too many hats, eg. farmer, spouse, father, son etc.	1	2	3	4	5
59	Surface-rights negotiations	1	2	3	4	5
60	Other recent events which have had an impact on your life:	1	2	3	4	5

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## INVENTORY SCORE

### Putting Your SCORE in Perspective:

#### *If the majority of your scores are 4 or 5:*

- It is important to devote immediate attention to stress management. Give yourself credit for the tough times you have survived. Long term stress depletes your internal resources. It is common to identify with these farm stresses in your operation. Remember there are people who will listen and help brainstorm ways to cope. For help, please refer to the back page of this resource book for local contacts. There is no shame in talking to someone about your concerns and remember to incorporate the five STEPS (page 21) to cope with stress on the farm.

#### *If the majority of your scores are 3:*

- Focus on your stress management strengths. Continue to expand your coping skills. Set goals that allow you take control of what is controllable on your farm. The skills you are using and those you will develop can help you to deal with uncontrollable situations that arise.

#### *If the majority of your scores are 1 and 2:*

- You have stress coping skills. Share your skills with others. Farming will continue to challenge you, so continue to communicate, prioritize daily tasks and support your family, friends, workers and community in difficult times.

*Keep in mind that the average farmer is experiencing more stress than observed in other occupations so even an "average" level of farm stress may be too much!*

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**AWARENESS****What I Can Control.....**

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*Stress cannot be cured but it can be handled. A farmer cannot control outside forces that affect the farm and family but a farmer can control how they handle the stress.*

**Events**

- **Plan ahead.** Don't procrastinate. *Replace worn machinery parts and complete maintenance during down times rather than when the equipment is needed in the field.*
- **Use your time efficiently.** Set priorities and work at tasks accordingly. *Remember there are only so many things that you can do in a day.*
- **Prior to stressful seasons,** - calving, seeding, harvest - delegate and plan who will take care of the everyday chores.
- **Learn to say NO to extra commitments.** *There is only one you. Take care of yourself so you can fulfill present commitments.*

**Attitudes**

- Concentrate on thinking and using your positive energy to solve a problem instead of worrying yourself sick about it.
- Give yourself and others credit for what has been accomplished instead of focussing on what hasn't been done.
- Set realistic goals. *"My goal this next year is to fence that back quarter south of the house."* Having a major long term goal makes it easier to keep things in perspective. Setting daily priorities becomes more straightforward too.
- Make a plan for your day. When you cannot get everything you want completed in a day, tackle what will give you the biggest return.
- Look at the big picture and count the good things that happen. *"It's a good thing that I noticed that bearing was gone on the combine while still in the yard. Fixing it in the field would have been really difficult."*
- Leave a little time to deal with the unexpected.

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## **AWARENESS**

Put the stressors that you identified in the Farm Stress Inventory starting on page 11 or any personally identified stressors in the appropriate boxes below.




**Important/Controllable Stressors**

*ie., Getting your taxes filed.*



**Unimportant/Controllable Stressors**  
*ie., Who is going to do chores when I am gone next Tuesday?*



*“Grant me the strength to change the things I can change  
and the wisdom to know the things I should not change.”*

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## AWARENESS

Put the stressors that you identified in the Farm Stress Inventory starting on page 11 or any personally identified stressors in the appropriate boxes below.




### Important/Uncontrollable Stressors

*ie., The weather.*



### Unimportant/Uncontrollable Stressors

*ie., The neighbours crooked new fence line.*



*...nge, the courage to accept those things I cannot change  
now the difference.”*

## ACCEPTANCE SKILLS

Acceptance skills can change your attitude toward controllable and uncontrollable stressors.

- ▶ **Keep things in perspective.** Ask yourself:
  - Has this happened before?
  - What did I learn last time this happened?
  - What's the worst possible outcome?
  - Are my fears realistic?
  - What else can I do?
  - What do I tell a friend in this situation?
  - A year from now, how important will this be?
  
- ▶ **Use positive self-talk** – let go of the blame and guilt:
  - I did the best that I could at the time.
  - I will succeed.
  - There is no place to go but up.
  - Someday we'll laugh about this.
  - This is a learning experience.
  - Calm down.
  - Things take time.
  
- ▶ **Keep a positive attitude.**
  - With a positive attitude it is easier to live and work with others and find solutions.

**Someone to talk to is a phone call away → Look on the back cover to see who is there to help in your area.**

## ACCEPTANCE SKILLS

- ▶ **Develop a stress-resistant personality.**
  - Set realistic goals and expectations.
  - Build time for leisure activities.
  - Get some exercise.
  - Put problems in perspective and look at them as challenges.
  - Look for possibilities and get creative.
  - Connect with a positive social network that is supportive.
  - Share responsibilities and ask for help.
  
- ▶ **Talk to someone you trust to help you clear your head and focus on eliminating or reducing stress and anxiety.**
  - Family, friends or a clergy member.
  - Consider seeking out a professional counsellor or confidential phone line program to help if you feel completely alone, overwhelmed or hopeless.
  - There is no shame in asking for help to sort the wheat from the chaff in your life.

*“I felt like I was trapped and couldn’t get out.  
Half of me didn’t want to open up to anyone.  
I think I was afraid people would judge me and think I wasn’t able  
to solve my problems.  
The other half of me desperately needed someone to talk to, to  
listen, and to help me brainstorm some ways to cope.  
When I finally opened up,  
I felt like a weight had been taken off my shoulders.”*

## COPING SKILLS

Coping skills are ways in which an individual or their family uses personal, financial and community resources to help to handle the strain of stress.

A positive attitude, willingness to explore resources, accepting and offering help, and being flexible in stressful situations are helpful ways to cope so one does not feel isolated and frustrated.

Exercise	Hobbies
Curling Playing old time hockey Bowling Dancing Riding a bike	Doing a crossword puzzle Playing a musical instrument Trying something you always wanted to do Reading a book Woodworking projects Restoring an old car
Diversions	Relaxation
Playing cards with friends Fishing Checking a local attraction Having a wiener roast Taking a mini holiday Phoning the funniest person you know	Getting a massage Taking a nap Enjoying a bath Listening to music Taking a walk Stretching

### ► Physical fitness fights stress in two ways:

- A physically fit body is better able to withstand the effects of stress. A balanced lifestyle with regular exercise, healthy meals and adequate sleep gives you energy and endurance to handle whatever comes your way.
- Exercise has a calming effect. Repetitive exercises can produce a mental state like meditation. Exercise that gets your heart pounding for at least 20 minutes releases chemicals in the brain called “endorphins” that reduce depression and stress.

## COPING SKILLS

### ► Relaxation.

Stress tenses your muscles, makes your breathing shallow, raises your blood pressure, makes your heart pound and clouds your judgment. Relaxation skills can reverse those effects to make you feel better, think better and perform better.

#### To get a good sleep:

- Get some exercise throughout the day but avoid too much exercise before bedtime.
- Avoid nicotine, caffeine and alcohol for they really do not help at all.
- Eat the big meal of your day earlier in the day and have a lighter supper that is higher in carbohydrates and lower in protein.
- Have a bath an hour or so before bed and relax.
- Make sure the place where you are sleeping is dark and the darker the better.
- Sleep with the window slightly open.

#### 5 STEPS To Keep Stress In Check

- Stop to take breaks, relax at least 20 minutes a day.
- Talk about your stress with others.
- Eat three meals a day, while comfortable and seated.
- Prepare for stressful events.
- Strengthen your relationships with others – HAVE SOME FUN!

*Avoid the chemical haze. Booze, tranquilizers, cigarettes, and caffeine do not help deal with stress.*

*Give your body an exquisite treat.*

*Take a 20 minute nap.*

## ACTION SKILLS

Farmers, ranchers and their families can use action skills to increase their effectiveness when dealing with important and unimportant controllable stressors. Everyone can choose to do something to make things a little better.

► **Communicate.**

- Talk about the tough realities as the start of a cooperative stress-busting effort.
- Communication takes time and includes talking and listening.
- Realize men and women indicate their concerns in a different manner. Women discuss their feelings more often than men. Men tend to concentrate on discussing information and facts.
- Use *I* statements rather than blaming statements which lead to calmer, more productive discussions.
- Understand that the quality of one's statements can be affected by energy level, past discussions and personality.

► **Prioritize.**

- Make a list of everything you want to do today. Be realistic.
- Prioritize tasks and do the important ones when your energy is high and resources are available.
- Break down tasks into bite-sized chunks.
- Combine similar trips and tasks.
- Delegate as much as possible. Can the spouse, kids or partner take over some tasks? Can you barter skills with a neighbour?
- Reduce paperwork by organizing your paper and creating a filing system that works for you.
- Avoid time-wasters. When you're interrupted, let them know you can't spend time now, and arrange to call or visit them soon.
- Admit when you have too many priorities.
- Ask for help.

## ACTION SKILLS

- ▶ **Support your family, business partners and community.**
- Plan ahead.
- Learn to negotiate and address the problem. Create interaction rules and develop agreed-upon methods for handling problems. It is OK to have a difference of opinion but take the time to find a compromise.
- Show confidence in your family's, business partner's and community's skills and decisions.
- Provide encouragement and concern for your family, business partners and community. Ask what can be done to help the situation. A simple solution may be the answer.
- Have realistic expectations of your family, business partners and community.
- Spend time together to relax, laugh and celebrate. Family strength is important in preventing overwhelming stress and is extremely important in coping with overwhelming stress.

### **Laugh, it makes you feel good!**

Laughter is critical to relaxation and wellbeing. It's FREE, low calorie, and available without a prescription. When you laugh...

- 17 muscles in your face relax
- blood circulation is improved
- respiration is increased
- muscles in your abdomen are massaged
- the brain's natural pain killers are stimulated through the release of endorphins

## ACTION SKILLS

### ► Set “SMART” goals

It’s important to get a picture of what you, ideally, would like to have happen in your life and on your farm in the short and long term. SMART goals can help to achieve personal satisfaction and productivity.

**S**

**Specific:** Set a concrete goal that addresses behaviour and results. *“For the next month, when I feel stressed I will tell my spouse about the problem, using I statements rather than blaming statements so the discussion is calmer and more productive.”*

**M**

**Measurable:** State your goal in a way that you can easily measure progress. *“My goal is to take twenty minutes at the end of each day and relax.”*

**A**

**Agreed upon:** Don’t do it alone, ask others to help and support you. *“Everyone on this farm has agreed to not interrupt my twenty minutes relaxation time.”*

**R**

**Rewarding:** Behaviour change should be as much fun as possible. Reward yourself for achieving a goal as well as passing milestones. *“If I go for a mile walk every day to get some exercise, at the end of the month I will take Sunday afternoon to go fishing.”*

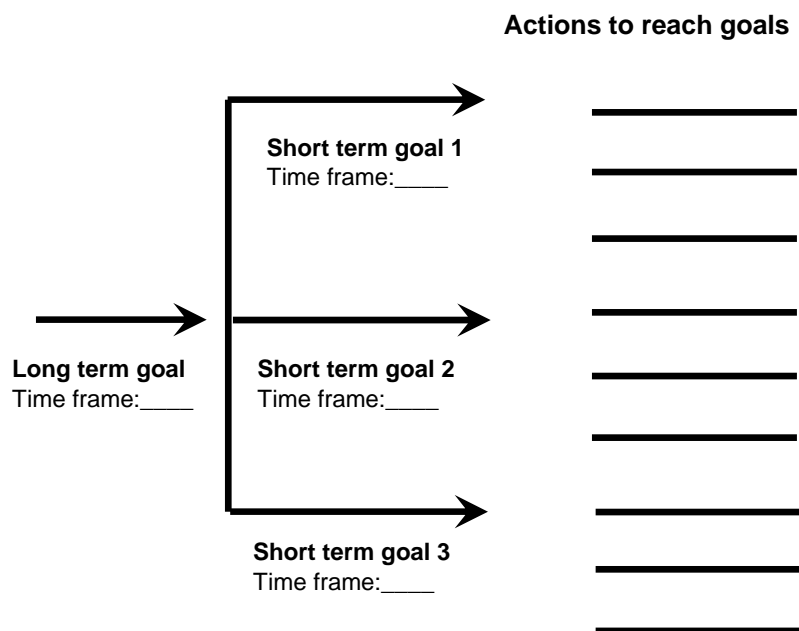
**T**

**Trackable:** Keep track of your progress in a visible way so you do not get discouraged. *“I will keep a notepad in my pocket and a calendar in the house with a list of things to do each day. I can then strike jobs off when they are completed.”*

## ACTION SKILLS

### How to use the goal setting template:

In order to achieve long term goals you need to set three short term goals. Develop actions that will enable you to succeed in reaching the short term goals. Outline a time frame for each goal. This template can be useful in setting goals on your farm.



*Farm families with positive coping skills are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, are involved in decision making, and are willing to give and use support.*





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Institute of Agricultural Rural and Environmental Health

University of Saskatchewan

Box 120, Royal University Hospital

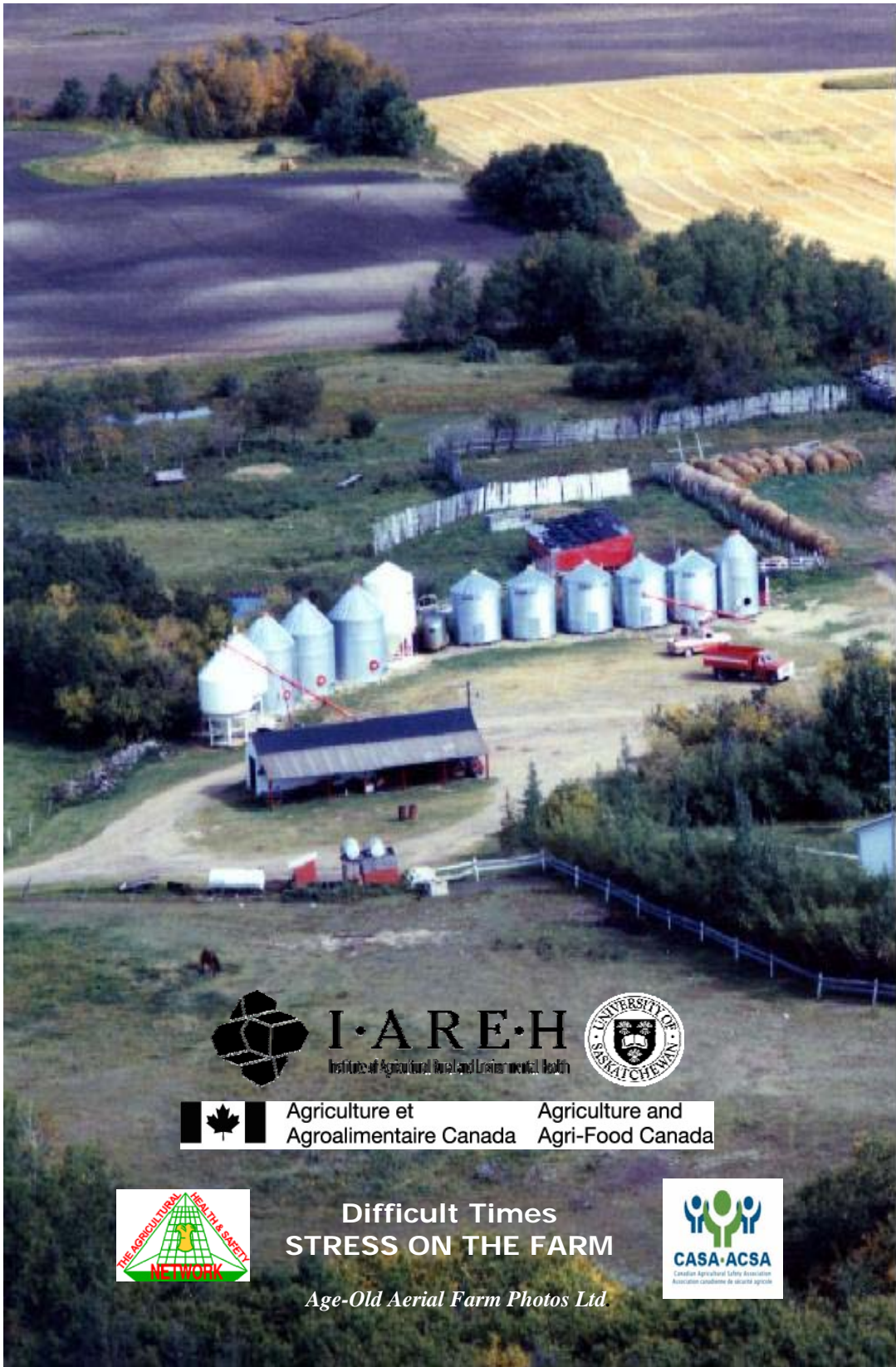
103 Hospital Drive, Saskatoon, SK, S7N 0W8

Phone: (306) 966-8286/Fax: (306) 966-8799

Email: [aghealthandsafety@usask.ca](mailto:aghealthandsafety@usask.ca)

## WHO CAN HELP

Accountant	
Addictions	
Alcoholics Anonymous	
Bankruptcy Information Counseling	
Domestic Abuse	
Child Abuse	
Clergyman/Priest/Pastor	
Family Doctor	
Farm Consolation Services	
Farm Debt Mediation Service	
Kid's Help Phone Line (24 hrs)	1-800-668-6868
Lawyer	
Mediation Services	
Mental Health	
Narcotics Anonymous	
RCMP	
Rural Service Centre	
Sexual Assault	
Social Services	
Suicide Prevention	



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Institute of Agricultural, Rural and Environmental Health



Agriculture et  
Agroalimentaire Canada

Agriculture and  
Agri-Food Canada



**Difficult Times  
STRESS ON THE FARM**



*Age-Old Aerial Farm Photos Ltd.*