

Healthy Farmer

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Coping with a Prolonged Harvest*

Jubilant about prospects for record or near record corn and soybean crops in early October, now farmers are getting worried and depressed about the 2009 harvest. While farmers nearly everywhere have been affected by protracted rainy spells, early snows and even flooding, the situation in the Eastern Corn Belt is especially grim. The corn and soybean harvests are lagging three weeks or more behind average harvest dates.

How can we cope when we see corn ears dropping, soybean pods shedding their seeds and the quality of grains and oil seeds slipping on a daily basis? It's not easy to maintain an upbeat disposition when our economic well-being is threatened. But, there are some things we can do behaviorally to improve our coping.

Complaining Helps.

There are several reasons why complaining helps. First, sharing our concerns helps reduce our anxiety. When others listen with understanding, we feel emotionally comforted. Second, talking about our worries usually leads others to give us feedback, which helps confirm that we have good reasons to be worried or perhaps just the opposite, that we are unnecessarily stressing out about circumstances that aren't as bad as they might seem when we brood on them alone. Feedback helps us determine if our worries are reasonable. Third, talking about our concerns may help us develop alternatives to worrying, such as becoming engrossed in conversations or finding projects to capture our attention when we can't harvest. Humans are social beings who need emotional support from others and complaining can help us obtain this necessary understanding.

But, if we complain only to make others as miserable as we are, complaining becomes a useless tactic and drives people away from giving us the understanding we need. We should label our feelings by saying things like "I'm worried and I don't what to do", or "Do you think my worries are reasonable?" And be sure to say "Thanks for listening." It doesn't come as any surprise that many farmers find that Twittering, talking to friends and family on the phone and sharing emails are becoming evermore popular pursuits. These activities have positive functional value when undertaken as a means of expressing our concerns in realistic fashion. Research has confirmed that the comfort that comes from receiving positive understanding reduces the production of adrenaline and cortisol (i.e., bodily hormones

that signal distress and depression) and increase the production of serotonin and norepinephrine (i.e., hormones that accompany a sense of well-being). So, visit with friends, neighbors, and make complaining a positive coping device.

Watch What You Think About

Yes, it's mind over body. What we think about tells our body how to cope. When we are alarmed, brooding, worried or angry, our bodies don't produce serotonin and norepinephrine. Instead, the brain sends a signal to our adrenal glands to become alarmed. It's appropriate to become alarmed when we first detect a threat, so that we can evaluate it and determine if we need to fight it or take flight from it. But if we evaluate a long-term threat such as rainy day after rainy day by dwelling on the negatives, we deplete our bodies of serotonin and norepinephrine. Sleep becomes difficult and not restful. We become consistently keyed up and also depressed as our body alternates between arousal and tiredness. We need breaks of many hours and even days from worry.

How do we get these breaks? By controlling what we think about, we tell our bodies to remain on guard or to decompress and to relax. Just like positive complaining can help produce the serotonin and norepinephrine we need, becoming engaged in positive activities also produces these essential hormones. We can indulge in our favorite pastimes and in creative outlets. Building something new, reading stimulating books and articles, engaging in vigorous physical exercise, hobbies and music all stimulate the production of serotonin and norepinephrine. Physical exercise is particularly beneficial in producing serotonin.

Don't Overdo It

Be sure to not overtax yourself when you can harvest. Becoming sleep deprived by putting in extra long days and nights during favorable harvest weather can increase your risks for injuries and machinery breakdowns. Researchers have found that accumulated sleep debt of ten hours (i.e., that's two hours of reduced sleep for each of five days/nights) is similar physiologically to .08 blood alcohol level. When we are sleep deprived, our reaction time is slower, we are more prone to verbal and motor mistakes and more apt to make misjudgments.

It is also helpful to check your crop insurance and with the Farm Service Agency to see what benefits are available when weather delays harvest. Another place to check is with grain merchandisers and the local Extension office. Often grain merchandisers and the Extension have publications that help farmers deal with rainy conditions that cause mold and detract from grain quality.

The suggestions in this article, in many ways, are just common sense. The part that most farmers don't understand is how we can control our serotonin and norepinephrine levels by the way we behave. We can't control the weather or market conditions, but we can control our behavior for the most part.

Keeping ourselves in optimal running condition makes us more likely to succeed as farmers.

** Versions of this article appeared in several state Farm Bureau Publications*