

# Managing Stress for Agricultural Producers: Learning to “Unhook”



We’ve all been there – a cool winter night with friends, laughing and having a good time. Suddenly, one of your friends mentions something about the economy or the drought, and your pleasant evening ends. Your friends seem to be fine and keep laughing, but all you can think of is what this current situation means for your family and if there is anything you can do that will actually make things turn out okay. Maybe you stay for a while longer, but you’re distracted and preoccupied. You might even have a few extra drinks, just to ‘take your mind off things.’ In a word, you’re hooked.

## Getting Hooked



“Hooked” is a term from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) that means thoughts are dominating actions and awareness; in essence, you are hooked by thoughts when you get so caught up in them that you zone out of the world around you and cannot effectively do the things that matter to you (Harris, 2019). Having thoughts of failure, inadequacy, or discouragement is entirely human; it doesn’t mean that there is anything wrong with you. However, getting hooked by thoughts can lead to harmful, repetitive cycles that decrease quality of life and increase depression (Carvalho et al., 2019). This is especially the

case when life stresses (drought, economic recession, chronic pain, family struggles) add up. Let’s take a look at two ways getting hooked might show up.

1. Getting hooked and acting automatically. When we get hooked by thoughts, we sometimes act on them automatically, forgetting that they are thoughts rather than something we “have” to do. For example, if you got hooked by the thought that, “There’s no way we can increase our bottom line with our production this year,” then you might act in ineffective ways, such as not exploring new techniques and working with economists and supports to help you.
2. Getting hooked and acting to avoid the thoughts/feelings. On the other hand of acting automatically, sometimes when we get hooked by our thoughts, we do things to try to control the thoughts and feelings, to make them go away. If you got hooked by the thought that “I am a failure as a farmer,” then you might try to avoid it by drinking alcohol, distracting yourself with technology, or starting an argument so you have something else to focus on.

## Getting Unhooked

ACT has shown effectiveness in helping people learn how to unhook and refocus on the things that matter to them (Gloster et al., 2020). When you are unhooked from thoughts and feelings, you have enough space from them to see them for what they are (thoughts and feelings) and to still do things that matter to you. While that is easier said than done, here are three unhooking skills:



1. **Recognize that thoughts do not control behavior.** It may sound odd, but one of the most effective ways to unhook from thoughts and feelings is to recognize that they are thoughts and feelings – information and indicators, not something that controls your behavior. Have you ever felt angry yet treated someone else (a friend,

partner, or animal) kindly? That is proof positive that you can control your behavior, even while having difficult thoughts and feelings (Hayes, 2019).

2. **Label your thinking as thinking.** In unhooking from thoughts and feelings, it can be helpful to label your thoughts in a way that reminds you that they are thoughts (Hayes, 2019). For example, you could label “I am a failure as a farmer” instead as “I’m having the thought that I am a failure as a farmer.” Or, to create even more distance, you could relabel it as “I’m noticing that I’m having the thought that I am a failure as a farmer.”
3. **Learn what it feels like to be hooked and to unhook.** It can be helpful to increase your awareness of what getting hooked feels like for you (Harris, 2019). In this exercise, your hands represent your thoughts and feelings. To begin, get “hooked” - bring your hands up over your face so that they cover your eyes. After 15 seconds, try pushing away your ‘thoughts’ – push your hands straight out and away from you as hard as you can. Both of these positions represent what happens when you get hooked – either you act automatically (hands over your face) or you try to avoid the thoughts and feelings (hands pushed away). Now, open your hands and lay them flat in your lap. Just let them be there. Can you feel the difference? This represents life unhooked; the thoughts and feelings are still there, and you can engage effectively with things and persons you care about.

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## Authors

**Jacob Gossner, Beth Fauth, Ph.D., and Tasha Howard**

## Practice:

Try one or more of these exercises throughout your day for a week. You might notice when you get “hooked” and bring your hands over your face and then slowly lower them to your lap to remind yourself what it feels like to unhook. Or, you might choose a thought that has hooked you in the past and practice rephrasing it, like, “I’m having the thought that \_\_\_\_\_.” Whatever you decide to do, you are taking an important step towards getting distance from thoughts and feelings and pursuing personal well-being. (View the full Fact-sheet below)

## References

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