

Farm life can be full of hidden stresses

Don't underestimate the impact of mental strain, says **Finola Colgan**

THE farm enterprise is more than just a business. Unlike a typical business premises, there is no pulling down the shutters, turning on the security alarm and heading off home for a nice quiet evening. Farming is a 24/7, 365-days-of-the-year job that requires careful time management.

In addition, many factors in farm life are beyond the farmer's control, ie the weather, machinery breakdowns, market prices and so on. Add in all the other variables, like family pressures, age and fitness, and there is clearly a risk for stress, and this needs to be managed for good health and well-being.

The most basic definition of stress is "physical, mental, or emotional strain or tension". Another popular definition is "a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilise."

In a new publication, *Manage and Reduce Stress Mental Health Ireland* (www.mentalhealthireland.ie) define stress as a feeling of being under abnormal pressure, whether it is an increased workload, an argument with a family member, or financial worries.

The long hours culture associated with farming can impact on the farm family and may not allow for adequate time to relax and recuperate from the physical demands of farming. Lack of regular sleep and tiredness are associated with these working patterns which can be exacerbated by worries about farm incomes and security.

Stress affects us in a number of ways, both physically and emotionally, and in varying intensities.

While research has shown that some stress can be positive, making us more alert and helping us perform better in certain situations, stress is only healthy if it is short-lived.

Unfortunately, excessive or prolonged stress can lead to debilitating illnesses such as heart disease and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression.

There are some good tips on developing mental resilience and combating stress suggested by a new Mental Health Ireland leaflet. These include:

Stay Connected — nurture relationships with friends and family. When you're going through a hard time, don't withdraw from others. Accept help from those who care about you.

Learn Healthy Habits — A person will manage stressful times better if they exercise regularly, eat a balanced diet and take time to rest.

The lifestyle of a farmer does not lend itself to normal working hours, so therefore it is important to make time for self care. After all, water cannot be got from a dry well.

Be Optimistic — a positive, hopeful outlook makes you a much more resilient person. Many of the problems being faced in life are temporary; most people have overcome setbacks in the past and can overcome them again.

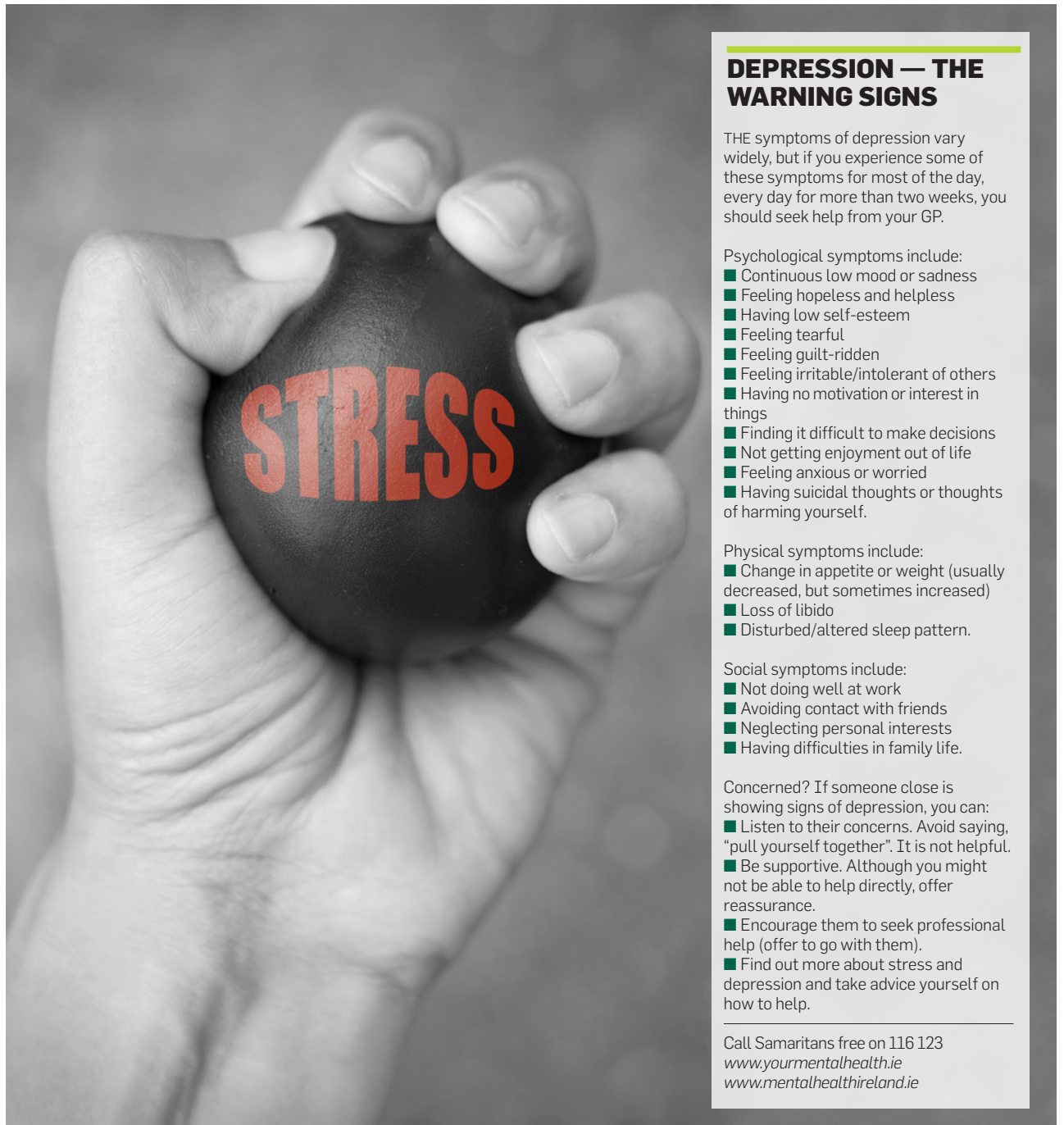
Be imperfect, allow for imperfection, accept and work with personal flaws and imperfections — everyone has them! Be true to yourself and aim to do your best.

Mental Health Ireland recently promoted the theme 'Dignity in Mental Health — where we Live Laugh, Learn Love' as part of World Mental Health Day.

It is a network of words that have significant meaning when applied in daily living. We need to make every day a good mental health day.

As the Arabs say: "The nature of rain is the same, but it makes thorns grow in the marshes and flowers in the gardens."

Finola Colgan is an area development officer for Mental Health Ireland and a member of the Teagasc Farm Financially Fit National Committee. Email: finola@mentalhealthireland.ie



DEPRESSION — THE WARNING SIGNS

THE symptoms of depression vary widely, but if you experience some of these symptoms for most of the day, every day for more than two weeks, you should seek help from your GP.

Psychological symptoms include:

- Continuous low mood or sadness
- Feeling hopeless and helpless
- Having low self-esteem
- Feeling tearful
- Feeling guilt-ridden
- Feeling irritable/intolerant of others
- Having no motivation or interest in things
- Finding it difficult to make decisions
- Not getting enjoyment out of life
- Feeling anxious or worried
- Having suicidal thoughts or thoughts of harming yourself.

Physical symptoms include:

- Change in appetite or weight (usually decreased, but sometimes increased)
- Loss of libido
- Disturbed/altered sleep pattern.

Social symptoms include:

- Not doing well at work
- Avoiding contact with friends
- Neglecting personal interests
- Having difficulties in family life.

Concerned? If someone close is showing signs of depression, you can:

- Listen to their concerns. Avoid saying, "pull yourself together". It is not helpful.
- Be supportive. Although you might not be able to help directly, offer reassurance.
- Encourage them to seek professional help (offer to go with them).
- Find out more about stress and depression and take advice yourself on how to help.

Call Samaritans free on 116 123
www.yourmentalhealth.ie
www.mentalhealthireland.ie

'Don't let pride stop you from getting help'

case study

DEPRESSION is widespread in farming, but it's rarely talked about. Yet it can quietly and invisibly wreck lives. This was almost Martin's story before he sought help. He has experienced intense bouts of depression over recent years, which at points have left him unable to work, left him estranged from his family and friends, and even led him to thoughts of suicide.

Martin's depression had been coming and going over the years. Working long hours on the farm with insufficient income to meet over-extended banking facilities began to impact on daily living and family relationships. Martin's wife was bringing in a regular income that was maintaining family needs. However, that was reduced significantly when her work hours were reduced.

Martin had not been sharing with his wife the demands being made by the bank to settle business arrangements. Debt was accumulating with suppliers, now also looking for

payments. There was a lot more going on, third-level education was on the horizon. Farmyard maintenance had been left unattended; the tractor needed an overhaul.

There was so much going on for Martin that he felt he couldn't cope, experiencing more anger, despair, hopelessness and the inclination to lash out unfairly at family members. It had reached a point where he didn't want to get out of bed, so that meant Martin's wife and children had to pick up the pieces. Their children were missing out on school regularly.

"Depression is an illness, but one that people outside your immediate family sometimes can't see," Martin said. "If I'd broken my arm, it would be understandable that I could not farm efficiently. It would be visible and acceptable, not so with depression. If they did, they might have understood what I was going through."

During Martin's worse phase, he lost his ability to make decisions, had little or no energy, and the inability to concentrate, even to maintain a conversation. "I felt like an

emotional wreck, and did not wish to admit it, to anyone, including my family. I did not recognise myself and at times I had no desire to carry on."

Listening to ongoing pleas from his wife to at least see the family doctor was the first step to change. "Almost immediately I was diagnosed with depression. I foolishly thought by taking anti-depressants that I was going to change overnight. I did not. My journey was slower than I expected.

"I took advice and went for a number of counselling sessions. This provided me with the opportunity to share problems that I had bottled up. For the first time I began to realise the benefit of opening up and talking to other people. I began to feel less overwhelmed, became more open with my wife and children. They had gone through a very difficult period.

"The counselling helped me understand depression and I've learned to know what can trigger me off and the early warning signs that depression could be setting in again. I try to keep things in perspective, make sure I eat regularly and build

exercise into my day's work. I'm more involved in my children's education, their school activities and have agreed with my wife that we take regular weekend breaks and go to occasional social functions."

Martin's best advice is to urge anyone feeling like he did to talk to someone who they can confide in. It might be your wife; another close family member, but it could be anyone. Ask them to help you get through it. Similarly, if you think a family member has depression, guide them in the right direction by encouraging them to see their GP or by getting them to talk about it.

Martin cannot answer what caused his depression. "I wish I could put my finger on it, but I can't. Without doubt it was a combination of things that gradually got worse. I'm sorry for what happened but I do not carry shame about my experience. When I realised I could not manage, I sought help. That is what anyone should do. Pride or thinking about what others will think should not come into it. You have to take personal responsibility and to get better."