

Preventing Farm-related Stress, Depression, Substance Abuse, and Suicide

Rebekka M. Dudensing, Samuel D. Towne, and Carly E. McCord

Financial stressors combined with family-farming relationships that blur the line between business and personal lives create unique sources of stress for farmers and farm families. If not addressed, these stressors can lead to physical illness, depression, substance abuse, and suicide. Farmers are more than five times as likely to commit suicide than the general population (McIntosh *et al.* 2016) and are more likely to report substance abuse (Bush and Lipari, 2015).

Stress and depression also increase the already above average probability of accidents and injury (Fetsch, 2012), and stress may affect factors influencing other leading causes of death in rural areas, which include heart disease, chronic lower respiratory disease, and stroke (Moy *et al.*, 2017). Farmers, farm families, and rural communities can help to manage farm-related stress and reduce incidences of depression, substance abuse, and suicides.

Understanding Farm-related Stress

Stress is the body's physical and psychosocial response to anything that threatens its physical, emotional or financial well-being or survival (Middleton, 1988; AgriSafe Network, no date). Researchers identify farming as more stressful than most other occupations (Fetsch, 2014; Swisher *et al.*, 1998; Jurich and Russell, 1987). Farming is

a demanding profession with many occupational risks. The loss of a job could also imply loss of home. While farmers have many skills, those skills may not be reflected in the formal experience and education required in the job market for other occupations (Jurich and Russell, 1987).

Farmers often live where they work and work with family members, blurring the lines between business and family roles (Fraser *et al.*, 2005). These relationships can provide additional support, but they can also result in additional conflict when family members disagree about business or personal needs and opportunities. Multigenerational farms pose specific stressors, with younger farmers sometimes feeling they have additional financial burdens on the farm and in their families while having less support and less control over the farm relative to the older generation (Weigel, Weigel, and Blundall, 1987). Even outside multi-generational operations, farmers and ranchers worried about losing family land may face extreme guilt leading to anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and/or suicidal thoughts or actions.

Work problems can become family problems and vice versa (Weigel, Weigel, and Blundall, 1987). However, farm families, especially men, are traditionally reluctant to seek help due to a perception of farmers as independent and self-sufficient, social stigma around mental health issues, and a lack of mental health providers in rural areas (Towne, *et al.*, 2016; Fraser *et al.*, 2005; Weigel, 2002; Jurich and Russell, 1987). Many rural men believe that showing emotion or needing help is a sign of weakness (Weigel, 2002). This worldview prompts them to try to avoid reaching out for assistance.

Women, regardless of role on the farm, are more likely than men to experience stress (Reynolds, 2008; Freeman, Schwab, and Jiang, 2008). Women tend to bear stress on multiple fronts as they balance the traditional responsibility of taking care of the family with on- and off-farm jobs. Many women also feel they lack a say in the farm operation, with daughters-in-law reporting the highest levels of stress

Farm Occupation Risks

- Isolation
- Stressful work environments
 - long hours
 - weather conditions
 - lack of control over costs and prices
 - machinery breakdowns
- Work-home imbalance
- Potential for financial losses
- Possible neurological effects of chronic exposure to pesticides

in multi-generational farm families (Marotz-Baden and Mattheis 1994; Weigel and Weigel 1987; Russell *et al.* 1985).

Children are not immune to farm stressors. Farm children often work on the farm and identify closely with rural values (Fraser *et al.*, 2005; Jackman, Fetsch, and Dalsted, 2015). A study of Kansas farm families found that many parents were unwilling to talk with their children about the family’s financial situation, which increased children’s uncertainty and stress (Jurich and Russell, 1987). In fact, children tended to blame themselves for economic conditions well beyond their control. Children’s stress may manifest as behavioral outcomes (*e.g.*, inappropriate behavior, poor school performance), health-related outcomes (*e.g.*, higher rates of illness), and other unwanted outcomes (*e.g.*, bedwetting) (Fetsch, 2012; Fraser *et al.*, 2005; Jurich and Russell, 1987).

Recognizing Symptoms of Stress and Depression

Many feelings, behaviors, and physical symptoms may indicate stress or depression (Williams and Fetsch, 2012; Middleton, 1988). Prolonged stress is associated with physical health risks, including hypertension and ulcers. Stress is also related to anxiety and depression. Symptoms of anxiety disorders, which range from feelings of uneasiness to immobilizing terror, include fear, worry, apprehension, and feelings of dread (SAMHSA, 2003; AgriSafe Network, no date). Untreated anxiety can lead to depression and substance abuse, which are associated with higher suicide risk.

Depression affects the brain’s biochemical balance and can be diagnosed when multiple symptoms are present for

more than two weeks. Signs of depression include physical symptoms similar to those experienced with stress and feelings such as sadness, reduced activity or pleasure, and guilt. Friends and neighbors may notice behavioral changes such as missing church, declining maintenance or care for the farmstead, or distressed family members, including children (Williams and Fetsch, 2012). See the Resources section for more information about symptoms of stress and depression, including a checklist of symptoms and guide for referrals from Colorado State University Extension.

Signs of Alcohol and Drug Abuse

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (2016) defines addiction as “a chronic disease characterized by drug seeking and use that is compulsive, or difficult to control, despite harmful consequences.” In a SAMSHA study, 10.5 percent of workers engaged in agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting reported a substance abuse disorder (dependence on or abuse of alcohol or illicit drugs), higher than the overall rate of 9.5 percent. Furthermore, the incidence of illicit drug use and substance abuse disorders rose from the 2003-2007 timeframe while heavy drinking fell, although natural resource workers were still more likely than the general population to report heavy drinking. Misuse of prescription drugs and illegal substances in rural America has been an increasing concern documented in the popular media as well (Runyan, 2017).

The CAGE (Cut down, Annoyed, Guilty, and Eye-opener) drug and alcohol screening questions (Ewing 1984; Turvey *et al.* 2002; Johns Hopkins, no date) include:

Recognizing Stress

Feelings or behaviors:

- tension
- exhaustion
- anxiety or restlessness
- irritability
- drug/alcohol misuse

Physical symptoms:

- headaches or dizziness
- changes in appetite
- upset stomach
- diarrhea
- backaches

Managerial changes:

- ineffective management
- reduced productivity

Symptoms of Depression

- Sadness, discouragement, or hopelessness
- Reduced activity and pleasure
- Withdrawal or feelings of isolation
- Guilt
- Reduced self-esteem
- Physical symptoms as with stress

Outward Signs of Depression

- Changed routines (*e.g.*, avoiding the coffee shop)
- Sad or unkempt appearance
- Reduced care of livestock or farmstead
- Increased accidents resulting from fatigue or inattention
- Distressed family members, including children

1. Have you ever felt you ought to cut down on your drinking or drug use?
2. Have people annoyed you by criticizing your drinking or drug use?
3. Have you felt bad or guilty about your drinking or drug use?
4. Have you ever had a drink or used drugs first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover (eye-opener)?

Answering “yes” to at least two questions is often considered an indication of alcohol and/or drug abuse problems, but a single positive answer may also be cause for concern (Johns Hopkins, no date).

Suicide Prevention

A 2016 CDC report found that the suicide rate was higher among people employed in farming, fishing, and forestry than in any other occupation (McIntosh *et al.*, 2016). The report analyzing 2012 suicides found a rate of 84.5 suicides per 100,000 population among agriculture and natural resources workers (90.5 for men). The second highest suicide rate was among construction and extraction (*e.g.*, oil field) workers at a rate of 53.3. The overall suicide rate was 16.1 per 100,000 population in 2012, the year of the occupational data. Other data indicate that U.S. suicide rates are increasing since 1999 (Curtin, Warner, and Hedegaard, 2016). While the risk of a friend committing suicide may seem relatively low, it’s estimated between 10 and 20 percent of people in the U.S. think about suicide at some time in their lives (Weissman *et al.*, 1999). In other words, one or two of your 10 closest friends may consider suicide at some point.

The negative thoughts associated with stress and depression can be changed. Often a suicide attempt provides a clear alarm for the individual and those around them that something must change quickly. However, suicide attempts using highly lethal means such as firearms frequently result in an irreversible outcome. Booth, Briscoe, and Powell (2000) state that farmers with suicidal intent may be at increased risk of dying as a result of ready access to firearms.

Warning signs for suicide often mirror symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression. In fact, anxiety, depression, withdrawal from friends and activities, and alcohol abuse are often associated with suicidal thoughts (Williams and Fetsch, 2012; AgriSafe Network, no date). Family and community members may also observe behaviors such as making a will or final arrangements or giving away possessions. Previous attempts and a history of family members of friends committing suicide are associated with greater risk of suicide.

Frequent thoughts of suicide with a plan in mind is cause for concern. If someone talks of suicide, makes comments hinting at suicide, suggests that people would be better off without him/her, or exhibits other warning signs, ask that person if they are considering suicide.

People struggling with stress, depression, or suicidal thoughts may think their feelings are too much to burden someone else with. When you ask directly about their mental health and intentions, you are telling them it is not too much and that you care about them. Asking a person if they are contemplating suicide has not been shown to cause the person to consider suicide if they weren’t already. And if someone is already considering suicide, asking them about their thoughts about taking their life has not been shown to make the person more likely to make an attempt. Talk to them privately and

Signs of Alcohol and Drug Abuse

- Drinking more than intended
- Being unable to stop or cut down on drinking
- Drinking more to get the same effect
- Finding that the usual number of drinks doesn’t have the same effect
- Getting into risky situations after drinking
- Trouble with family or friends stemming from drinking
- Drinking or hangovers interfering with work or other activities

(National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2016)

Warning Signs for Suicide

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Withdrawal from friends and activities
- Alcohol and/or drug abuse
- Refusing to take or hoarding medication
- Aggressive behavior or irritability
- Making a will or final arrangements
- Giving away possessions
- Talking of or hinting at suicide
- Suggesting people would be better off without him/her
- Frequent thoughts of suicide with a plan in mind

summarize why you are concerned about them, but don't promise secrecy.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) recommends the following guidelines to help someone who may be thinking about committing suicide, and these steps are also recommended by Fetsch (2012) in an agricultural context:

- “Ask them if they are thinking about killing themselves.
- Listen without judging and show you care.
- Stay with the person (or make sure the person is in a private, secure place with another caring person) until you can get further help.
- Remove any objects that could be used in a suicide attempt.
- Call SAMHSA's *National Suicide Prevention Lifeline* at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) and follow their guidance.
- If danger for self-harm seems imminent, call 911.” (– SAMHSA Suicide Prevention Website)

Managing Stress

Many strategies can help farmers and farm families manage stress.

- *Identify sources of stress.* Recognizing the pileup of stressors can provide some measure of control as individuals understand why they are experiencing negative feelings (Fetsch, 2014; Middleton, 1988). Some people find it difficult to admit they are experiencing stress and may need guidance in observing the physical, emotional, and behavioral symptoms of stress. This may be facilitated by seeing a doctor about a medical concern, yet rural residents face gaps in access to many health care providers (especially mental health care providers).
- *Engage social support systems.* Family and social support systems help maintain well-being, allow tasks to be delegated to relieve additional stress, and provide connection to additional resources. Families with greater community involvement and stronger social networks are often more resilient in the face of hardship (Lavee *et al.*, 1985).
- *Use new and existing resources.* Resources help individuals and families to understand and resolve stressful situations (Fetsch, 2014). For example, reaching out to financial (including mediation) or legal experts may help facilitate the resolution of certain economic-related farming concerns.
- Consulting mental health experts can help increase one's ability to cope and make it easier to deal with encountered stressors (Middleton, 1988; Fetsch, 2012). Implementing economic risk management strategies has been shown to help reduce stressors (Jackman, Fetsch, and Dalsted, 2015). Finally, personal resources like self-esteem, self-efficacy, and communication skills are inherent in all of us and can be strengthened to provide an additional buffer against stress (Fetsch, 2014).
- *Reframe stressful situations.* Reinterpreting perceptions of stressful situations can increase the level of control family members feel in dealing with stress and help them see alternative solutions (Xu, 2007; Fetsch, 2014; Jurich and Russell, 1987). It is imperative to avoid self-blame and to find perceptions and meanings that acknowledge positive benefits and opportunities for the family (Fetsch 2012). Working through stressful situations has the potential to improve confidence in one's ability to overcome adversity, heighten one's sense of spirituality and connectedness to something greater than their circumstances, reprioritize what is important, and discover a sense of hope and renewed purpose (Snyder, 1998; Wright, 1983).
- *Stay physically healthy.* Maintaining health through regular physical exercise, a healthy diet, and appropriate sleep patterns also promotes mental health and well-being (Reynolds, 2008; Molgaard and Miller, 2002). Stress management activities, including meditation and breathing exercises, may be relatively easy to implement. It is important to take time to relax. Relaxation exercises can be beneficial both during down-time and when experiencing immediate frustration. Example exercises from the University of Illinois Extension can be found at <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/fmpt/ec/091205.html> and in Farm Family Stress (Middleton, 1988) from the Michigan State Cooperative Extension Service at <http://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC/Ag.%20Ext.%202007-Chelsie/PDF/e1697-1988-rev1.pdf>. The Breath2Relax app by the National Center for Telehealth and Technology is a smartphone tool to aid relaxation.
- *Make time for fun.* Fun and enjoying life are essential to mental health (Reynolds, 2008). Focusing on interests, hobbies, and family relationships can go a long way to improving one's quality of life. Planning time away from the farm,

where possible, can also provide a meaningful break and a change in scenery. This may serve as an opportunity to enrich social engagement among family and friends in new settings and may serve to lessen potential resentment toward the farm (Middleton, 1988).

- *Identify a shared mission.* Understanding family and business values and goals can help families make strategic decisions, ensure that financial and other resources are directed to the things that matter most, and help family members accept some stressors as bumps on the road to a desired destination (Molgaard and Miller 2002; Middleton, 1988). The family may ask What do we stand for? Where do we want to be in x years? What do we want to pass on to our children or the next generation? What would we like to do in retirement? and What concrete actions can we take to make these things happen?

The Rural Community's Role in Supporting Farm Families

Strong, resilient individuals and families seek help when they need it. Strong rural communities support those in need by guiding them to appropriate resources. Community cohesion and collectiveness have been identified as potential protective factors against rural stress, depression, and suicide (Hirsch and Cukrowicz, 2014; Turvey *et al.*, 2002; Weigel, 2002). Bankers, lawyers, agricultural cooperative employees, doctors, pastors, teachers, and neighbors all play a role in breaking down the stigma around mental health issues, in noticing changes in individuals' attitudes and behaviors, and in suggesting resources.

From an economic perspective, many studies demonstrate the role of financial hardship in rural depression (Freeman, Schwab, and Jiang, 2008; Fraser *et al.*, 2005; Turvey *et al.*, 2002; Scarth *et al.*, 1997). Community-based programs can facilitate discussion of the causes and effects of macroeconomic or industry-specific economic problems to decrease instances of self-blame, shame, isolation, and despair and to build awareness and support for mental health services in the community (Turvey *et al.*, 2002; Hirsch and Cukrowicz, 2014; Towne, *et al.*, 2016). Banks, agricultural cooperatives, or chambers of commerce may be natural hosts to such programs.

Many communities believe that "taking care of each other" is part of rural living. In stressful times, improving quality of life hinges on each individual

taking care of themselves and collectively caring for each other. Everyone can learn to recognize warning signs for stress, anxiety, depression, and suicide and can identify financial, legal, mental health, and other helpful resources in the community or region. It may be difficult to ask someone about his or her feelings, but listening to their concerns and referring them to new resources could save a life.

Resources

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-TALK. 24-hour, toll-free crisis hotline. En Espanol: 888-628-9454. Tele-interpreters are available for over 150 languages using the English language site. <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

SAMHSA's National Helpline (Treatment Referral Routing Service): 1-800-662-HELP (4357). 24-hour free and confidential treatment referral and information about mental and/or substance use disorders, prevention, and recovery in English and Spanish. Website: www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline

Farm Aid: 800-FARMAID (800-327-6243). Farmer Help Hotline staffed with individuals who understand the pressures of farm life and help farmers connect to financial, legal, and other resources. <https://www.farmaid.org/our-work/family-farmers/help-for-farmers/>

Farm and Ranch Family Stress and Depression: A Checklist and Guide for Making Referrals from Colorado State University (Williams and Fetsch, 2012) provides information about stress and depression symptoms and resources and is available at <http://extension.colostate.edu/disaster-web-sites/farm-and-ranch-family-stress-and-depression-a-checklist-and-guide-for-making-referrals/> or in printable PDF at <http://texashelp.tamu.edu/004-natural/pdfs/2016-01-winter-storm-goliath/Farm-Ranch-Family-Stress-Depression-Checklist-for-Making-Referrals.pdf>.

The Personal Nature of Agriculture series from the University of Wyoming Extension provides a number of resources on stress, crisis, goal setting, and rural perspectives of mental health and is available at <http://www.uwyo.edu/fcs/faculty-staff/weigel/life/personal-nature-agriculture/index.html>

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