



A recent Teagasc study found that one in eight farmers are experiencing chronic stress.

Are you constantly under stress?

John McNamara & Francis Bligh
Teagasc Health & Safety Specialists

Finola Colgan
Mental Health Ireland

A recent Teagasc study has shown that 12% (almost one in eight) farmers are constantly under stress. Are you one of these? Stress is the mind's way of responding to an excessive demand or threat. Constant, negative stress can damage your health, quality of life, relationships and productivity.

In contrast, positive stress helps us to be focused and alert. The term 'wellbeing' refers to positive emotions and also the capacity to function effectively in both individual and social aspects of life. Recent Teagasc research found, unsurprisingly, that high on-going stress levels are generally associated with lower wellbeing scores.

As for all sectors of society, stress levels among farmers change over time depending on circumstances. Numerous stressors can arise in farming including: adverse weather, excessive workload, livestock health along with management and financial issues. Increasingly, farmers are becoming employers. Managing staff, particularly if not used to it, can be stressful.

It is important to recognise your stress levels and to employ strategies

to maintain your wellbeing. To assist farmers to achieve positive mental health, Mental Health Ireland (MHI) and Teagasc co-produced a new guidance leaflet: 'Sowing the Seeds of Support: Positive Mental Health Guidance for the Farming Community'.

A key theme running through several recent Irish research studies is that farmers were unsure of where to seek support for mental health.

Finola Colgan Mental Health Ireland Development Officer, explains that the best support for maintaining positive mental health, lies within each person.

"A key step is to recognise and acknowledge that you are under stress, identify its source, and respond positively to the challenge it poses," she says.

Positive strategies

There are many practical and achievable suggestions to minimise stress. These are set out in the Teagasc/ MHI leaflet under 'social involvement', 'health related goals', 'farm management' and 'leisure activities' sections.

"Mental health and mental illness are often confused as being one and the same," says Finola Colgan.

"Having a mental health challenge is where a person has difficulty dealing coping with the stresses of normal life, working productively, or contributing to their community. Mental ill health on the other hand is a health condition requiring medical care."

Focus on specific changes

The key practical approach for farmers experiencing negative stress is to identify and focus and work-on the specific changes needed on an individual farm basis. The second half of the year is a good time to plan and make changes in advance of the busy spring period.

Positive changes are optimised through engagement with others such as advisors, vets and fellow farmers. Psychologically, positive action has been shown to lead to well-being. Planning and achieving goals is good for stress reduction. Managing what is within your personal control gives a sense of empowerment. Whether you feel excessive stress or not, one positive action would be to get a copy of the leaflet.



The 'Sowing the Seeds of Support' leaflet can be obtained at Teagasc offices or downloaded online from www.teagasc.ie/media/publications/Positive-Mental-Health.pdf