

MAKING CHANGE WORK FOR YOU

FACT SHEET

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INTRODUCTION

Many farm families involved in agriculture in the Pacific Northwest are facing economic stress as a result of low prices and returns. Although change is a normal part of life, coping with these changes is difficult for many. With economic pressures mounting, more and more farm families are feeling out of control in their ability to handle the situation.

Farming as a way of life and family business is being challenged. Farm couples are concerned about the future of farming for themselves and their children, stresses on family relationships and their health, more work and less fun, financial issues, and planning for retirement. They're unsure about what to do. They're concerned about the present and the future, and are asking themselves questions such as, "What should we do?" and "Where do we go from here?"

Hopefully, this fact sheet will help you understand change, identify your responses and reactions to change, and learn strategies for taking control and improving your farm and family life.

FACTS ABOUT CHANGE

Change is inevitable! It's a normal part of life and affects everyone. While life changes of any sort are disruptive, adjustment is easy when changes are minor everyday events. However, when changes happen that involve significant changes or adjustments such as divorce, change of job, suddenly reduced income, or death of loved one, they can be overwhelming.

The reality is coping with change takes work. It involves identifying and accepting the reality of your situation and focusing on active problem solving. It's important to remember the outcome of change is not necessarily bad. In fact, some people end up better off than before. Although most of us are resistant to change, change forces us to take a look at our lives from a new perspective, to question our beliefs and values, and what we want from life. As you think about change and your situation, here are some things to keep in mind:

Change is most satisfying when people choose to change. Sometimes people plan for change and sometimes things happen over which they have little control. When the latter happens, it is much more difficult to make adjustments and move ahead.

Change is a choice. How a person responds to change may be the difference between surviving and not surviving tough times. Choosing to change is a conscious, rational choice. Choosing NOT to change or “do nothing” is also a conscious, rational choice. People who take positive steps to improve their situation versus those who give up or feel like they have no choices are more likely to succeed.

People tend to want to keep everything the same. For some people, change is so scary they aren’t able to make necessary changes because of fear. Others don’t want to change. They’ve worked long and hard to get where they are and feel comfortable and content with keeping things the same.

Change occurs gradually and unevenly over time. It’s often a process of three steps forward and one backward. Most people don’t make immediate changes. However, people who more quickly change or consider different options are usually more satisfied with the adjustments they need to make. Some people take longer to make changes because they temporarily get stuck in different stages of the loss and grief cycle.

Each person and situation is unique. No two people view a situation or problem the same or react the same. What might seem devastating to one person is not so bad to another. Everyone’s situation and what he or she wants in life is different. Everyone does things in his or her own way. What works for your neighbor might not work for you.

Disagreements and conflict are likely to increase. Efforts need to be made to handle disagreements in a respectful manner. Communication needs to stay focused on issues and be free from personal attacks and blame. This is not a time to “prove” who’s right and who’s wrong. It’s a time to work out differences and conflicts in a constructive way. Ongoing high levels of conflict can be energy draining and destructive to relationships and decision-making progress.

THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS

Tough times bring out strong emotions in farm families. When people experience a major loss or threat to their way of life or work, they go through a grieving process, like people go through when facing terminal illness or death. Farm families facing serious crises, loss or significant adjustments in their farm operation and their family life experience similar feelings of loss, but typically don’t anticipate or understand their feelings.

Knowing the stages of grief and accepting each stage as natural and normal is critical. Farm people don’t usually expect to experience guilt, blame, anger or depression when facing financial difficulties. When they do, they often think something is “wrong” and ignore or deny what they are experiencing. Such feelings of denial can seriously delay the process of resuming meaningful lives.

Research done in the Midwest, during and after the farm crises in the 80's, showed that families who came through the crises in the best shape, accepted the reality of the situation and worked through their emotions to active problem solving. Even those who decided to leave farming were happy with their new way of life.

WORKING THROUGH EMOTIONS TO PROBLEM SOLVING

The stages of the loss and grief cycle, as identified by Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, provide a useful guide to understanding feelings and reactions to change. As you look at the stages of loss and grief, here are some guidelines remember:

There is no set amount of time for each stage. Each person progresses at his or her own pace. One person may move through a stage in a few weeks. Another person may need several months or years. How quickly progress occurs depends on a person's personality, background, individual situation, and efforts made to accept the loss.

People often move back and forth between the stages. They may go through a stage, move onto another stage and then go back to a previous stage.

People may get stuck in a stage and need assistance in getting "unstuck."

Not everyone goes through every stage in the same sequence or at the same time. For example, one member of the family may be in denial, another is dealing with anger, while someone else is depressed.

It is important to find a healthy way to cope during these stages. People will accomplish this in different ways. There is no absolute "right" way to do this.

Shock and Denial

"No, not me, it can't be true," is a typical reaction of a person facing significant change or pending loss. Shock and denial are usually the first reactions of people experiencing unplanned changes. At this stage, it's normal for people to feel confused and afraid. Many people are numb, as if they were on automatic pilot. People are often unable to function or perform simple, routine tasks during this stage.

Denial can be healthy for a short time. It works as a buffer to allow people to collect and protect themselves when faced with a painful situation. However, continued denial of the pain and fear will block people from doing something about it. It is dangerous to become stuck in denial, pretending the loss hasn't happened or won't happen, and putting off plans to deal with the problem. It is very common for people to avoid making decisions or taking action at this point.

Anger and Blame

"Why me?" "It's your fault!" Anger is often intensely felt and expressed during this time. Anger is triggered by feelings of blame, frustration, anxiety, fear, irritation, self-doubt, irritation, and shame. People usually understand more clearly what is happening at this stage, but may look for someone to blame.

People are often afraid if they let themselves acknowledge their feelings, they will express it in a way they will regret later. However, not admitting to themselves and others close to them the loss and pain they feel will block from doing something about

the situation. It is common for people to get stuck at this stage. Decision-making is very difficult for people in this stage because their energies are so involved in the emotions of the situation. Research shows that during peaks of anger, a person's ability to make quality judgments is extremely low. So, this isn't a good time to make important decisions. It's better to wait until anger subsides to focus on problem solving.

To express anger in a positive way, people need to change how they view the situation. It is also helpful to talk to others. Another option is to turn the anger into energy by doing something physical they enjoy such as an active sport or a brisk walk.

Sadness and Depression

"I feel so bad about what's happening." "It seems so hopeless." When faced with a large number of changes and an uncertain future farm people often begin to feel overwhelmed. This usually leads to intense sadness or depression. This stage is characterized by feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and being overwhelmed. People often feel down, lack energy and have no desire to do anything. Withdrawal from activities and other people is common. Because it's hard to make decisions at this stage, people often need the help of family members, friends, or professionals when important decisions need to be made.

Signs of depression are not eating or sleeping, constant moodiness and irritability, no longer caring or concentrating, intense absorbing sadness, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Anyone, especially in a crisis, may experience one or more of these conditions. If several exist for a period of time, it may indicate the need for professional help.

The most serious danger of this stage is suicide. A person who sees no hope is a prime candidate for suicide. That's why arranging for professional help for a deeply depressed person, especially if he or she has talked about suicide, is important.

It's especially difficult for farm people to talk to others about their feelings and concerns about depression. However, when Dr. Val Farmer, a rural psychologist from the Midwest discussed the topic on his radio talk show, the phone lines were jammed with calls, indicating farm families do have concerns and a need for information about depression.

Bargaining

"I should have." "If only." "Why did this happen?" "What should I have done differently?" This is a time when people struggle to find meaning in what has happened. People often think that what's happening is their fault and try to "fix" things by working harder or trying to do a better job. However, doing more of what they've done in the past may not be where they focus for future success.

Acceptance and Return to Problem Solving

"It's going to be all right." During this phase, there is growing sense that life goes on. People may not be happy about the process or outcome, but accept the situation and are ready to go on with life. People are again ready for problem solving and decision-making.

Working through the stages of grief is essential to moving on. If family members accept their feelings, talk about them, and look for solutions to their problems, they are likely to

emerge as well as or stronger than before. Feelings of anger and guilt and bouts of depression can recur. In time, however, these emotions are felt with less intensity and less often. With understanding, perseverance, support from others, and the acceptance of the grief, everyone in the family can expect to resume a full and meaningful life.

COPING WELL WITH CHANGE: STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

What are the characteristics of people, families and businesses that endure challenges? Why do some falter, but bounce back and adapt? Why do some fall prey to the situation and deteriorate? Researchers have been studying people and farm families under stress for many years to find answers to these questions. Based on the findings of this research, we're going to take a look at some ideas and strategies that will help you move ahead and successfully cope with the challenges and stresses of change.

Develop a Positive Attitude about Change

Be proactive instead of reactive. Being proactive means you plan for change and are open to new ways of doing things. Proactive people view themselves as controlling their circumstances. They see life as challenging and filled with opportunities. They appreciate the dangers and threats in change, but are not overwhelmed by them. Being reactive means you let change happen and then respond or adapt to it. Reactive people view themselves as victims of circumstances over which they have little or no control and often become resentful and self-pitying.

Be Willing to Change and Accept Uncertainty

Change requires we be prepared for a journey of uncertainty. It means we must be careful not to end up doing things the same way. We often cling to the very things that hold us back. People who adjust well to change have the ability to know when to hold on and when to let go. Many of us grew up believing that strength was "holding on" when, it often takes more strength to "let go" and move on.

Work on Being Flexible

Being flexible means being open to different options when faced with uncertainty. A certain amount of uncertainty is an essential part of planning and coping with change. There are few black and white situations where there is a specific right or wrong answer. There are many ways of reaching a goal. What is right for one family and family business may not be right for the family down the road. It depends on one's goals, vision, and financial circumstances.

Create a Vision for the Future of Your Family and Farm Business

Now is a good time to reassess or develop a vision and goals for the future. A vision serves as an invisible force that helps family members know where they are headed and stick to that goal so barriers along the way don't become insurmountable. Even though the family and farm are closely integrated, think about the farm as a means to an end — the happiness and well being of the family. When the farm becomes an end in itself, it can become a liability that interferes with rational decision-making and family relationships.

Pay Attention to Your Family

Work on maintaining family involvement and stability. Because of the interdependent nature of family farming, it's important to remember what's good for the family is also

good for the farm. In difficult times, family members tend to take each other for granted and forget to give each other the attention they need and deserve. Farm families should make a conscious effort to pull together as a family and work together through tough times.

Keep Communication Open and Clear

Research shows that farm families who come through crises in the best shape have excellent communication within their family unit and with all of those who have direct influence on their decisions, such as lenders and landowners. Good communication means being able to talk and listen to each other and work out differences and conflicts in a non-critical and non-threatening manner.

Work Together as a Family to Solve Problems

Involve and use the strengths of all family members, both male and female, and children in problem solving and making decisions about family and farm issues. A solution to a farm financial problem that doesn't take the feelings of all family members into account will be flawed and less likely to succeed.

Shift from Worrying to Problem Solving

Many farm stressors are worries about things over which you have no control or incidents that never occur. Know the difference between what you can and cannot change. Change those you can and accept the rest. Focus your attention on finding solutions. It's easy to give up and quit trying. Progress is made when people are willing to learn from their mistakes and keep trying.

Face the Reality of the Situation

Conduct an assessment of your family and farming situation. Become familiar with your family and farm finances. Assess your farm's current and future profit potential. Conduct an analysis of your farm resources such as crops, farm animals, labor, storage, and marketing system. This information will help provide a basis for decision making and planning.

Have a Sense of Humor

Look for humor in life and laugh on a daily basis. Laughter breaks the cycle of stress and helps keep you mentally and physically healthy.

Take Stock of Your Human Assets

Remember, you and your family have important assets that don't show up on the net worth statement. Assets such as education, experience, skills and knowledge are hard to put a dollar value on, but don't overlook them as a resource. Talk to members of your family about ways to use their strengths and skills during this time of change and in the future.

Take Good Care of Your Yourself

Taking care of your mind and body is important to deal with stress. It's more important than ever during stressful times that you eat right, exercise and get sufficient sleep. Other actions such as planning and education help to reduce stress by making things less confusing and increasing your level of hope.

Seek Social Support

During times of stress, the support of friends, family, community members and acquaintances is needed most. Strong support systems are particularly important for coping with stress, making changes in farming practices, or making the transition from farming to a new life. Now is the time to stay in touch and get involved.

Be Willing to Ask for Help

Take advantage of resources in your community to help you through tough times. Many farm people and families have difficulty accepting assistance from others. They believe accepting help is a sign of weakness and evidence that they aren't able to solve their problems. Actually, the opposite is true. A wise person knows when he or she needs help and welcomes assistance. In many cases, those most weakened by a crisis have not sought help from others.

Open Up and Talk to Others

Openly discussing and venting problems, concerns, fears, and frustrations can be helpful and healthy. This is especially true as you work through emotions to find solutions to problems. Let others know you're in trouble so that you can be helped. Farmers find it hard to do this, but they need to. Otherwise, it may take a long time to straighten out their lives.

Learn as Much as You Can

Seek information about various alternatives. Take time to learn as much as you can about your commodity, other options and alternatives. Knowledge is power and helps build one's confidence. Successful farmers know the latest and most effective farming practices and trends. Seek sound professional and legal advice to help with decision-making. Educating yourself takes time and commitment, but it can help reduce stress by providing you a mental road map that helps in planning and decision-making.

SUMMARY

The key to coping well with change is the ability to face the situation and actively search for a solution. Farm families should focus their energy on problem solving instead of blaming themselves or others. They need to recognize and accept that emotions are normal and part of the process of dealing with change.

Farm families should utilize all resources available to them to gather information about the challenges they are likely to face. They need to be willing to seek and accept help from others. They should keep abreast of what's happening in the agriculture industry and learn as much as they can about various options and alternatives. Farm families should talk to others who have experienced similar adjustments. They should consult professionals to help identify their options and understand the implications of decisions.

Farm families should take advantage of this time to look at their lives from a new perspective, reassess their goals, and develop a vision the future of their family.

Farm families should work on keeping their families healthy and strong. Now is the time for families to pull and work together. Involve family members in planning and decision-making. Keep lines of communication open among family members. Give spouses and children the attention they need. Letting the family deteriorate for the sake of the farm can be more costly than ever imagined. Farm families should also stay in touch with and draw from the support of family members, friends and the community.

Every family feels frustration, uncertainty, and anxiety about making decisions to cope with change. But, with an optimistic approach, it's possible to remain in control and progress through change quickly with few problems. Whatever direction farm families decide to go, they can emerge stronger and with a positive outlook for the future.

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