

Building Family Strengths in Times of Drought

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Strong, resilient families communicate effectively, are committed to each other and will seek help from an extended network of family and friends.

“And what the heck can anybody do? There is nothing anybody can do for drought except wait for rain, that’s it!”

Female farmer, 2004

Although families often are resilient and manage stress well, there’s no doubt severe drought is having some negative impact on couple and family well-being. Drought conditions are more long-term than a one-time flood or pest, making it more difficult on the overall health and well-being of individuals and families. Drought appears to be causing difficulties for couples and families as reported in informal interviews with Panhandle families (Bosch, Griffin, Meek & Rossman, 2002). Their major concerns are low yields as a result of drought, low prices for most crops, reduction in the amounts of surface water and declining groundwater levels, compounded with the costs associated with agriculture production. However, a positive change when compared to earlier drought conditions, is that today more Nebraska farmers/ranchers are willing to seek help from an extended network that includes professional assistance and mental health care (Bosch, 2004).

Australian research addressed families and drought during the 1990s; however, little research has been conducted in the United States to study couple and family relationships during extended drought periods. The University of Nebraska, in cooperation with Kansas State University, is investigating how families, specifically couples, cope with drought conditions and how their overall relationships (physical, mental, sexual and spiritual well-being) are affected. Findings will have implications for family specialists, mental health counselors and therapists, bankers, religious leaders, community officials, and others working with farm and ranch families (Vitzthum, 1991).

What do we know about families who are in distress, including drought?

Research in the 1980s and 1990s indicated that Nebraska farm/ranch families suffered hardship under economic stress and more than 40 percent of farm operators reported very high levels of stress (Jurich & Russell, 1987). Although farming, by nature, is a stressful occupation, the potential stressors are elevated under drought conditions (Bosch, Boeckner & Johnston, 2003). The high incidence of stress, depression, poor decision making, and breakdown of family relationships led the Australian government to provide farm families with drought relief programs. These included a recovery guide, hot line, skills training for primary producers, farm debt mediation, and rural women’s networks to provide information and resources (Stayner & Barclay, 2002). Families losing their farms/ranches often received little help from friends and neighbors for a variety of reasons. These included friends blaming farmers’ management skills, concern for getting involved in other people’s business, a fear of not knowing what to say to others, or knowledge of available resources. Farmers/ranchers losing their farms may not have communicated the seriousness of their personal situations and may have experienced a sense of personal failure. Families who have lost farms or chosen to get out of farming also may be suffering grief and even depression because of the changes. Farmers typically have been independent people in control of solving problems and making decisions. In terms of drought or other weather issues, farmers/ranchers have little control. But individuals are in control of their own behavior, and in control of nurturing relationships most dear.

Qualities of Strong Families and Couple Relationships

The farmer quoted at the beginning indicates that rain is the only thing that will help with the drought, and she is right in many respects. However, research conducted over the past 30 years with more than 22,000 couples around the world indicates that strong families have certain characteristics that help each other cope with hard times (DeFrain & Olson, 2004).

Appreciation and Affection

Family members who care about each other let one another know it regularly. They are willing to express feelings of love and not withhold it. There are, of course, appropriate ways to display love to your partner, your children, your parents and other family members or friends. A lot of what is appropriate, though, depends on individual values, beliefs, traditions, role modeling and personality. People from different countries and cultures vary in their display of affection. Midwesterners, for example, typically have more difficulty expressing affection and inner emotions than do other Americans. Why is that? It may have something to do with the way children were taught or personality type. If things are going well for you in personal relationships, you probably are doing OK. But if intuition tells you things aren't going well, you may check to see how you might improve the way you show appreciation and affection to family members. One way to do this is to simply ask your mate or family members what they think!

Commitment to Your Partner and Family

Commitment means being dedicated to one another's well-being. Committed families are willing to invest time and energy in family activities and don't allow work or other issues to consume their lives. In other words, couple and family relationships are a priority and other things aren't allowed to drain their emotional or physical energy to interfere with family interaction. Commitment to the couple relationship is a great part of this, especially when both individuals in the relationship want the partnership to work and are willing to nurture or strengthen it in nonabusive ways. During drought conditions, the partner relationship must be nurtured even though farmers/ranchers often feel they must work constantly to try to bring in an income or save a crop. Partners must help each other through difficult times, try to understand one another's concerns, fears and reasoning. However, strong couples will help to balance each other and will let each other know when things are getting out of kilter.

Positive Communication

Successful couple and family relationships not only are about solving problems and resolving conflict, but strong families are good at task-oriented communication. They identify difficulties, stay focused on them, and find solutions that work reasonably well for all family members. Strong families also realize that the couple relationship between husband and wife is the main bond that holds the family together, and take time to nurture and prioritize this relationship. There still will be some conflict in strong families; in fact strong families are not afraid to air their feelings about a sensitive or problem issue because they live in a safe environment and trust each other. Even in times of drought, they will have some optimism and be grateful for the inch of rain, friends who came to visit, the daughter who called home or for time to talk with each other.

Enjoyable Time Together

Strong families all over the world express that enjoyable time together is something they strive to attain, even when life gets busy and time demands are great. Time together is something that rejuvenates them, builds self-esteem, helps them cope with some of life's difficulties and provides an opportunity for having fun together. Some individuals haven't grown up in a happy family and, therefore, have more difficulty in knowing how to describe good times or what they can expect. Often being with friends, playing with pets, or spending time outdoors are ways families enjoy each other. These times often are inexpensive and without detailed planning, and occur naturally because the family just wants to be together. Strong families don't wait for major occasions to celebrate life. They celebrate little things such as a child bringing home a higher grade, a mother taking time to exercise today, a father cutting down on fat consumption and feeling better, planting a flower garden or giving some food to the shelter.

Spiritual Well-being

Research has found that families grounded in a spiritual faith or belief fare better and are happier. Spiritual well-being doesn't necessarily include organized religion, but often does. Many talk about faith in God, or a sense of optimism in life, or believing in something larger than themselves. Some describe this component as their ethical values, commitment to causes, beliefs about certain issues, and acceptance or tolerance of others' differences. Spiritual well-being also can be seen as the caring center that promotes love, sharing, tenderness and compassion. It helps them rise above the daily hassles of life and protects the family from being unduly harsh or hard on family members or others. Some consider this their "road map" for their life course and cannot imagine living without their faith.

Successful Management of Stress and Crisis

Certainly, strong families aren't exempt from stress, crisis and hardship. What sets them apart from other families who struggle or are seriously troubled, is that they look at their problems as challenges and examine problems from different perspectives. They know how to prevent trouble before it happens by being creative in their communication, being caring and accepting, and working together to meet challenges. They look at problems from the perspective of *reframing* where they purposefully decide to look at various options and to tackle the problem, not each other. They don't blame each other for things that go wrong or take their frustration out on those closest to them. Rather, strong families are willing to express love verbally and physically even during times of stress and crisis. They are willing to admit their problems and seek help from a support network of extended family and friends, in addition to a formal network of educators, service providers and others trained to work with families. This means that during drought conditions, a situation beyond their control, they will do what

they can to learn how to conserve water, use the best irrigation practices, work with their neighbors, tap into their spiritual faith and lean on moral support from others. If one family member is especially needing help, others in the family (or close friends) pull together to offer assistance and advice. This may be evidenced through “tough love.” For example, the person may be referred to counseling, treatment for depression, medical assistance, or encouraged to volunteer or exercise. Although tough love may not willingly be accepted, it may save a family member from depression, mental illness, suicidal tendencies, or making poor choices that hurt themselves and others. Strong families are not afraid of the consequences of pitching in to help each other and don’t keep secrets from one another. They are there for each other through good times and difficult times, through rainy seasons and drought.

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Index: Family Life Relationships
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