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# Removing the Tension from Extension

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**Abstract:** Job burnout and stress begin with day-to-day frustrations, roadblocks, and unmet expectations. These can transform job satisfaction and, ultimately, career choices, affecting the quality of programs, expense to universities, and relationships with the community. A series of innovative statewide workshops involving 97 agents and Extension directors from 100 counties in North Carolina answered the question "There's got to be a better way to . . ." with overarching themes including: invest in yourself and your career; focus, delegate, organize, network, shine, and be efficient.

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## Introduction

Outstanding local Extension Educators who are well connected to the community are one of the key benefits of Extension. However, burnout and turnover are significant problems for Extension. Turnover of local Extension educators often leads to a loss of accumulated knowledge and

experience; loss of valuable relationships in the community; temporary voids in programming and volunteer participation; and additional strain on the remaining staff. Costs of refilling the positions and training new staff are a financial and time drain that ripples throughout Extension (Ensle, 2005; Strong & Harder, 2009).

North Carolina Cooperative Extension has recently seen a great deal of turnover at the local and state level. To help county agents, especially new recruits, successful peers identified strategies that improve efficiency, reduce job-related stress, and increase professional success. Ninety-seven Extension agents and directors from 100 North Carolina counties attended seven regional workshops where they were asked to identify tips for being a successful horticulture agent. Workshop results were summarized and distributed to all horticulture agents, county directors, and district directors in North Carolina with the request that they review the list to identify the most important tips for the success of county horticultural agents. Additional input was solicited and follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify responses. The final tips are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
Tips for Removing the Tension from Extension

<p><b>Invest in Yourself</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protect important family dates.</li> <li>• Annually take a minimum of 7 vacations days in a row.</li> <li>• Develop hobbies away from Extension.</li> <li>• Become flexible and creative. Find humor in difficult circumstances. Focus on the good in yourself, co-workers, staff, volunteers, clients, and the job.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Invest in Your Career</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take responsibility for your own destiny and for developing the skills you need.</li> <li>• Seek out professional improvement opportunities.</li> <li>• Find a mentor and connect with them regularly.</li> <li>• Get involved in Extension committees and professional associations that provide networking, professional development, resources, and awards.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Focus Your Effort</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop formal as well as informal advisory groups.</li> <li>• Select two or three program areas in which you are interested and have valuable skills. Focus on those and become an expert.</li> <li>• Identify clear program goals and objectives and stick to them. Be pro-active. Block out time to achieve specific goals.</li> <li>• Don't expect to solve every problem for every client.</li> <li>• Do not allow urgent (but unimportant) things to swing</li> </ul>

	<p>your schedule.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is not possible to continually pursue new projects without discontinuing existing ones. Before you take on new responsibilities get your director and advisory board's support for restructuring ongoing priorities.</li> </ul>
<b>Turn Loose</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Surround yourself with outstanding staff, volunteers, and partners. Define what needs to be done, meet regularly, and appreciate their support.</li> <li>• It is not possible to know it all. If you wait for everything to be perfect you will miss valuable opportunities.</li> </ul>
<b>Stay Organized</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use an effective time management system. As soon as you finish an event, make notes, contacts, and suggestions in your calendar for next year. Block out times for planning and preparing programs. Leave open time to deal with the unexpected.</li> <li>• Keep up with your mail, email, and phone messages on a daily basis.</li> <li>• Keep a dated log of recommendations made. This will provide an annual tally for reporting and seasonal programming topics as well as a written record should issues arise later.</li> <li>• Establish a good system for gathering data for your accountability reports and compile information throughout the year.</li> <li>• Keep track of images, slides, and speaker notes. Develop programs and materials that can be modified to serve a variety of audiences and purposes.</li> <li>• Aggregate your references. Check to be sure you are relying on the best possible resources.</li> <li>• Some saw a work cell phone as essential, others felt it implied an artificial sense of urgency and distracted them from driving or addressing the needs of whomever they were with when the cell phone rang.</li> </ul>
<b>Develop a Network</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify who you need to know within your county, district, state, and country to be effective in your job. Build relationships to foster partnerships. Learn where to find the resources, experts, and answers. Ask for and</li> </ul>

	<p>allow them to help. Ask questions. Dedicate time to lunch appointments, to visit other professionals in their workplace, and tour related professional destinations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Join community organizations (Jr. League, Kiwanis, Rotary, Toastmasters, Better Business Bureau, etc.) Connect with organizations with shared desired outcomes to pool money and resources.</li> <li>• It's important for people to know who you are and to care about you and your success. To enhance your effectiveness exponentially, develop a diverse network of supporters who can help open doors, make introductions, and get you an invitation to the table where critical decisions are being made. Be sure that key people know what you are trying to accomplish and what you will need to succeed so that you are on their radar when opportunities surface.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Shine as a Professional</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project a positive, professional image in all you do. Share your success, apply for awards, and seek out media attention for your programs.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Develop Funding &amp; Resources</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Charge cost recovery for programs and products.</li> <li>• Identify and use available resources.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Save Time</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use technology to streamline your efforts.</li> <li>• Manage your schedule. Plan out the entire year. Don't make appointments before 8:30 a.m. to allow time for email and phone calls first thing in the morning. Deal with email briefly several times a day rather than having it beep each time a message comes in. Over estimate how long it will take to do things. Create built in time limits.</li> <li>• Stop doing things that don't work.</li> <li>• LISTEN</li> <li>• Rely on expertise and program materials of other agents and specialists. Explore options for cross county programming.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Inspire</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on inspiring rather than inundating with details.</li> <li>• Use relevant examples and hands-on engaging exercises.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Streamline training to focus on the key points.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Handle the Tough Stuff</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address problems quickly and directly.</li> <li>• In Person: Invite the person who is upset into your office. Move your chair around and sit next to them. LISTEN. Take notes. Write down everything, this slows down the conversation and honors the importance of what they are saying. Clarify the key issues to be resolved. Solicit their input on a reasonable resolution. Clarify the key components of the resolution (exactly who should take what steps when). Thank them for bringing the issue to your attention and agree to take their suggestions under advisement. Follow up to let them know what steps you have taken and to determine if the issue is resolved.</li> <li>• On the Phone: Don't try to handle significant issues over the phone, instead meet in person. For minor issues, place the call after hours to honor the importance you place on addressing the concern and your commitment to prevent interruption. This may have a strong positive impact on the attitude of the person who is lodging the complaint. Follow procedures above.</li> <li>• Email: Do NOT handle problems via email. It is too easy for messages to be misinterpreted.</li> </ul>

## **Implications for Extension**

To retain current county agents, and for new county agents to be successful, Extension will need to find ways to reduce the strain on these individuals. One way to do this is to share strategies identified by successful agents. These strategies, such as the ones identified in this article, can be incorporated into professional development training for new agents and their mentors. By encouraging the use of such strategies, Extension can improve the success rate, reduce the stress level, reduce the burnout, and reduce the turnover rate of county agents while ultimately saving Extension money and improving stakeholder relationships (Ensle 2005; Strong & Harder, 2009; Safrit & Owen, 2010; Saunders & Reese, 2011; Sears, Urizar & Evans, 2011).

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