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EC85-414 Family Stress : Dealing with Blame

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Dealing with Blame

Help for Farm Families in Crisis

It's natural to look for someone or something to blame when things are not going well or when we are hurt or threatened. For example, persons threatened with the loss of the family farm may find their anguish eased a bit if they can find a place to put the blame. This publication looks at how and why people blame each other, with emphasis on the current farm financial crisis. We will discover how to avoid blame that hurts us and the people we are blaming, and how to handle self-blame and being blamed by others.

Understanding Blame

The act of blaming may stem from a need to understand a difficult situation. Somehow it's worse to feel that the world has gone topsy-turvy for no reason than it is to point fingers at the "cause" of the problem. We think that if we can find out who's to blame, we may have some control over the outcome and over our own feelings.

When adjusting to a loss or a threat of loss, most people go through several stages of the "loss cycle":

shock and denial, anger, depression and withdrawal, willingness to talk, and acceptance. Only after the acceptance stage comes the return to meaningful life. People vary in the ways they move through these emotional stages and how long they spend at each stage. Sometimes we become stuck on a certain level and are unable to progress through the cycle.

Blaming occurs primarily at the anger and depression stages. It's only natural to feel anger when the farm, which has meant so much in the past and held so many hopes for the future, is in danger. It's important to remember, though, that while blame and anger are natural human emotions, they do not help in solving problems. We must move beyond blame, through each stage of the loss cycle, if we are to get on with the business of living.

Who Is Blaming?

Where loss of the family farm is concerned, blame can come from many directions—from the community, from relatives, from the spouse, and from within oneself.

The Community Blames

Lots of blaming and finger pointing are going on at the community, state, and national levels. When people say that it's only "poor managers" who are losing their farms, they are blaming the farmers themselves. These blamers apparently are ignoring the effects of the national economic situation including U.S. international trade policies, high interest rates, and the high value of the U.S. dollar in foreign markets. Also local loan policies, high land prices during the late 1970s, and bad weather in several recent years have taken their toll.

The above factors and others are beyond the individual farmer's control. Therefore, it is both unhelpful and inappropriate to label all those in difficulty as poor managers who are to be blamed for their own problems. The fact is that many different kinds of farm operations are in trouble—good managers and bad, large and small. Some were previously affluent; others have experienced many years of limited income. The group in trouble includes young, middle-aged, and older farmers.



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When local and national leaders minimize the problem by saying that the present farm situation is the farmers' fault, the farm family, which is already hurting, feels even more hopeless and discouraged.

The Extended Family Blames

It is even more painful when blaming goes on within families. Many farm families today are in danger of losing farms that have been in the family for three and four generations. There is a love of the land itself, as well as a commitment to farming as a way of life, that makes it painful for the whole family when financial crisis threatens the future of the farm.

It is extremely hard for the older generation to witness the loss of the farm that they and their parents were able to hold onto through the Great Depression. Many older family members are remembering how they survived by economic measures such as gardening and canning, home butchering, sewing their own clothing, and finding leisure activities that didn't cost money.

What these people ignore are the major differences between these times and those of 50 years ago. One difference is that during the 1930s almost everyone was hurting financially. Now, some farmers and many nonrural people are doing very well economically and there is a tremendous gulf between farmers who are losing everything and their well-to-do neighbors or relatives in town.

Another major difference is that it's no longer possible to live on garden produce and a barter economy because of huge overhead expenses such as electricity and high interest on large loans. And children can no longer go barefoot in patched overalls to the neighborhood one-room school.

There are several reasons, then, that older family members have trouble dealing with their children who may be "going under." The older family members may be in pain from seeing the younger generation in danger of losing the family farm. Also, parents may have loaned money or cosigned loans for their farming sons and daughters, and perhaps have lost some or all of their savings for retirement. The fear of parents for their own future may be a frustration that is expressed through blame.

However, the guilt that many young and middle-aged farmers are already experiencing is made even worse when they are blamed by the older generation. Many farmers today who are losing family farms feel like failures who have betrayed a generational trust. At this point there may be little that they can do to win in the struggle to keep the farm, and the blame they feel from the older generation may lead to severe depression and lack of hope for the future.

Spouses Blame Each Other

The story goes that when the boss is feeling grumpy he yells at the employee who goes home and yells at his wife. The wife, in turn, gets after the child, who then kicks the cat. The point is that it's easy to take out frustration with those closest to us. In a family that is in danger of losing the farm, everyone is apt to feel hurt, angry, and frightened. It's natural to point the finger of blame. Something is wrong and it must be someone's fault.

Symptoms of loss, such as anger and depression, make spouses' nerves raw; and irritability is a natural result. Just when husband and wife need each other most, each person's own painful feelings make it hard to be understanding and sympathetic.

One reason for blame and guilt is that spouses may be at different stages in the loss cycle. For example, the husband may be in the depression and withdrawal stage while the wife is still angry and blaming. In that case, the husband may feel that she doesn't care about him and his feelings. The wife, on the other hand, may feel that the husband isn't trying hard enough or has given up.

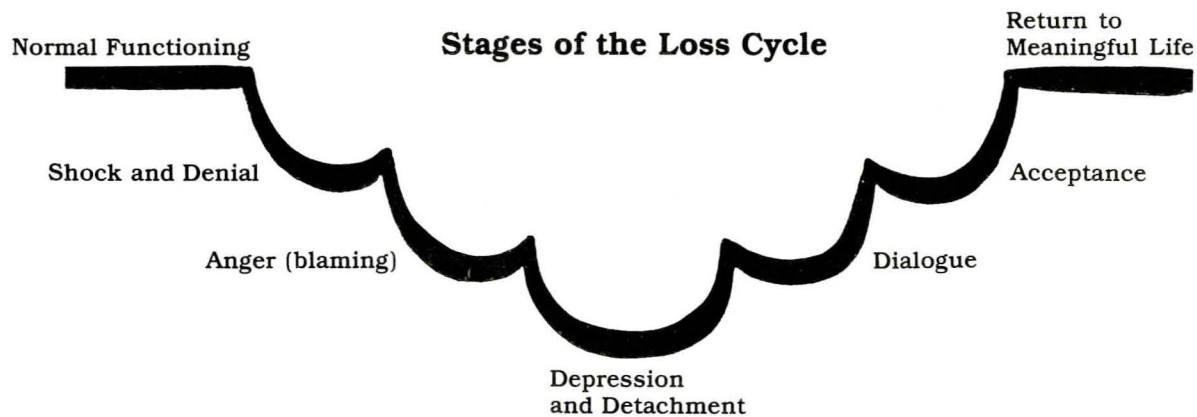
In another family, the wife may have reached the stage of acceptance and is trying to make realistic plans for the future. She may feel unsupported by a husband who is denying that there is a problem or is too depressed to do anything. It's easy to blame a spouse who's not feeling what you're feeling.

It may be helpful for couples to remember that it's unlikely for both people to be in the same stage at the same time. In fact, the situation may be even worse if both husband and wife are in the same stage, such as depression, and are unable to act or give support to each other.

Husband-wife blame might happen when the farmer stays awake at night trying to figure ways to cut corners on the farm operation. He may begin to blame his wife for spending more than he thinks she should on food, clothing, and other family expenses. Blame might also occur if the wife has brought land into the marriage. It might be easy for her and her family to blame the husband who has had direct responsibility for the farm operation. Or, a husband or wife might blame the spouse who urged buying a piece of land or machinery.

Farmers Blame Themselves

"We're losing the farm and I'm the one who's been in charge. It must be my fault." After the stage of anger and blame against others, farmers



may begin to blame themselves—to feel guilt and failure. Others, especially those who have been taught that it's bad or sinful to be angry, skip the anger stage and go straight to the depression stage. They immediately blame themselves when there is trouble. These people tend to ignore the fact that problems may have been due to factors beyond their control. Instead, they play the "if only" game: "If only I hadn't bought so much land . . . If only we hadn't borrowed money from Dad . . ."

While some self-blame is natural, the intensity of guilt feelings and the length of time they persist can create a real problem for both the individual and the rest of the family. It is probably fair to say that the biggest reason for suicidal thoughts and feelings, particularly in the present rural crisis, is the sense of intense guilt and failure on the part of the farmer or another family member. Stories of those who jumped out of office building windows in 1929 and the early 1930s remind us of what lengths people may go to when they are caught in the stage of depression and self-blame.

Avoiding the Blame Trap

There are ways to escape from the misery of self-blame or the hurt and anger of feeling blamed by others. Just as the willingness to talk with others is the way to move out of the loss cycle, giving and receiving support from others is a way to get out of the "blame trap." Here are some ways to begin:

1. Let people in the family know that you are blaming yourself or feeling hurt because others are blaming you. A spouse, for example, may be more supportive of you if he or she knows you are already feeling guilty.
2. If you are the spouse, parent, or other family member of a person who is feeling guilt or sadness, let the person know that you don't blame him or her. Try to tell the person that while you may be feeling anger over the situation, it isn't directed at him or her personally. Sometimes during difficult times, silence by family members can be interpreted as blame.
3. Remind yourself and other about factors beyond personal control that have helped create financial difficulty for farmers.

4. Talk to others in a similar situation. When you visit with a respected neighbor or friend who is also facing possible loss of a farm, you may see that he or she is not entirely at fault. That may help you quit blaming yourself.

5. Remember, "to err is human." Even if a decision turns out wrong, that doesn't mean you are a bad or stupid person.

6. Keep in mind that the future of the farm is separate from the future of you as a person and from that of your family. More and more farm families have faced and lived through the anger and hurt of losing the farm and have gone on to find new jobs and a new life.

Moving Away from Blame

While blame is a natural human emotion, in the long run it doesn't help in solving problems. Blame stands in the way of taking appropriate action. If blame goes on for long, families may miss the opportunity to help each other through what is already a painful situation. One farm couple who learned to stop blaming made this comment: "We may still lose the farm, but at least we've got each other."

Dealing with Blame—Worksheet One

Situation One. Think of an experience in your childhood in which you were blamed for something.

Situation:

Who blamed you?

How did you feel?

Outcome or result of the situation:

Situation Two. Think of an experience when you blamed (or felt like blaming) someone.

Situation:

Who did you blame?

What other emotions did you feel underneath the blaming?

How would you have felt if you didn't blame the other person?

Outcome or result: