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Farmer Resilience Workshop

# Cultivating Farmer Resilience

## Words of Wisdom

...from the fields...  
gathered by Kareno Hawbolt & Kimi Hendess  
for SPEC Small Farm Symposium Jan 2018

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“It is never reasonable to put self-care on hold for 4-8 months  
and expect to recover within a few months.

Putting self-care on hold like that should be an exception - something we might find ourselves doing while caring  
for a loved one who is ill, for example. It can't be the norm.” – A farmer's counsellor

### Prioritize Work-Life Balance & Relationships

Make time and space for your primary relationship and family before, during, and after the farming day.  
Have friends who can do an intervention if you're too stressed out & losing perspective or ability to cope. Our multi-farm coop is planning in mandatory time off for all members this season.  
Go to counselling early on if your relationship is suffering. Too many relationships break up over farming.  
We need a farm couples' support group – a mandatory training before we're allowed to start a farm!  
Have goals that are not farming-related. Farming can't be everything.  
Take off one (or even two) days a week.  
In Sept around the time of burnout, make sure to get off the farm for a break.  
Have a time-off calendar and fill it in at the beginning of the year. Stick to it!  
Take a decent break in winter to re-fresh and re-set.  
Find mentors who have good work-life balance and find out how they do it.

### Take care of your Body, Mind, Heart & Spirit

Get enough sleep. For real.  
Yoga. Running. Meditation. Deep Rest. Wendell Berry sermons.  
Rely on brain & planning, and not just brawn & brute force. Pace yourself – fast and furious burns out.  
Farming is a movement-based activity – use your body consciously.  
Gain strength from nature's cycles, patterns & seasons.  
Find beauty & joy in your farm's ecology – breathe it in, offer back gratitude & stewardship care.  
Drink water!  
Recognize the amount of energy it takes for your brain to do so much multi-tasking and hold so many to do lists in your head – be gentle on yourself and take a break away from the farm to have mental rest.  
Go to counselling if you need help with stress, anxiety, or depression. Talk to someone, get help.  
Talk about stress & recovery within the farming community (including mental health & self-care) – even if no one responds, keep the dialogue open. Share stories of asking for help so others know it's safe to do so.  
Put away enough of our veggies for *us* to eat throughout the winter.  
Listen to music that opens my heart and feeds my soul.  
Work the land quietly. Work with nature, be a student of your land.

### Perspective, Vision, & Mindset

Lower your expectations & accept what happens “It's a process, not a destination”.  
We seem to be trying to yield ever-increasingly more per acre now than when I began 20 years ago – is this sustainable?  
Comparison can be deflating or inspiring; compare your farm to your farm.  
Be honest - some of the farming resources out there do not reveal the hard times, and raise expectations about what's possible and how easy it is – this can be hard on new farmers who can't achieve that on their farm.  
Don't compare your life to your friends who don't farm.

Remind ourselves constantly of the importance of organic farming and stewarding land - we aren't honoured yet as we should be, but our work is vital.

Hold onto your deep vision and your convictions. Remember the heart of why you farm.

Value that we are a values-based enterprise. Make it part of our story.

Don't worry about weather and pests. Cultivate respect towards plants & critters you "share" your crops with.

Respect the farming movement and all the work that has been done before you.

Tap into the inspiration of food activists and farmers who do activist work. Believe in sacrifice & change.

Reconnect to my earth activist roots.

Get really good at walking past things that need to get done but aren't top priority.

Focus, stay the course, don't freak out.

Have realistic expectations of what you and your land can produce. Start small!

Accept and let go of control – you can't accept help if your standard of perfection means you're the only one who can do it.

Realize the limits of the land and our situation – what kind of farming does it ask for & can it provide?

Recognize you always have a choice – as to what you do each day, and also to continue farming or to walk away. As soon as you feel trapped by farming (that you don't have a choice), it's an overwhelming situation. Knowing you have a choice can make the low points seem manageable.

"What you leave behind matters, and it's not about money, wealth, or material goods. It's not success you want to be remembered for, but significance." –Mas Masumoto

Stay humble. Be aware of when ego is at play.

Surround yourself with positive thinkers and a can-do mindset.

Keep learning, always and in all ways. Repetition is the natural rhythm of farming.

### Planning, Adapting, Skill-building

Create a farm plan that works for your life – if you have other interests, design that into your farm plan.

Plan and re-assess the business after each season - "We haven't done the same thing two years in a row".

Know your scale and find resources that can help you with that particular scale.

Identify what skills you lack and find ways to bring people in to teach, advise, or help you (or hire).

Planning and management are key – carefully plan the season to ensure you have the resources and the capacity to meet your needs, and monitor how it works.

Share your Failures, learn from them, and bounce forward (Failure Tour!).

Take workshops with your farm partners (e.g. nonviolent communication and holistic management).

Invest in essential farm systems that allow me to feel more spacious in my farmwork.

"Lean" the farm - eliminate what takes too many resources for too little gain.

Articulate our "triple bottom line" so we can identify what is and isn't helping us stay on track.

Prune to Grow – Choose what direction you want to grow in, and prune what's not serving you.

Learn to "pivot" – constantly stay on our toes, observe & assess, adapt swiftly to change.

Something *WILL* go wrong every year – Accept, adapt, and advance.

### Financial Tools & Perspective

Be frugal, find creative ways to feel like we're on holiday.

Tap into creative economy (e.g. barter, DIY, celebrate at home / on the farm, ask to borrow friends' resources).

Financial stability is crucial, and it makes overall sustainability even more achievable.

Build slowly and within your current capacity, always improving the top priority, and making do with temporary or simple systems. Have patience. You don't need the Japanese paper pot transplanter (yet).

Maybe you need off-farm income to supplement – this is not a failure.

Diversify & add value – spread your risk away from production.

Lighten the labour load & keep more income for yourself – lower peak season production & extend the season.

Hire a bookkeeper – the payoff is higher than the cost!

## The Power of Team & Community

Apprentice!

Technology is only a tool; people are still required. People grow food. People make food.

Look to your mentors – be inspired & learn from what you admire in them.

Gratitude for the community of eaters who show up rain or shine to buy our veggies.

Don't farm alone – create team. Hire to share the load, even if the numbers scare you.

Stay connected to farmers. Socialize and have celebrations with farmers.

Recognize the importance of non-farmer friends.

Cultivate really local markets, because it is the local community that supports you through hard times and shares your knowledge of, and care for, local farmland.

Host farm concerts, hoe-downs, potlucks, and share the land in celebration.

Share farm meals together - hold hands and give gratitude.

Stay connected to those who help you through the hard times.

Find strength in cooperatives and learn to trust your coworkers in skill and accountability, and also goodwill.

Collaborate loosely with another farm for a few years – test the waters to see if you're a compatible coop team.

Surround myself with farmers who live a similar financial & lifestyle reality.

As an introvert, too many people on the farm keeps me from relations with the land, observation & priority-setting - put a time limit on volunteers & visitors, schedule days with no staff.

Engage in your community to protect the things you love... and pass the torch when your farm and personal well-being need you (know when to expand and contract).

Instead of hiring, invite people to carve out their own venture, their own incentives & share the risks.

Create incentives to keep staff from year to year – training inexperienced workers is an incredible outlay of time & money.

Check out your local Farmer's Institute to see if there are supportive farmers there (some are, some aren't). If not, maybe create your own!

Check in with the BC Food Systems Network to see who your local Food Security group is.

Join the certified organic network to access expertise, training & support, acknowledge the shoulders we stand on, and to help the movement stay strong & thrive.

Ask for help and advice when you need it – farming is not a solo path, we need each other.

Engage in community so you help it and have it when you need help. Barn-raising were community events for a reason!

Cultivate the art of "neighbouring" – make time to get to know & shoot the breeze with the farmers in your area.

Everyone is busy but leaning on the proverbial fencepost is more important than ever!

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These words of wisdom were gathered from the following farmers – much gratitude to these folks whose hard heart work translates into truly golden advice:

Arzeena Hamir (Amara Farm), Chris Bodnar (Close to Home Organics), Dan Jason (Salt Spring Seeds), Daniel Brisebois (Ferme Cooperative Tourne-Sol), DeLisa Lewis (Green Fire Farm), Gemma McNeill (Zaklan Heritage Farm), Robin Tunnicliffe (Sea Bluff Farm / Saanich Organics), Sue Earle (Duck Creek Farm)...and us, Kareno Hawbolt & Kimi Hendess (Sweet Digz Farm)

and these farmer contributors to "Letters to a Young Farmer":  
Joel Salatin, Amigo Bob Cantisano, Wendell Berry, Mas Masumoto

# Resources for Farmer Resilience

\*If you have resources to add to this list, please email us!

## Books

*Letters to a Young Farmer*, ed. Stone Barns Center for Food & Agriculture

*The Resilient Farmer* by Doug Avery, New Zealand

*All the Dirt: Reflections on Organic Farming* by Rachel Fisher, Heather Stretch, Robin Tunnicliffe

*Lean Farm* books by Ben Hartman

*You Can Farm* and *Field of Farmers* by Joel Salatin

*The Market Gardener* by Jean-Martin Fortier

*The Color of Food* by Natasha Bowens

All books by Wendell Berry

All books by Raj Patel

*Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmerer

*Earth Path* by Starhawk

*The Dirty Life* by Kristin Kimball

*The New Farm: Our Ten Years on the Front Lines of the Good Food Revolution* by Brent Preston

*Woefield Farm & The Republic of Dirt* by Susan Juby (fiction)

## Stress Management & Mental Health for Farmers

(special thanks to Chris Bodnar for many links on stress and self-care in farming)

[The Farmers Aren't All Right](#), on The Ruminant Podcast by Jordan Marr with Jessica Gale

[The Resilient Farmer](#) videos, website & book by Doug Avery, New Zealand

[Managing Farmer Stress: Practical Tips to Recognize Early Warning Signs of Stress](#) by Chris

Bodnar in BC Organic Grower

[My Big Meltdown](#) on Growing Farms Podcast by John Suscovich

Country Guide magazine articles:

[Farmers Take Care of Yourself](#), [Meditating on the Farm](#), [The Dark Side for Entrepreneurs](#)

[Stress on the Farm](#) booklet & [support service](#) by Manitoba Farm, Rural & Northern Support Services

[How Farmers Sparked a Conversation About Mental Health](#) Global News Oct 16, 2017

[Recognizing an Invisible Illness and Finding Help on the Farm](#) by Joe and Mary Ann Dore

[The Modern Farmer Project](#) – Stewart Skinner's Mental Health Journey

[The stresses of farming can lead to mental health challenges](#) – Michigan State Extension Service

[How Chronic Stress Affects Your Brain](#) video - TedEd

Young Agrarians Business Mentorship Program (includes planning courses on Farm Business Planning & Bookkeeping for Farmers)

Farmer Networks, Conferences & Gatherings:

Young Agrarian Winter Mixers, COABC, SPEC Small Farm Symposium, Farmer2Farmer, BC Food Systems

Network, Farmer's Institutes

Please continue this dialogue!

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