

The Battle for Balance

STRESS IN RANCHING

R.C. Steward, B.C. Ranch Safety Consultant, Superintendent of Field Operations, AgSafe



PART 1

The computer would simply not do what it was supposed to do. As I stared out the window thinking, when this kind of “breakdown” of the communication tool or device happened to my dad... well he just threw it (the pen) out and got another one.

It made me think of how many stressors there are in this day and age. A time that was supposed to be easier. All the stuff, the technology that was supposed to make it all quicker and easier, is, for many of us still in adaptation mode, that which imposes new demands and we fail to master the helpful stuff and become slaves to those very things. No question, in balance, properly managed those tools of today can and are a huge help, but they can also creep in and tip our balance. The phone call that has to be answered, the device taken on holidays (note to self), the email that has to be answered prior to going to bed, and we could go on. When the device takes over there will be stress.

There is no doubt that when these things all work, when all the stars align and the device does what it is supposed to,... and nobody is on the device trying to sell you yet another device better than your existing one...that technology helps. It is safe to say though, particularly it seems for those of us who have had to adapt and adopt to technologies, that

those devices come with their own inherent stress. “Oh I need to take that call, I have to answer right away, what if I don’t get back to her, I need to deal with this one (soon becomes 20) email, they’ll think I am upset if I don’t answer, they’re expecting a response, it will only take a minute....” Sound familiar? Perhaps it is time to look at the balance in that part of our life, the phone or computer part ... balance. What about other parts of our life? The technology stuff hits home to me and when it doesn’t work...well you can’t just work harder, try it again, ask the neighbour ... nope ... turn it off, turn it on ... that’s all I’ve got.

Balance, it’s often said it is all about balance, so what about balance? All this makes one begin to think, is there a

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

balance battle going on in our day and what stress do I face and what do I do about it? Life has stress, so is there good and bad stress? This is serious business and there is a real issue here.

AgSafe recognizes that stress is a reality, managing and balancing become part of every day for everyone and knowing when stress is causing an issue is a key component of our Rural Stress workshop. This workshop looks at the very serious issue of stress. Stress and hurriedness are known to create issues in health and in safety. Incidents and accidents, injuries and fatalities, when investigated almost always include one or more realities of stress and hurriedness. These play into the chain of events or the domino effect of the incident.

So clearly there is a much bigger issue

at play than the stress guys like me feel as one of those who are kicking a bit at new and potentially invasive technologies and secretly wishing for the flip phone to make a return. That issue may be a tipping point, how we deal with situations and things just like that may be an indicator that we need to assess our stress health.

The Rural Stress Workshop was developed by the Agricultural Health and Safety Network Institute of Agricultural Rural and Environmental Health at the University of Saskatchewan. I have been doing these workshops for years and have done them for many groups and commodities throughout B.C. and Western Canada...but rarely for cattlemen and the ranching sector.

Maybe we need to look at this a bit closer. The workshop is designed to help you examine you, to take a look at your responses and to develop some good ways to “balance” the reality of stress in your life, to manage what cannot be made to go away. It examines things like:

The Need: Ranchers have a strong tradition of being independent. The tendency is not to openly talk about problems or ask for support until

things are desperate.

A Way: This resource is a way of enabling ranch families to understand stress, its impact, and learn skills to help balance stress when ranching in difficult times.

The Situation: Ranchers face tremendous pressure as they work to balance ranch and off-ranch work and struggle to have the ranch support itself. Many factors that influence a ranch’s viability are out of a producer’s control. Often what we cannot control causes us to feel the most stress.

Factors Affecting Stress On The Ranch: Stress for ranchers continues as rural communities shrink, schools close and fewer services are conveniently available. As members of these communities, ranchers work to fill the gaps in attempts to keep their communities functioning.

Rural communities in turn are affected by the high stress ranch environment.

- The weather, wildfires, floods
- Increased input costs
- Large debt loads
- Animal disease outbreaks (ie. BSE and Avian Influenza)
- Erratic markets
- Increased government regulation and paper work
- Long working hours
- Disagreements with other family members in the farm operation or direction
- Uncertain crop yield and forage production
- Machinery breakdowns ... etc, etc, etc

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 calving and haying.

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? BALANCE is the key to effectively dealing with stress and we all need to find our own BALANCE. Consequences of "too much stress" for a ranch family can widely vary from tension in family relationships → to poor operational decisions → to death from a ranch incident.

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 ► cattle get out onto the highway
- 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

In upcoming issues, we will dive a little further into the material covered in the workshop as we continue to look at this important issue. If you even think you ought to talk to someone about stress in your life, then you need to.

Being aware of the stress that can impact us is a huge part of the workshop and helps us know when it is time to talk to someone. Making a plan to manage it and know when to seek help is the other key piece. Think about booking a workshop for your association or community. I would welcome the opportunity to work through this with you and your group. Not a huggy feely group share kind of deal, just some sensible challenges for you to quietly review where you are at and see if there are some things you should change and how you might do that.

Take care out there

R.C. Steward

B.C. Ranch Safety Consultant,

Cariboo-Chilcotin Regional Consultant

Superintendent of Field

Operations FARSHA/AgSafe

Buffalo Creek Consulting

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Call: 1.877.533.1789

Contact@AgSafeBC.ca

www.AgSafeBC.ca

