



ADDRESSING FARM STRESS

FIELD GUIDE

BY JAMIE ATEN, PH.D. & KENT ANNAN, M.DIV.

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SPIRITUAL FIRST AID™

Spiritual First Aid
Wheaton, Illinois
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INTRODUCTION

God provides strength for every farming season.

Farming and ranching represent more than work; they are ways of life rooted in stewardship, family, and faith. Yet those ties that make agricultural life meaningful also make it uniquely stressful. Market fluctuations, unpredictable weather, rising input costs, equipment failures, and long workdays can take a toll. When pressure builds with little chance for rest, the result can be chronic stress that impacts body, mind, and spirit.

Research shows that farmers often face more stress than most professions, because many factors affecting success are outside their control. Economic instability and social isolation increase strain. For many, identity is deeply connected to the land, making financial and environmental losses feel personal and moral.

Scripture recognizes the dignity of labor and the burden of endurance. “The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops” (2 Timothy 2:6). This guide brings together research, rural insight, and biblical reflection to help farmers understand farm stress, respond to it wisely, and find renewed strength for each season.





DEFINITION

Farm stress is the physical, emotional, and relational strain caused by the challenges of agricultural life. It is more than occasional worry; it is the cumulative impact of economic uncertainty, long work hours, environmental hardship, and isolation. The unpredictable nature of farming means that control is limited even as responsibility remains high.

Researchers describe farm stress as an occupational hazard shaped by both external and internal factors. Weather, market prices, and input costs interact with family dynamics, debt, and generational expectations. Because work and home life overlap, boundaries are often blurred. Fatigue accumulates as rest feels like a luxury rather than a necessity.

Spiritually, farm stress challenges the illusion of control but also deepens trust. Psalm 65:9 reminds us, “You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly.” Remembering that provision ultimately depends on God, not just hard work, creates space for perspective, humility, and renewal.





OVERVIEW

Farm stress arises from intersecting pressures that rarely relent. Equipment breakdowns, weather delays, or price drops can quickly threaten income and stability. The physical demands of farm labor are compounded by the emotional toll of uncertainty and the solitude that often accompanies rural living. For family farms, stress may also include generational transitions and disagreements about the future.

Research on rural health shows that chronic stress affects sleep, concentration, and decision-making. Financial strain and unrelenting schedules elevate risk for anxiety, depression, and burnout. Because farmers are accustomed to self-reliance, they may delay seeking help until the situation becomes critical.

Faith invites a different rhythm, one that values both diligence and dependence. Psalm 127:2 warns, “In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat, for he grants sleep to those he loves.” Sustained productivity is not a mark of faithfulness if it comes at the cost of rest, health, or relationships. Recognizing limits allows renewal to begin.





SIGNS OF FARM STRESS

Farm stress can appear across emotional, physical, cognitive, behavioral, relational, and spiritual domains. Awareness of these signs enables early response and effective support.

EMOTIONAL PATTERNS

Farmers experiencing stress may feel anxious, irritable, or discouraged. Feelings of guilt or failure can emerge when hard work doesn't yield results. Over time, persistent tension can lead to fatigue or hopelessness. Identifying these emotions as valid responses, not weakness, opens the door to honest reflection and recovery.

PHYSICAL PATTERNS

Farm work demands endurance, yet physical strain combined with chronic stress leads to exhaustion, illness, or pain. Muscle tension, sleep disruption, and poor appetite are common. Addressing these signs with rest and proper nutrition strengthens both physical and emotional resilience.



COGNITIVE PATTERNS

Decision fatigue, difficulty focusing, and constant worry may interfere with daily operations. The brain under stress tends to magnify threats and overlook progress. Research shows that structured planning and mindfulness restore problem-solving capacity and reduce anxiety.

BEHAVIORAL PATTERNS

Changes in behavior can signal deepening stress working excessive hours, withdrawing socially, or using alcohol to cope. Some may neglect safety protocols or take unnecessary risks. Replacing reactive habits with intentional ones, such as setting time limits or scheduling breaks, restores stability.

RELATIONAL PATTERNS

Relationships on the farm are intertwined with work. Conflict over finances, workload, or inheritance can escalate under strain. Helpers support farmers by fostering communication, reducing isolation, and modeling empathy that encourages openness.

SPIRITUAL PATTERNS

Hardship may cause faith to feel distant. Farmers wrestle with questions like, “Why isn’t God helping?” Psalm 13:1 captures this tension: “How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?” Honest lament can become the soil where endurance and renewed trust take root.





COPING PRACTICES

Responding to farm stress involves both practical management and spiritual renewal. These research-informed and biblically grounded practices build long-term resilience and perspective.

TAKE INVENTORY OF STRESSORS

Listing specific sources of stress helps turn vague pressure into defined challenges. Identifying which issues are within control, like finances or scheduling, and which are not, like weather or markets, clarifies where to focus energy. Writing these down makes stress tangible and easier to manage. Regularly reviewing this list can also reveal small wins, encouraging a sense of progress.

REBUILD DAILY RHYTHM

Agriculture often blurs boundaries between work and rest. Establishing predictable patterns—consistent meal times, short breaks, and evening shutdown routines—creates a sense of order amid unpredictability. Research shows that such rhythms improve sleep, concentration, and morale. Adding a brief morning or evening reflection connects routine with gratitude and purpose.



PRACTICE PHYSICAL RENEWAL

Farm labor is physically demanding; without recovery, fatigue accumulates quickly. Taking time to stretch, hydrate, and rest between tasks helps preserve long-term strength. Studies confirm that even brief pauses reduce injury risk and enhance productivity. Treating physical care as stewardship aligns work with faith, honoring the Creator's design for the body.

ENGAGE SUPPORT NETWORKS

Connection alleviates isolation. Reaching out to peers, farm co-ops, extension programs, or pastors provides perspective and shared learning. Support systems normalize struggle and replace shame with solidarity. Proverbs 15:22 teaches, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." Relationships cultivated before a crisis often become lifelines during it.

STRENGTHEN FINANCIAL AWARENESS

Financial uncertainty amplifies stress. Creating or updating budgets, reviewing expenses with advisors, or exploring assistance programs builds a sense of agency. Even small financial steps restore control and reduce mental strain. Involving family in these conversations promotes transparency and collective responsibility rather than secrecy or avoidance.



FIND MEANING IN STEWARDSHIP

Remembering that farming is not only a livelihood but a vocation reframes effort as service to God and community. Reflecting on the miracle of growth, how a seed becomes a harvest, encourages patience. Discussing faith's role in daily work with family members reinforces identity and purpose that endure beyond immediate outcomes.

ESTABLISH BOUNDARIES AROUND WORK

Defining clear stopping points each day guards against exhaustion. Dedicating one day per week to lighter tasks or rest allows a physical and emotional reset. Boundaries protect family relationships and prevent burnout from becoming normalized. Boundaries also communicate to younger generations that rest is part of faithful stewardship, not laziness.

SEEK PROFESSIONAL AND PASTORAL GUIDANCE

When farm stress begins affecting sleep, health, or safety, seeking help from professionals or clergy offers new tools and perspective. Counselors familiar with agricultural life can address both practical and emotional burdens. Pastoral guidance integrates spiritual reflection with encouragement. Asking for help models courage, not weakness, and reminds others in the community that renewal often begins with conversation.





CARE STRATEGIES

Those supporting farmers under chronic stress—pastors, agricultural agents, neighbors, or family members—play a crucial role in creating stability, understanding, and connection. These strategies integrate research and faith to promote restoration and hope.

LISTEN WITHOUT FIXING

Listening is one of the most powerful acts of care. Farmers often carry unspoken fears and grief. By providing space to talk freely without rushing to solve or minimize problems, you communicate respect and empathy. Silence, when paired with presence, can speak volumes about solidarity and trust. Follow-up visits or messages reinforce that the relationship is ongoing, not conditional on a crisis.

AFFIRM DIGNITY AND WORTH

Farm stress can erode self-esteem, especially when financial or crop losses occur. Remind farmers that their worth rests not on productivity but on being created and loved by God. Isaiah 41:10 assures, “Do not fear, for I am with you... I will strengthen you and help you.” Regular affirmation combats shame and keeps discouragement from taking root.



ENCOURAGE CONNECTION

Isolation amplifies distress. Invite farmers to local gatherings, small groups, or informal check-ins at cafés or feed stores. Even brief contact can interrupt cycles of loneliness. For faith communities, hospitality sharing a meal or hosting an appreciation event reconnects neighbors and reminds all that community still matters.

MODEL STEADINESS AND HOPE

Your calm presence can help balance another's anxiety. Avoid mirroring panic; instead, demonstrate patient confidence in God's provision and the possibility of change. When you model endurance, you quietly teach that stress is temporary, but faith and community endure. Offering prayer at the end of a visit can help anchor that reassurance.

OFFER TANGIBLE SUPPORT

Words of encouragement matter, but practical help often speaks louder. Organizing volunteers for fieldwork, providing transportation, or delivering meals during planting or harvest communicates shared burden. These actions embody biblical justice by ensuring that compassion is expressed through fairness, generosity, and shared responsibility.

GUIDE TOWARD PROFESSIONAL HELP

When emotional distress deepens or signs of self-harm appear, gently recommend professional assistance. Offer to



locate local or telehealth resources and accompany them if needed. Framing help-seeking as stewardship of life, rather than weakness, aligns intervention with faith values. Helpers can also work with churches or agencies to ensure ongoing follow-up support.

ENCOURAGE FAITH PRACTICES THAT GROUND HOPE

Faith-centered practices nurture resilience when resources run thin. Suggest reading Scripture that emphasizes perseverance, such as James 5:7–8: “Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop.” Prayer, worship, and reflection transform despair into trust that seasons of hardship will not last forever.

CULTIVATE ONGOING COMMUNITY CARE

Sustainable support requires long-term commitment. Encourage churches, rural health providers, and extension services to coordinate outreach programs that reduce stigma and provide practical stress-management tools. Building these systems ensures that care becomes a normal part of community life, not an emergency response after a crisis.



CONCLUSION

Farm stress reflects both the hardships and holiness of working close to creation. Its pressures are real, but so is the potential for renewal when support, rhythm, and faith converge. Research confirms that resilience grows from community connection, predictable structure, and gratitude, the same themes that Scripture has long upheld.

Faith reminds us that seasons of struggle are part of life's rhythm but never its end. Renewal unfolds when effort is joined with trust when farmers and communities work side by side with patience, prayer, and practical care.

For those facing stress in agriculture, may this guide serve as both reassurance and roadmap. And for those offering help, may it remind you that shared burdens lighten the load and that faith, when cultivated with compassion, yields lasting fruit.

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Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

- Galatians 6:9

— ” —



SPIRITUAL FIRST AID

CO-FOUNDERS



Jamie Aten, Ph.D., is the Co-Founder of Spiritual First Aid. He is also the Founder and Co-Director of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute, Blanchard Chair of Humanitarian and Disaster Leadership, and Co-Coordinator of the Trauma Certificate Program at Wheaton College. He is both a Hurricane Katrina and a late-stage early-onset cancer survivor. As a trauma psychologist, Jamie has responded to and researched disasters and mass traumas around the globe. He has published nine authored and edited books and over 150 scholarly publications, including some of the top peer-reviewed journals in psychology. His research has been supported by over \$12 million in awarded grants. He is frequently cited, interviewed, and published in outlets like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *CNN*, *Fox News*, *BBC News*, *Psychology Today*, *Religion News Service*, *Moody Radio*, and *Christianity Today*. In 2016, Jamie was awarded the FEMA Community Preparedness Champion Award at the White House. He also received the Early Career Award and Applied Psychology of Religion and Spirituality Award from the American Psychological Association's Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality. He is co-author and co-host of the award-winning *The Better Samaritan* (column and podcast) at *Christianity Today*. You can follow Jamie on LinkedIn.



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