

Cow Care is Our Self-Care

By Chris Gwyn, Jefo Nutrition North American Ruminant Business Development Manager

When your dairy herd isn't where it should be due to health, production or reproduction issues, your stress levels likely increase. Chances are, you're not yourself when you're stressed. You may lose sleep, forget things and become unproductive. Your window of tolerance may decrease, and emotions can run high. Stress can significantly influence your mental and physical health. In addition, your stress can affect those around you, including your cows.

Yes, your cows. The level of stress you feel on the farm is important not only for your health but also because it can affect your cows. A 2023 study from Norway showed that dairy farmers with low stress levels and greater occupational well-being received higher animal welfare scores. On the flip side, the study showed that low occupational well-being and high stress levels were negatively associated with animal welfare scores.

In another study, researchers in Canada surveyed dairy farmers to better understand their mental health and the potential connections to cow health and welfare. The results showed that high stress and anxiety levels were associated with the prevalence of severe lameness.

If one path to healthy, productive cows lies in your reduced level of stress, then it pays to lower your stress. At Jefo Nutrition, we believe that statement goes both ways. Cows that feel good and have fewer stressors produce more quality milk and are more profitable. Good cow performance should make you and your team feel good, too. In other words, it reinforces that "cow care is self-care."

As complex as modern dairy production and cow management can be, there are still basic practices that have proven, positive outcomes. Chances are, you have followed leading producers, nutritionists and researchers who have described these practices for years. Implementing them is essential. Let's look at some of these basic practices for maintaining and improving cow well-being.

Address lameness

Data shows that lameness prevention works. We know the causes of most lameness problems, and there are tools available to mitigate them. However, according to Karl Burgi, a leading expert on hoof care, implementation is often an obstacle. Burgi appeals for all of us in the dairy industry to ask more questions about reducing lesions and lameness, to look more closely at the data, and to maintain regular trimming schedules.

A key to reducing lameness, Burgi says, is for producers to be equipped to make the right decisions. To help solve lameness, he advocates for the creation of a farm advisory team and an action plan regarding hygiene, comfort, lameness identification, and routine maintenance hoof trimming of cows and replacement heifers. He recommends assigning a timeframe and responsibilities for the action plan and scheduling follow-up meetings to evaluate the progress. He's confident this would help solve farm lameness challenges.

Ensure good rest

Cows need about 12 hours of optimized rest each day. Natural rumination and blood circulation are more efficient when cows lie down. Getting "good rest" has a lot to do with the quality of your cow's bedding surface.

For decades, Dr. Nigel Cook, Chair of the Department of Medical Sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has recommended sand bedding in free stalls. A deep sand-bedded area provides both comfort and traction. Multiple studies show that sand bedding reduces lameness, hock soreness and knee injuries.

When producers switch to sand, Dr. Cook says they typically see cow welfare and milk production improvements. More milk helps to pay for the investment.

If sand is not practical on your dairy, then focus on "deep bedding" that can be kept clean and dry. The result: Cows will perform better and stay in the milking string longer. Longevity and highly efficient component yield are the foundation of profitability, resulting in lower stress for all.

Supply good nutrition safely

We all know cows do their best when regularly supplied with a well-balanced, properly mixed and delivered ration based on high-quality forages. Regular forage testing is a basic practice to ensure your herd is getting the nutrients they need.

Work with your nutritionist to create a schedule for testing your forages so you know exactly what you're feeding. Providing your cows with the best nutrition drives milk production. However, the peace of mind you get with a great diet will be undermined if you or someone on your team gets hurt while testing, mixing or feeding.

Doug DeGroff, owner of Diversified Dairy Solutions, LLC, a dairy nutrition and management consulting firm, speaks from experience. "You either have a good,

solid safety management program, or you have excuses when somebody gets injured or killed,” he says.

DeGroff is a silage avalanche survivor who was young and confident with an “it can’t happen to me” attitude when it did happen to him 15 years ago. As a strong advocate for safety related to silage management, DeGroff has some recommendations for a silage safety program.

Start by sitting down with anybody who’s going to be in the feed area and go over potential risks, including avalanching, gases, fast-moving equipment, and more. Create standard operating procedures (SOPs) tailored to your farm. When you have new employees, make sure you don’t wait until the next training session to teach them.

To safely sample silage, DeGroff recommends facing the silage with a facer or scraping it with a payloader. At that point, his clients put some in a feed or forage mixer wagon, mix it up, and spit it out to clean what was left in the mixer wagon. Next, they load another 5,000 pounds in the wagon, spit it out in a safe place, and take a sample. “That’s the slowest but most accurate and safest way to get the best representation of the pile,” he says.

Reduce nutritional stress

Nutritional stress results from anything that negatively impacts dry matter intake. This can be physiological, such as how a cow’s metabolism reacts to a change in diet; perceptual, such as a cow viewing a diet change as different, resulting in lower intake; or behavioral, such as competition for bunk space or out-of-feed events. Anything that negatively influences intake will have a trickle-down effect on rumen health, energy balance, production, reproduction and overall health.

When feed intake is impaired, your cow’s ability to convert forages, grains and up-cycled by-products into nutritious milk decreases. Converting the TMR into energy, protein, amino acids and vitamins is related to how much the dairy cow eats. Vitamins, in particular, are essential.

Much progress has been made in understanding the role vitamins play in a cow’s diet. Vitamins are nutrients needed in small quantities to support all the metabolic processes in your cows – helping them to produce milk, boost components, stay healthy and reproduce efficiently. Subclinical deficiencies occur, in particular with B vitamins, when feed intake is not optimal. After all, B vitamins are known as the

“Stress Vitamins.” Talk to your nutritionist about adding rumen-protected vitamins to ensure they are effectively absorbed by your cows to support their needs.

Lower the stress in your working environment

Farm synchronization involves aligning your three main management centers: feeding, milking and herd management. Dairy consultant David Greene says that when you synchronize the schedules of these centers, you create efficiencies in labor management and milk production.

He admits understanding the timing can be a challenge, especially in large herds. Each management center typically has its own schedule, and these centers don't always communicate well with one another.

But it works if they do. Several of Greene's clients who changed the feeding schedule to align with the milking and herd management centers saw significant improvements. For example, by feeding cows around two hours before they enter the parlor, you allow them to get up, eat and lie back down. After being milked, they have another meal. Cows are going to be more efficient and healthier when they have more, smaller meals. Greene says his clients see a 2- to 3-pound increase in milk production for the same, if not lower, feed intake when they feed smaller meals ahead of the parlor (20-25 minutes instead of 35-40 minutes).

In addition, when these cows return from the parlor to eat and are in a lock-up system, the herd management team can step in and do herd health and breeding work as efficiently as possible. “Timing is everything,” Greene says.

Give yourself what you need

For some, self-care means grabbing a coffee on the way to the barn, fishing in a nearby pond or reading a book before bed. What if you also took a moment to breathe intentionally? Intentional breathing, also known as breathwork, can have a calming effect. Box breathing is one example. To do it, empty your lungs, then inhale for a count of three, hold your breath for three, and exhale for three. The goal is to feel relaxed.

Take in the wonders around you. Research shows that being close to nature and spending time outdoors are exceptional ways to manage stress. Perhaps this is part of agriculture's resilience.

Eat healthily. Consume what you produce – milk, cheese, yogurt, and meat – and include fruits and vegetables. In short, eat a balanced diet. And if possible, avoid eating on the run. Healthy eating helps cultivate a healthy gut. More and more,

science is telling us that our gut is like a second brain. It's not going to analyze your spreadsheet, but your gut does influence your brain health. Just like with your cows, the stomach and digestion influence well-being.

Rest well. A good night's sleep is when you fall asleep fast, stay asleep through the night, and feel refreshed in the morning. The science-backed benefits are nothing short of amazing. You think more clearly and focus better. Reflexes quicken. Disease risk drops. Mood improves. You perform better at work. You're safer at work. I could go on, but I'll give this one a rest. There's simply no doubt about the stress-reducing benefits of a good night's sleep.

The relationship is real

Science supports what you know intuitively: When your cows feel good, chances are you feel good.

Next time you're walking to the barn, stressed about what is going on around you, stop for a minute and focus on your breathing. Reset your frame of mind. If the dairy is stressing you, take time to review your basic cow management practices, including lameness, cow comfort, farm safety, and nutrition. Is your ration well-balanced, accurately mixed and delivered, and supporting optimal feed intake? Are there straightforward management improvements you can make? Your healthy, productive dairy cows will return the favor.

At Jefo Nutrition, we're raising awareness of the many different stress factors and the solutions available to help keep cows comfortable, healthy and productive. To learn more, visit JefoDairyStressors.com.