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The Farmers and the Stress Paradox: From Distress to Eustress

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Farming is a profession with many uncertainties. Farmers face problems such as irregular weather, pest and disease attacks, rising input costs, labour shortages and changing market prices. When these problems continue for a long time, they can cause distress and affect farmers' well-being. However, farmers may respond to the same problem in different ways. While one farmer may feel helpless, another may seek information, learn from the experience and try to find a solution. This positive side of stress is called eustress. From an Agricultural Extension perspective, understanding eustress can help us see farmers as learners, decision-makers and problem-solvers. Proper knowledge, support and extension services can help farmers handle challenges in a better way.

Farming: A Profession of Uncertainty

A farmer may begin the day with many questions. Will it rain today? Will the crop survive the heat? Will labour be available during harvesting? Will the pest seen in the neighbouring field reach my crop? And after months of hard work, what price will I receive for the produce? These questions are common in farming. Agriculture depends on several factors that farmers cannot completely control. Weather, markets, pests, diseases, input prices and labour availability can change quickly. Therefore, stress is a natural part of farming life. The discussion on farmer stress has mainly focused on distress and rightly so. Financial problems, crop losses, uncertainty and other challenges can affect farmers' well-being. Studies have also reported concerns about the mental health of farming communities (Bomble & Lhungdim, 2020). However, an important question remains: Do all farmers respond to the same stressful situation in the same way? Not always. Some farmers may feel helpless when faced with a difficult situation, while others may try to understand the problem, seek advice and look for a solution. This difference in response brings us to the idea of eustress, the constructive side of stress that can encourage motivation, learning and action.

The Other Side of Stress

Stress is generally associated with worry, tension, frustration and exhaustion. However, people do not always experience or respond to stress in the same way. Crum, Salovey and Achor (2013) showed that people's mindsets about stress can influence how they respond to stressful situations. This does not mean that every stressful situation is beneficial or that problems can be solved through positive thinking. Rather, how a person understands a challenge can influence the way they respond. For example, consider two farmers who are told that rainfall may be below normal. One may think, "This season may fail; nothing can be done," while another may think, "I need to plan differently." The second farmer may seek advice, discuss water-saving practices with other farmers or consider an alternative crop.

Both face the same uncertainty, but one has moved from worry towards action. Stress therefore has a dual nature. It can have a negative side, known as distress and a positive side, known as eustress, which often receives less attention. Eustress can encourage farmers to face challenges, learn new skills, try improved technologies and explore better alternatives. Difficult weather, pest attacks or changing market prices may become opportunities for learning and innovation. It can also build confidence, resilience and a sense of achievement when farmers successfully overcome challenges (Sanjay et al., 2025).

When Challenges Become Learning Opportunities

Consider a farmer who gets poor yield from a crop. The farmer is naturally disappointed, but after the initial reaction, several questions may arise: Was the variety suitable? Was the sowing time correct? Was irrigation adequate? Could the crop management have been improved? The farmer may discuss the experience with fellow farmers or seek advice from an extension professional and make better decisions in the next season. The crop failure was not beneficial, but the learning from the experience can be useful. This is an important distinction. Eustress does not mean calling failure a success. It means asking, “What can I learn from this experience?” The same can happen when farmers consider a new technology. A farmer may hesitate to adopt drip irrigation because of concerns about cost, operation or maintenance. However, seeing another farmer successfully using the system can build confidence and encourage the farmer to try it on a small area. In this way, information, observation and experimentation can help farmers manage uncertainty. Farmers also learn from one another. A local farmer who has successfully adopted a new variety or practice can provide not only information but also the confidence to try. Sometimes, knowing what did not work can be as useful as knowing what worked. This is why farmer-to-farmer learning, demonstrations and field experiences are important in agricultural extension. Farmers are also decision-makers. They decide what to grow, which inputs to use, where to seek information and whether to adopt new practices, often under uncertain conditions. When the market price of a crop falls, for example, a farmer cannot control the price but can explore alternatives such as collective marketing, storage, value addition or crop diversification. Thus, a difficult situation may encourage the farmer to move from “There is a problem” to “What options do I have?”

The Role of Agricultural Extension

This is where eustress becomes particularly relevant to Agricultural Extension. Extension is not only about providing technical information; it can also help farmers reduce uncertainty and build confidence. Demonstrations, exposure visits, farmer-to-farmer learning and timely advisory services can encourage farmers to observe, experiment and learn. For example, instead of simply explaining a climate-resilient practice, an extension worker can demonstrate it in a local field and allow farmers to discuss the experience with the farmer who adopted it. Such approaches can change the response from “I am not sure” to “I can try, observe and learn.” However, eustress should never be seen as a substitute for addressing genuine agrarian distress. Farmers facing serious financial problems, repeated crop losses or climate-related difficulties cannot simply be told to “think positively.” They need reliable extension services, appropriate technologies, financial and market support and strong social networks. Individual capacity and institutional support must work together. Agricultural extension can therefore play an important role in helping farmers deal with uncertainty while also connecting them with the support systems they need. The aim is not to make farmers tolerate unlimited stress, but to help them respond better to challenges while reducing the problems that can be addressed through better support systems.

From Distress to Eustress

The movement from distress to eustress is not an instant change. A farmer may first experience fear, frustration or disappointment. With timely information, social support and appropriate guidance, the farmer may gradually regain confidence and look for solutions.

The process can be viewed simply as:

Challenge → Information → Support → Action → Learning → Adaptation

A difficult season may provide a lesson for the next. A failed experiment may prevent a future mistake. A conversation with another farmer may provide a new solution. An extension advisory may turn uncertainty into confidence. Therefore, farmers should not be seen only through the lens of vulnerability. They are also learners, innovators and problem-solvers. Recognizing these strengths does not mean ignoring their problems. Instead, it allows Agricultural Extension to take a more balanced approach by asking not only “What problems are farmers facing?” but also “How are farmers responding and what support can help them respond better?” Agriculture will continue to change and farmers will continue to face uncertainty. The farmer of tomorrow will need not only technical knowledge but also the ability to learn, make decisions and adapt. Understanding the constructive side of stress can therefore help us build an extension system that is more responsive to the real experiences and changing needs of farmers.

Conclusion

Stress is an unavoidable part of farming, but its effects do not have to be the same in every situation. When stress becomes prolonged and overwhelming, it can contribute to distress and affect farmers' well-being. At the same time, some challenges can encourage farmers to seek information, learn from experience, try new practices and adapt to changing conditions. This constructive side of stress is known as eustress. For Agricultural Extension, the concept offers a useful way to look beyond the distressed farmer and recognise farmers as capable learners, decision-makers and problem-solvers. However, eustress should never be used to overlook serious economic, social or environmental problems faced by farming communities. Farmers need appropriate technologies, reliable information, institutional support and better opportunities to learn and adapt. The goal is therefore not to make farming completely stress-free, but to help farmers respond to challenges with greater confidence, knowledge and support. In the journey from distress to eustress, the challenge may remain, but the farmer's response can change from worry to action, from experience to learning and from uncertainty to adaptation.

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