

Farm Families and Mental Health

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Farm families face unique stressors, including financial challenges and family-farming relationships that blur the line between their business and personal lives. These stressors can affect the entire family and may lead to physical illness, depression, substance abuse, and suicide.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), farmers are more than five times as likely to commit suicide as the general population and are more likely to report substance abuse. Stress and depression also increase the probability of already above average work-related accidents and may also affect physical health factors. Farmers, farm families, and rural communities can help to manage farm-related stress and reduce incidences of depression, substance abuse, and suicides.

Farm occupation risks

- Social and geographic isolation
- Inability to control stressful work situations:
 - long hours
 - weather conditions
 - input costs and commodity prices
 - machinery breakdowns
- Work-home imbalance
- Potential for financial losses
- Possible neurological effects of chronic exposure to pesticides

Farm stressors

Researchers identify farming as more stressful than most other occupations. Farming is a demanding profession with many occupational risks. The failure of the farming operation could also imply loss of home and long-established family legacy. Farmers and ranchers worried about losing family land may face extreme guilt leading to anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts or actions. Family-farming relationships can provide additional support, but they can also create additional conflict when family members disagree about business or personal needs and opportunities.

Recognizing stress

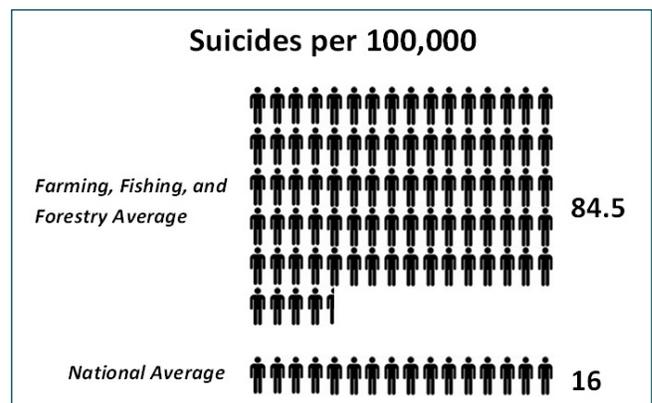
Feelings or behaviors:

- Tension
- Exhaustion
- Restlessness
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Drug/alcohol misuse

Physical symptoms:

- Headaches or dizziness
- Changes in appetite
- Upset stomach
- Diarrhea
- Backaches

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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
- Thoughts or actions of self-harm or suicide

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
- Behavioral issues with children

Work problems can become family problems and vice versa. However, farm families, especially men, are traditionally reluctant to seek help due to a perception of farmers as independent and self-sufficient, the social stigma around mental health issues, and a lack of mental health providers in rural areas. Women, regardless of their role on the farm, are more likely than men to experience stress as they balance the traditional responsibility of taking care of the family with on- and off-farm jobs. Women may also feel they lack a say in the farm operation, with daughters-in-law reporting the highest levels of stress in multigenerational farm families during the 1980s farm crisis (Marotz-Baden and Mattheis).

Children are also not immune to farm stressors. 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). In fact, children tended to blame themselves for economic conditions well beyond their control.

Managing stress

The following can help farmers and farm families manage stress.

- **Identify sources of stress:** Recognizing the pileup of stressors can provide some measure of control. This can help individuals understand why they are experiencing negative feelings.

- **Engage social support systems:** Family and social support systems help maintain emotional well-being, allow tasks to be delegated to relieve additional stress, and provide connection to additional resources.
- **Use new and existing resources:** Community resources help individuals and families to understand and resolve stressful situations. 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. Strengthening personal resources like self-esteem and communication skills can provide an additional buffer against stress.
- **Reframe stressful situations:** Acknowledging external factors related to stress and both negative and positive experiences within stressful situations can help families avoid self-blame, increase the level of control they feel in dealing with stress, and see alternative solutions. Finding benefits and opportunities can help families renew their hope and sense of purpose.
- **Stay physically healthy:** Maintaining health through regular physical exercise, a healthy diet, and appropriate sleep patterns also promotes mental health and well-being.
- **Make time for fun:** Focusing on interests, hobbies, and family relationships can go a long way toward improving one's quality of life.

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
- 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)

- **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 accept some stressors as bumps on the road to a desired destination.

Community support

Strong and resilient individuals and families seek help when they need it. Strong rural communities support those in need by being willing to talk about mental health and by guiding community members to appropriate resources. Community cohesion and collectiveness have been identified as potential protective factors against rural stress, depression, and suicide. 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.

For more information

For more information, see the *Preventing Farm-related Stress, Depression, Substance Abuse, and Suicide* publication by Dudensing, Towne, and McCord.

Resources

Farm and Ranch Family Stress and Depression: A Checklist and Guide for Making Referrals from Colorado State University (Williams and Fetsch, 2012) <http://extension.colostate.edu/disaster-web-sites/farm-and-ranch-family-stress-and-depression-a-checklist-and-guide-for-making-referrals/>

The Personal Nature of Agriculture (Weigel, 2002) <http://www.uwyo.edu/fcs/faculty-staff/weigel/life/personal-nature-agriculture/index.html>

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

Additional citations

Jurich, A.P. and C.S. Russell. 1987. Family Therapy with Rural Families in a Time of Farm Crisis. *Family Relations* 36: 364-367.

Marotz-Baden, R., and C. Matteis. 1994. Daughters-in-Law and Stress in Two-Generation Farm Families. *Family Relations* 43(2): 132-137.

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