



Farm Stress And Emotional Well-Being, Part I

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FarmFirst

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Agriculture is an economic and social bedrock of the United States, yet for decades, farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers have endured growing challenges that increase their levels of stress. The Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network Northeast (FRSAN-NE) aims to improve behavioral health awareness, literacy, access, and outcomes for farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers in the Northeast by developing a service provider network that can assist and meet the unique needs of agricultural workers. FRSAN-NE Network members developed a Resource Working Group to focus specifically on providing information and materials designed to inform those who interact with this population. The resources provided here were created to provide information needed by those who want to offer support but don't have expertise in the mental health profession.

This is part one of a two-part guide that briefly describes some of the issues contributing to the challenges of farming and provides helpful strategies and resources to aid farmers in building and maintaining the resilience needed to be successful. It was developed to be used by anyone who lives or works in the world of farming. This publication addresses reducing and managing stress, risk factors, emotions, and spirituality.



Photo: investeap.org

Introduction

Why do farmers farm, given their economic adversities on top of the many frustrations and difficulties normal to farming? And always the answer is: "Love. They must do it for love." Farmers farm for the love of farming. They love to watch and nurture the growth of plants. They love to live in the presence of animals. They love to work outdoors. They love the weather, maybe even when it is making them miserable. They love to live where they work and to work where they live. If the scale of their farming is small enough, they like to work in the company of their children and with the help of their children. They love the measure

of independence that farm life can still provide. I have an idea that a lot of farmers have gone to a lot of trouble merely to be self-employed to live at least a part of their lives without a boss.

—Wendell Berry, *Bringing it to the Table: On Farming and Food*

There's so much to love about farm life, but working on a farm, owning a farm, and being part of a farm family are not easy, even at the best of times. It's important that anyone in a position to support this population recognize that, for many, it's hard to imagine living any other way.

Acknowledging the struggles farmers face, while respecting the commitment they feel, is a starting place for being able to offer information and resources that can ease those struggles.

Countless farmers talk about their land and their work as a way of life that they knew from childhood would be central to who they are and how they live. Farmers, and often their families, work hard and feel pride for both their success and their persistence. It's rare for a line of work to require the diversity of skills and knowledge as is the case for farming. Think about the number of different things done in a typical day! The work might include fixing a tractor, tending to the birth of a cow, filing a new business plan with the bank, and calculating the amount of feed needed for the week.

The broad diversity of skills and knowledge required is just one challenge that contributes to farming being a high-stress occupation. Weather, economics, injury, relationships with employees, governmental policies, and many other factors combine to create what can feel overwhelming. The intention of this guide is to briefly describe some of the issues contributing to the challenges of farming and to provide strategies and resources to help farmers build and maintain the *resilience* needed to be successful.

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from challenges and continue to feel good about one's life, no matter how difficult life events may be. Focusing on resilience is important because farming often includes stressful, demanding, and dangerous work. It's not always possible to eliminate, or even reduce, some of the stressors: for example, farmers can't change the weather. Building resilience is what helps people to better

manage these challenges and minimize the impact stress has on relationships, health, and the well-being of the farm. If left unaddressed, stress can lead to chronic disease, as well as family and economic problems that can ultimately hurt the farm. The good news is that farmers can learn skills to build resilience and reduce stress.

To learn more about resilience, consult these free online resources from the American Psychological Association:

- *The Road to Resilience*
- *Building Your Resilience*

This resource guide provides information and resources designed to support farmers, their families, and employees and help them thrive, despite experiencing the struggles that are common to farm life. It was developed to be used by anyone who lives or works in the world of farming, and it includes information and suggested strategies that are accessible to people who aren't mental health professionals. Everyone can play an important role in this work.

The Agrarian Imperative

Dr. Michael Rosmann, a farmer and psychologist who works in the field of agricultural behavioral health, wrote:

"Farmers are providers with a deep commitment to feeding their communities and caring for their land. Agrarian Imperative impels farmers to hang on to their land at all costs. The agrarian imperative instills farmers to work incredibly hard, to endure unusual pain and hardship, and to take uncommon risks." (Rosmann, 2010)

This statement resonates with people who recognize that a farmer's connection to the land and work can be all-encompassing and represent a commitment beyond what one would generally expect from other occupations.



Photo: Earl Dotter

Related FRSAN-NE Resources

Farm Stress
and Emotional
Well-Being, Part II

Helping Farmers in
Financial Crisis

I'm a Farmer. When
Do I Need a Lawyer?

Weathering the
Storm: A Guide
to Preparing for
Disaster and Finding
Disaster Assistance
for Your Farm or
Ranch



Photo: Earl Dotter

Farm Stressors and Risk Factors

Farming is recognized as one of the most psychologically dangerous professions, evidenced in part by a higher suicide rate than most occupations (Peterson et al., 2020). Understanding the common stressors and risk factors that make farming dangerous is important for reducing farmer stress. What are the most common farm stresses and risk factors?

First, farm work is often performed alone. Although many farmers may be content with such an arrangement, social isolation has been demonstrated to take a toll. For example, a meta-analysis of multiple studies, conducted by group of researchers at Brigham Young University, found that lack of social connection heightens health risks as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day or having alcohol-use disorder. They also found that loneliness and social isolation are twice as harmful to physical and mental health as obesity (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). This suggests that it may be important for farmers to take time to maintain social connections. Obviously, the hours required by farm work and the physical distances between farms can make such efforts a challenge.

Second, farm work often involves long hours of physically tiring activity. Although physical exercise is protective of health, constant physical exhaustion is not. Exhaustion can often lead people to be more vulnerable to their emotions. A difficult or challenging situation can leave one feeling much more despondent when exhausted than the same situation would feel when one is well rested and refreshed.

Economic challenges are another risk factor common among farmers of all types. The United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (USDA-ERS) reports that since 2013 farmers have experienced a 50% decrease in net farm income—a drop so severe that, in 2018, median farm income was *negative* \$1,553 (USDA-ERS, 2021).

Being aware of this data can add considerable perspective to the economic stress experienced by any individual farmer. It puts one's problems into perspective to realize that everyone is struggling and that personal struggles are not likely the result of simply underperforming.

Another situation that negatively impacts farmer well-being is lack of easy access to health care (both physical and behavioral). Although farming is not exclusively a rural endeavor, most farms are in rural areas where services are less available and less accessible. Clinics may be at some distance from the farm. There is often a dearth of providers in rural areas. Access to specialists may not exist, and this can be especially true for behavioral health issues. As of September 30, 2020, the Health Resources and Service Administration (HRSA) had designated 3,363 Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas in rural areas. It is estimated that it would take 1,676 additional practitioners in these areas to remove the designations (Bureau of Health Workforce Health Resources and Services Administration, 2021).

Even when it's available, care can be difficult to access due to problems with transportation, lack of Internet connection for tele-health services, language barriers, and the challenges of taking time away from the farm. Additionally, the lack of mental health services likely contributes to the fact that counseling is unfamiliar to many. Because people are unaccustomed to hearing about it, obtaining professional help may be viewed askance or as evidence of being "crazy." The stigma created by these types of beliefs forms a barrier to seeking such care.

Another source of stress for farmers is the multiple uncertainties they must deal with as part of a profession so dependent on nature. There are numerous unpredictable outcomes posed by the uncertainties of climate change, weather events, insects, and crop performance. Any one of these uncertainties can produce severe consequences for the health of the farm and the stress experienced by farmers. The multiple cascading effects of the global climate crisis have exacerbated these uncertainties in recent years.

The legacy of the family farm and a sense of history bring with them both great pride and the potential of great shame, another source of stress. It is difficult enough for anyone to face the potential loss of a job. When that loss also represents the loss of a family legacy, it can place enormous stress on the person impacted.

Finally, it is important to recognize that farming is also a physically dangerous profession (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 2020). Farmers frequently work with heavy machinery, work amongst large animals, and

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incur exposures to multiple toxic substances in pesticides and herbicides, amongst other risks. These dangers can lead to accidents, injuries, and disabilities, all carrying their own additional sources of stress.

A Brief Overview of Farming Demographics in the United States

Many of the above risk factors are at play for most farmers. However, there are groups of farmers that face additional stressors. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) farmers are some of these groups. Some of these additional stressors are best understood in historical context.

According to *Farm Producers*, a USDA brief reporting findings from the 2017 Census of Agriculture, currently:

- 95% of U.S. producers are white.
- 64% are male.
- The average producer is 57.5 years old (USDA-NASS, 2019).

For many, this is the picture that comes to mind when they think about farming. However, it is an incomplete picture. This current snapshot is one that has been cultivated over time by policies and attitudes that create barriers and challenges for those who don't fit this description.



Photo: investeap.org

How Has this Picture Changed over Time?

Early in the 20th century, farming was the primary occupation of most African Americans in the South. By 1920, 14% of all farms in the United States were Black-owned (about 925,000 farms). Decades of systemic discrimination and the abuse of legal loopholes robbed Black families of farmland and forced most out of the industry. By 1975, just 45,000 Black-owned farms remained. Today, African Americans compose less than 2% of the nation's farmers and 1% of its rural landowners (Douglas, 2017).

Indigenous farmers, who were at one point the only farmers in what is now North America, also experienced devastating losses of their ability to farm. Since 1776, the United States government has taken more than 1.5 billion acres of land from Native Americans. Native Americans were assigned to "reservations." In the 1880s, the U.S. enacted legislation that resulted in Native Americans losing ownership and control of two-thirds of their reservation lands. The loss totaled 90 million acres – an area about the size of Montana. The results were devastating, as generations of Native Americans were robbed of their economic, cultural, and human potential. This massive shift unsurprisingly had a tremendous impact on farming (Indian Land Tenure Foundation, no date).

Some groups of indigenous people have included farming as one of the traditional practices they strive to revive. Regaining food sovereignty has become a global movement that is just one part of an effort to build resilience in native communities.

Many other farmers don't see themselves reflected in the description of the "average" older, white male that the Census of 2017 provides. However, many groups that have faced injustice and marginalization that kept their success in farming limited are now beginning to see resources and support designed specifically to focus on what they, themselves, consider valuable. These include resources for BIPOC farmers, women, people with disabilities, socially disadvantaged farmers, veterans, and young farmers.

Find more information about both the history and current situation among diverse farmers in Appendix A: More on Diversity in Farming.

Impacts of Stress

Stress can impact one's physical, emotional, and behavioral health. It's important to be aware of the symptoms of stress, as the stress experienced by an individual farmer is not always obvious, particularly given the stoic exterior of many farmers. Any significant changes in how a farmer experiences emotion, behaves, or feels physically can be a clue that stress may be adversely impacting them.

The symptoms of stress are different for everyone, but here are some common ones.

More information is available in Appendix B: More on Stress and Its Impacts.



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Physical	Emotional	Behavioral
Headaches	Impatience	Increased use of alcohol or recreational drugs, or misuse of prescription medication
Stomach issues	Frustration	Yelling more
Increased blood pressure	Depression	Lack of communication
Clenched teeth, jaw	Difficulty controlling emotions	Physically harming others
Muscle tension	Anxiousness	Difficulty relaxing
Sudden perspiration	Anger	Sleep issues
Rapid heartbeat	Difficulty with change	
Back pain		

Managing and Reducing Stress: The Path to Wellbeing

The previous sections focused on identifying stressors common to farmers and how to recognize their effects. This section explores what can be done about stress.

The Role of Agricultural Service Providers

Agricultural service providers, fellow farmers, and others can do a great deal to help farmers and their families manage their stress and stay healthy and productive. Sometimes, people mistakenly think that only trained professionals can tackle issues of well-being, but the most important asset anyone has to offer is a true connection of caring and a desire to help.



Photo: Earl Dotter

Research confirms that the relationship itself is a strong component of the success that many experience from psychotherapy (Lambert and Barley, 2001). Some studies have even called it the most important common factor in successful outcomes to psychotherapy (Stamoulos et al., 2016). When a task force put together by the American Psychological Association's (APA) Society of Clinical Psychology set out to identify empirically supported treatments, they found that the "therapy relationship makes substantial and consistent contributions to psychotherapy outcome independent of the specific type of treatment" and that "the therapy relationship accounts for why clients improve (or fail to improve) at least as much as the particular treatment method" (Stamoulos et al., 2016).

attitude is accurately depicted with a great deal of humor in the Bob Newhart comedy sketch "Stop It!" that is available online at [youtube.com/watch?v=4BjKS1-vjPs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BjKS1-vjPs)

Although this is a humorous depiction of Bob Newhart doing everything wrong if he truly wants to be helpful to someone looking to make some changes, it is easy to imagine how frustrated and misunderstood the client felt. This example points out that there is more to the process of change than may appear. There are multiple steps that people must undertake, moving them from that first inkling that a change may be needed to the point where they are consistently behaving in a different way. When making small changes, individuals may go through these steps so quickly that they may not even be aware of them. Large changes may take longer, and the process may be more obvious.

There are numerous models of this change process, and they all describe things a bit differently. What they have in common is the recognition that change is not a magical event that spontaneously happens. Most models are uncomplicated and are not difficult to understand. Learning about change can help us have realistic expectations of people who are struggling with behaviors that are hurtful to themselves and others. This improved understanding can help us be patient and empathic while someone struggles through the process.

- It will benefit the helper to share some knowledge or interests with the farmer. This should not be taken to mean that to be helpful one must know everything about farming. It does mean that a farmer who is sharing concerns wants to know that their world is important enough that the person they are sharing with is investing in learning and understanding more about it. Taking the time to master some basic terminology and learning the source of local farmers' biggest worries are great places to start.
- Having extensive knowledge of resources and support is essential. This way, even without having all the answers, it is still possible to identify connections and other sources of help quickly and accurately. Offering something concrete, like a referral to someone who has expertise in an area of need, can generate a surge of hopefulness that may be greatly needed. When that

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What Makes a Connection Helpful?

- Showing up. Showing up means making the effort to be available when needed and being accessible in a variety of ways (calls, visits, email, etc.) to meet individual preferences.
- Empathy. It is important to demonstrate to farmers that you appreciate the gravitas of their situation and that you care.
- Genuineness. It is important to be honest about what you say, and to say things that are commensurate with how you feel. It's easy to tell when someone says they care but really do not.
- Nonjudgmental. Although you may disagree with some things that a farmer says or does, your role in providing support is to listen without judgment. If you judge someone's thoughts or behaviors, they will tend to shut down and stop talking.
- Active listening. Active listening fosters trust and helps people feel cared about and understood. These skills are not difficult to learn but may take some practice to seem like a natural way of approaching a conversation. One simple way to define the term is that active listening is *listening for meaning*. More information is available from the publication *How to Talk with Farmers Under Stress*, listed in the Further Resources section.
- One more thing that helps make a connection helpful is understanding how change works. On the surface, it may seem simple. If someone's behaviors are causing them pain and anguish, it seems clear that they should change those behaviors. This

information is not readily available, it's essential to do the work of obtaining it and coming back to close that loop. The farmer should not be expected to do the research and exploration. Instead, a more helpful approach is to show up well-equipped to share information about common concerns and situations.

Some of the more common resource areas to become familiar with include these:

- Financial
- Legal (including agricultural mediation)
- Disaster relief
- Disability



Photo: investeap.org

What Can Farmers Do About Stress?

Before focusing on strategies, it's important to realize that eliminating all stress is not the goal. That is not realistic, and it's not a good idea, anyway. Although we frequently talk about stress as something negative, some stress serves a purpose and is, in fact, important to well-being. It plays a role in keeping us safe and functioning well. It even plays a role in survival, by giving our bodies the boost they need to be able to fight off or flee from danger.

Is stress helpful or harmful?

That usually depends on:

- The amount of stress being experienced.
- The person's response to the stress.

The objective is to keep stress in balance. Times of higher-than-usual stress are inevitable. They may be precipitated by bad weather, a sick animal, or a broken-down piece of equipment. The amount and the timing are often not in the farmer's control. Because of the negative impact that too much stress can have on physical and mental health, relationships, and behaviors, it's important to balance out times like these by increasing activities that manage the stress response.

Increased stressors + Increased stress management = Less negative impact

Fortunately, there is a lot that farmers can learn in the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral realms that will mitigate their responses to stress. Learning and practicing these strategies can help a farmer maintain a sense of having some control during hard times and alleviate the negative impact.

GOOD NEWS: A healthy balance is determined less by what is happening in life than by thoughts, actions, and feelings.

Thoughts, behaviors, and feelings are all key factors in managing stress. We will explore each of these in more detail.



Photo: Earl Dotter

Cognitive (Thinking)

Farmers don't have much of a say in how many potentially stressful events happen in their lives. They have little control over whether crops experience a season with insufficient rain or whether milk prices suddenly fall. Still, how farmers think about such events can have a big impact on how they feel. If a farmer engages in catastrophic thinking and, for example, tells themselves that their life is now finished, they will experience much more stress. On the other hand, farmers can learn to remind themselves that they have no control over such events, realize that such events impact most farmers, and tell themselves that all they can do is to do the best they can. In this way, they can feel good knowing that whatever happens, they will understand that they did their best, and they will experience a greater sense of internal power and feel less stress (Beck, 1976).

P sychologists have studied thinking patterns and found that there are common patterns of that often trap all of us and that can lead to a low state of mind, where things may appear hopeless. These patterns are sometimes referred to as distorted thinking.

When people engage in thinking that exacerbates their stress, their thinking often narrows and, ironically, they see fewer options for themselves. This can be a scary place because when farmers may be feeling their worst and need to be able to see that they have options, they may not be able to. That's why it can be important for farmers to learn and practice ways of thinking that enable them to maintain a more open perspective. It's part of building resilience.

Psychologists have studied thinking patterns and found that there are common patterns that often trap all of us and that can lead to a low state of mind, where things may appear hopeless. These patterns are sometimes referred to as distorted thinking. The patterns are called *distorted* because our thinking at such moments frequently distorts reality, making events around us seem much worse than they really are. It's helpful to learn about frequent distorted thinking patterns to be able to identify them easily and correct such thinking to avoid the traps of hopelessness and increased anxiety (Burns, 1989). More information about common distorted thinking patterns is available in Appendix C: More about How People Think.

Behaviors

People's actions and behaviors also have an impact on the stress response. In fact, some behaviors can lead to a downward spiral. For example, anxiety is often alleviated by connecting with others. However, for many, the feeling of anxiety leads

them to want to isolate themselves. Isolation can then lead to feeling worse. If, instead, anxiety is met with a positive stress-response strategy, such as connecting with others for mutual support, people often feel better. From this better place, it is easier to keep making positive choices, and people move in a more upward trajectory, spiraling upwards, as it were. There are many actions that can have this effect. Helping others is a particularly effective one. In fact, scientists have verified that helping others causes a positive chemical reaction in our brains. One study that monitored 846 people over five years found that although stress was generally linked to a higher chance of dying, this was not the case among those who helped others. It may seem counterintuitive for struggling individuals to help others, but that may be just the recipe for feeling better (Poulin et al., 2013).

There is strong evidence of other activities being able to trigger these upward spirals of behavior and mood. It usually takes some time for people to learn and practice how to feel their best during stressful times, but everyone can increase their resilience to stress. More information can be found in the Strategies section.

Emotions

Farmers have historically been known as a stoic lot. Their mantra is one of self-sufficiency and endurance of hardship without showing feelings or complaining. Someone once suggested that ignoring feelings is a lot like saying, "There is no sense in getting thirsty when there is no water around to drink." The human body just doesn't work that way. Emotions are natural and trying to bury them can contribute to many physical ailments. It's important to support farmers in expressing their feelings and to reassure them that feelings are okay. In this way, people can learn to not to be so overwhelmed by feelings that they experience. Ideally, people learn to simply notice or observe their feelings and not to become absorbed by them. A feeling can come up, be noticed without judgment, and then released. This release is what's happening when someone cries when upset or laughs with happiness. It's a natural way to release emotions, can feel good, and is an important defense against the negative impacts of stress.

If people pay attention to their feelings, their emotions may provide them with useful information about what is, or isn't, working in their lives. For example, it can be useful if

people notice when they're feeling happy and try to repeat the experience that produced that happiness. Similarly, when people notice when they're feeling upset, that may lead them to see some patterns about parts of their lives that might need some change. On the other hand, pushing away these emotions eliminates the chance to use those discoveries to improve things.

It can feel scary to pay attention and express emotions for those used to ignoring them. Many people grew up in families where it wasn't acceptable to show feelings, or at least some feelings, and breaking that rule can add to the fear. It gets less scary as people get more used to it. Some people find it helpful to work with a counselor if the whole idea seems too uncomfortable or frightening.

At the other end of the spectrum of stoicism, some may find that, rather than getting pushed down, emotions seem to be constantly bubbling up with little warning. Some people may just be more emotionally expressive, by temperament. Childhood experiences may also play a role. Interestingly, sometimes people who have avoided their feelings for a long time can simply get so overwhelmed by emotions that they can no longer keep them under wraps. Instead of the person noticing their emotions and then releasing them, the feelings have exploded before the person even realizes what is happening. It is scary to feel like emotions have taken control.

Both suppressing feelings and being overwhelmed by them are extremes. Balance is the goal. Learn more in the Spirituality section.

Emotional regulation is a term used to describe turning emotions up or down, by degrees, as appropriate to the situation at hand. Emotional regulation is about learning to respond rather than react. A farmer may tend to react to a strong feeling by pushing it down before they even recognize what it is or by simply letting it fly with no consideration of consequences. When someone rationally responds, they are engaging their conscious mind to choose to decide the best way to handle the emotion in that moment.

Recognizing that someone can stop and decide how they are going to respond to a situation may seem unrealistic, especially for someone who has

developed strong habits over the years. However, people can learn to recognize emotions when they first start to build and to avoid impulsive responses. Self-awareness can be developed. Find more information online in the article "5 Emotion-Focused Coping Techniques for Stress Relief," listed in the Further Resources section.

How you think and behave makes a difference in how you feel.

Everyone feels lonely sometimes.

You are not alone.

For more information regarding emotion-focused responses to stress, consult Appendix D: More on Emotions as a Coping Strategy.

Strategies and Tools

There are many ways that people can minimize the impact that stress has on their lives. Searching for strategies can feel overwhelming. Scientific research has provided evidence about the effectiveness of some strategies and has strengthened the understanding of why these strategies have the impact they do. Beginning exploration by focusing on research-informed strategies can make the search much more manageable. Some of the more common approaches are briefly described below and more information can be found in the Michigan State University Extension publication *Managing Stress for Farmers and Farm Families*.



Photo: investeap.org

Mindfulness

By learning to focus awareness on our physical body and surroundings, or to notice one's thinking in the moment, mindfulness allows people to become more centered and calmer (more emotionally regulated). In the process, people learn to observe their thoughts rather than “be” their thoughts. People can then notice an anxious thought as an anxious thought instead of taking that thought as “the single truth” (Hofmann et al., 2010). Research shows that mindfulness can reduce anxiety.

With mindfulness practice, farmers can learn how to respond to stress by focusing their awareness on what is happening in the present moment, rather than worrying about the future. As with any new skill, developing mindfulness requires practice. The good news is that in any moment, people can choose to practice mindfulness.

Spirituality

Psychologists know what many people have always believed to be true: spirituality can add positivity to life and reduce stress. This is often evident in someone whose spirituality seems to hold them up when their life gets challenging. What is spirituality? Spirituality can mean different things to different people, but, generally, it's a practice that helps people maintain their overall life in perspective amidst chaos. It has a lot to do with how someone makes sense of the world, their life, and their purpose on the planet. Spirituality for some is based in a religious belief; for others, it may have more to do with nature or being a part of a community. Sometimes, it involves a belief in something greater than oneself, such as a higher being or the universe.

One of the reasons spirituality helps is that it makes it easier to stop worrying about things that aren't within one's control. At times, it seems most everything fits into that category. Obviously, as we've stated previously, farmers can't control the weather or commodity prices. It can be easier to let go to a certain extent when one has a belief that, overall, life makes sense. There is purpose in living and the universe spins as it is supposed to. Believing this can help people have faith that things will be okay.

For more thoughts on spirituality, consult Appendix E: More on the Role of Spirituality.

Other Helpful Approaches to Consider

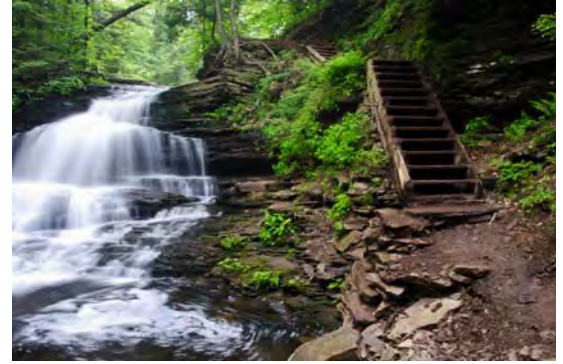


Photo: investeap.org

Countless ways to improve how one feels and functions in the world have been learned and practiced by people over many years. The list below is a small sampling of a few that have been well-researched and that people may have heard of already. Practices such as these are often considered “new-age” or maybe as something only religious monks would use. They have, however, become quite mainstream in the Western world. Suggesting them as options to be considered among strategies that may be more familiar and recognizing the science behind them may make them feel more approachable. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a data brief about the use of meditation, yoga, and chiropractors that provides information about the increase in usage and breaks that down to consider differences in age, gender, race, and Hispanic origin (National Center for Health Statistics, 2018).

- **Meditation** is a practice that has long existed and been studied extensively. Mindfulness, is just one approach to meditation. Because there are many different types of meditation, publishing clear and consistent findings is complicated. The bottom line is that there is a significant body of research supporting the practice as an effective tool for overall physical and mental well-being, and it has been adopted broadly. In fact, there are estimates that as many as 5 million people worldwide meditate.
- **Yoga** is another practice that is ancient and has evolved in many different directions through the years. Yoga is used both as a spiritual practice and as a form of exercise, and some of the adaptations emphasize one aspect more than the other. Yoga has been shown to improve flexibility and strength

If you let go a little, you will have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you will know complete peace and freedom. Your struggles with the world will have come to an end.

– Achaan Chah,
Thai forest monk,
from his book, *A Still Forest Pool*

in ways that can help prevent injury and help the body withstand intensely physical work. In fact, yoga routines developed specifically to help build resilience to the most common physical problems of farmers are becoming quite common, and many are easy to do on the farm during the workday. A quick tour of YouTube immediately brings up at least 20 of them. Here are a couple that may be helpful:

- *Yoga for Fruit Pickers and Farmers.* This video introduces a quick routine to try. Its 10-minute length makes it easy to build into a daily routine.
- *Yoga for Farmers and Ranchers.* This is a longer video—about 45 minutes—that both demonstrates helpful poses and teaches more about yoga and its benefits.

In addition to keeping the body fit for the work to be done, there are clear indications that yoga helps many people manage their stress and maintain clear focus. Like meditation, there are numerous approaches to explore, and people are likely to find something they like that works well for them.

- Since ancient times, *martial arts* have been employed for everything from combat and self-defense to discipline and self-knowledge and for physical fitness. Like meditation and yoga, these practices have impacts on body, mind, and spirit and there are many distinct types of practice that have been well-researched. It is interesting to note that farmers and farm tools played a role in the early history of martial arts. It may be particularly helpful to visit the Further Resources section to learn more about two martial arts programs with connections to farming: Nature and Martial Arts and Kung Food: Mixing Martial Arts With Urban Agriculture.
- *Breathing* as a stress management strategy may seem silly. After all, breathing is one of only a few things that humans are born with the capacity to do right away. Still, for many people—especially those under stress—how they breathe may have become a problem that can have significant impact. For more information, see the article “How to Breathe Properly” in the Further Resources section. Breathwork is often taught in conjunction with yoga and meditation and is, at its core, intentional breathing. Most people find breathwork easy to learn, it’s always accessible, and it’s also free!

- *Music and art* can be used in many ways to help with stress and emotional challenges. Both are sometimes used as a central part of therapy practice with someone who has been trained and certified in these areas. Both music and art, of course, can always add joy and relaxation to life without going to see a therapist. There is a considerable amount of information available on how music and art have a positive impact.

A review of research led one author to share the following conclusions:

- Art and music can lower anxiety and depression.
- There are plenty of ways to practice from home.
- Even a few minutes can improve your mood and well-being.
- Working on a project with loved ones can bring you closer together.

When Prevention and Maintenance Are Not Enough

These strategies are all great for preventing too much stress and helping people maintain equilibrium when things get hard. Sometimes though, hard times overcome usual coping strategies and people get off course in concerning ways. Others may struggle due to genetic differences or early childhood experiences that impact their ability to practice and experience resilience easily. FRSAN-NE has produced a second volume of this guide specifically to address these issues.

In *Farm Stress and Emotional Well-being, Part II*, you will find information and resources related to the following topics:

- Counseling as a strategy, including how to choose a counselor and insurance information
- Anxiety and Depression
- Alcohol and Other Drugs, including the opioid crisis
- Family and Relationship Challenges
- Suicide, including prevention strategies for everyone
- Grief and Loss, including the loss of a farm
- Anger
- Medications
- Peer Support

For many people—especially those under stress—how they breathe may have become a problem that can have significant impact.

Conclusion

The information and strategies in this guide are stepping stones to resilience, which is a key factor of success in overall well-being and in farming. Sharing these tools with farmers, farm families, and farm workers can equip them to thrive despite the challenges inherent in their work. It is essential to recognize that resilience is, in fact, built through practice and is not a character or personality trait.

Acknowledging and learning to recognize stressors that are common in the world of farming creates an opportunity to make connections

and to be well-positioned to share insights and concrete tools that fit the person and the situation well. The commitment and persistence that may make it hard for some people to admit that they are struggling or need to make changes must be respected. It's important to remember that many of these tools will be new introductions to farmers with whom you speak, which they may or may not be ready to embrace. Keep in mind that people change behaviors in small steps, from contemplation to small actions; as such, it is important to understand how to best to support farmers to move incrementally toward their goals.

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Appendix A. More on Diversity in Farming

In addition to the losses suffered by Black and indigenous people during the 20th Century, there were many other changes in the demographics of farmers. Gender and age of producers were two other areas of fast-moving change. In fact, even the definition of “farm producer” was changed to encompass anyone with a decision-making role on a farm. For more information, *Farm Producers* provides an overview of informative data from the 2017 Census of Agriculture, and AgrAbility Resources offers a comprehensive range of resources for specific populations or characteristics.

Women Farmers

The number of female farmers has fluctuated over time. There was a large increase in women farmers when men left their farms during the Second World War either to enter the armed services or to have better paying jobs while industry was booming.

The Bureau of Agricultural Economics reported that more than two million men left farm jobs between April 1940 and July 1942. By the time the war ended, that number had climbed to six million, while U.S. food production had grown by 32% over prewar levels, according to the USDA (Prater, 2018).

After a dip in their number following the war, female farmers are again experiencing a surge in growth and efforts are being made to better represent and meet the needs of female farmers. Explore The Female Farmer Project and “A History of ‘Women’s Work’” to learn more.

Young and Beginning Farmers

Concentrated efforts are being made to encourage younger farmers to consider agriculture as a viable occupation. Data from the 2017 Census of Agriculture provides us with the average age of farmers, but it’s important to note that some 27% of farmers are categorized as new and beginning producers, with 10 years or less of experience in agriculture (Abbott, 2019). Early research on the topic suggests that young farmers may be at increased risk of mental health disorders when compared to more experienced farmers, due to some additional stressors they may face (Ahearn, 2011). Among farmers, young farmers may suffer most from economic distress. They carry high burdens of depression and anxiety about finances and time pressures (Rosino, 2016).

Information specific to new farmers can be found at USDA New Farmers. Also, the National Young Farmers Coalition is an advocacy organization with a mission is to represent, mobilize, and engage young farmers to ensure their success.

People with Disabilities

Recent ERS research estimated that an average of about 19% of U.S. farmers (395,000 people) and 9% of U.S. farmworkers (134,000 people) had a disability at some point between 2008 and 2016 (Miller, 2019). As farm communities have made adaptations and adjustments to help those who become disabled in the dangerous work of farming, people with pre-existing disabilities are also experiencing more access and being able to farm. AgrAbility provides many additional resources for those interested in learning more.

Veterans

An additional trend worth noting is the surge in U.S. veterans turning to farming careers. Like other groups, veterans bring their own unique strengths and challenges to the industry. There is an increasing number of programs being established to support vets in making this transition, and program descriptions often note the perseverance and ingenuity that many vets bring with them from their previous experience.

A significant portion of veterans need mental health services. According to the VA National Suicide Data Report 2005-2016, the age- and gender-adjusted rate of suicide among veterans was 26.1 per 100,000, compared to 17.4 among non-veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018). Pair this information with the high suicide rates amongst farmers and it becomes clear why resources developed to meet the needs of veteran farmers need to address mental health needs. Also see Appendix I: More About Suicide Prevention. Additional resources for this population are available from Veterans to Farmers, USDA New Farmers, Farmer Veteran Coalition, and AgrAbility.

Socially Disadvantaged Farmers

According to the USDA definition, many of the diverse sub-populations of farmers described above are defined as socially disadvantaged.

The Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act (Public Law 87-128; 75 Stat. 294) defines a socially disadvantaged group as one whose members have been subject to racial, ethnic, or gender prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual characteristics.

USDA Economic Research Service addresses how women and other farmers fit the definition of socially disadvantaged farmers (USDA-ERS, 2021). As a group, socially disadvantaged farmers face many of the same challenges as one another. On average, socially disadvantaged farmers have smaller farms, which produce less. There are multiple factors that contribute to this situation, and they are complex and most often systemic. A USDA Economic Research Service report to Congress provides a wide range of comparative data that illustrates this situation (USDA-ERS, 1995). More resources can be found at USDA Farm Service Agency's Minority and Women Farmers and Ranchers Web page.

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National Young Farmers Coalition. youngfarmers.org

USDA New Farmers. newfarmers.usda.gov

Veterans to Farmers. veteranstofarmers.org

Appendix B.

More on Stress and Its Impacts

University of Maryland Extension and University of Delaware Cooperative Extension have published *Farm and Farm Family Risk and Resilience: A Guide for Extension Educational Programming* as part of a toolkit that is available online. The guide contributes to the growing body of research that focuses on the serious consequences of unmanaged stress on the farm.

When stress piles up, the ability to make sound decisions decreases (Friborg et al., 2003), the ability to adopt agricultural best practices and take appropriate action decreases (Burnett, 2014), and injury and illness increase (Jackson et al., 2015). The farm, and those who farm, become at-risk.

Studies show that injury is prevalent on farms due to dangerous equipment, work with animals, and numerous other farm dangers. Stress increases the likelihood of accidents, as it has also been associated with injuries (Thu et al., 1997).

One study of injuries on Iowa farms found that hurry (38%), fatigue (15%), and stress (14%) were commonly reported as contributing factors. Interventions aimed at reducing hurry, fatigue, and stress should be emphasized in injury prevention. Behavioral interventions aimed at reducing stress are key (Rautiainen et al., 2004).

In addition to stress making farm life more dangerous, it is also closely linked to dozens of short and long-term health issues. In fact, emotional stress is a major contributing factor to the six leading causes of death in the United States: cancer, coronary heart disease, accidental injuries, respiratory disorders, cirrhosis of the liver, and suicide (Simmons and Simmons, 1997). The connection between stress and health problems is not surprising when you learn a bit more about the fight or flight response and the ways our bodies and brains partner to try to keep us safe. Learn more from the Mayo Clinic publication *Chronic Stress Puts Your Health at Risk*.

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Appendix B Further Resources

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Appendix C.

More About How People Think

Many of these types of distorted thinking overlap with one another but do have some unique characteristics. See if any seem familiar.

- *Perfectionism.* You tend to think everything should be perfect: how your farm runs, how your crops grow, how your family behaves. The problem is, life seldom works like that.
- *All-or-nothing thinking.* If a situation falls short of expectations, you see it as a complete failure. Everything is either all good or all bad. Because things are rarely all good for anyone, you in turn view them as all bad.
- *Overgeneralization.* You view a single negative event, such as flood damage, as a never-ending pattern of things not working in your life by using words such as “always” or “never.”
- *Filtering.* You focus on a single negative detail exclusively, so your vision of the broader reality becomes blinded. Maybe your marriage is good; that doesn’t matter at to you at these moments when you’re so focused on this one bad thing.
- *Negative focus.* Related to filtering, you discount the positive in your life. You reject positive experiences by insisting they “don’t count” as much. You fail to regularly feel grateful for what is good.
- *Mind-reading.* Without checking it out, you assume someone is thinking negatively about you.
- *Fortune-telling.* You predict that things will turn out badly. Spoiler alert: no one can predict the future. Studies show 80% of what we worry about never happens.
- *Magnification.* You exaggerate the importance of your problems and shortcomings or minimize your desirable qualities.
- *Emotional reasoning.* You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are. You assume that because you feel a certain way—scared or depressed—that those feelings accurately reflect reality. Often, they do not.
- *“Should” statements.* You tell yourself that things should be the way you hoped or expected them to be.
- *Labeling.* (Extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking.) Instead of saying “I made a mistake,” you say, “I’m a loser.”
- *Personalization and blame.* You believe that everything that happens is about you. You literally take everything personally, even when something is not meant in that way. You hold yourself personally responsible for events that aren’t entirely under your control or perhaps blame others for personal mistakes.
- *Overestimating.* You tend to overestimate the realistic chances of some negative event happening when compared to the objective or scientific reality.
- *Catastrophizing.* You tend to assume or imagine that if some worrisome event happens, the result will be a catastrophe and you won’t be able to cope. You tend to ignore the objective reality and your current coping skills.

Almost everyone engages in some of these forms of distorted thinking occasionally or frequently. If we engage in many of these forms of distorted thinking often, it can lead to serious

depression. It doesn’t need to, though. The good news, if you find a number of these types of thinking familiar, is that you have a lot to work with that you can change to feel better! This is what the field of cognitive therapy is all about and research shows it really works! Our thinking patterns are highly malleable. If you “tend” to engage in a lot of the above types of thinking, you can practice and develop new thinking patterns that will have you experiencing life quite differently. Brain research shows that thinking patterns are a lot like a well-worn path in the woods. Once the path is worn, we tend to take it over and over; however, what’s exciting about the brain is that these patterns can be changed. Just as we can cut a new path in the woods, we can develop new, healthier patterns of thinking.

One way to do this is to stop what you’re doing when you’re feeling bad and take the time to review this list. Do you notice that you’re engaged in some of these forms of distorted thinking? If so, challenge yourself with the facts. Think about how you can reframe your thinking so that it’s less distorted. Many people find it most helpful to write this all down.

Here’s an example: You find yourself feeling highly anxious about the future of your farm. You review the checklist above. You see that you’re engaging in catastrophic thinking. You’re thinking the absolute worst will happen. Maybe you even go to an extreme and picture yourself as destitute and out on the street. Even with catastrophic farm failures, that scenario almost never happens. People usually land on their feet. Other things that they can’t possibly imagine happen, many of them quite positive. We note all of this and reframe our thoughts. “My farm will fail, and I will be out on the streets” becomes “I have a lot of strengths. The farm may not fail, but even in that worst-case scenario, unknown possibilities will likely emerge.”

When we engage in thinking that exacerbates our stress, our thinking often narrows and, at the very moment when it’s most important for us to see that we have options, our narrow forms of thinking prevent us from seeing them. Sometimes we’re able to stop and review our distorted thinking patterns, as suggested above. What do we do when that fails, or when we just can’t seem to muster the energy to do such a review? In those moments, it’s simply important to stop – stop all thinking. In those moments, label your thinking as part of a low state of mind and don’t trust any of it. Being at that point is like climbing into a garbage can. When you look around from inside a garbage can, all you can see is the inside of the garbage can. Attribute all your thoughts at that time to “being inside the garbage can.” Don’t take them seriously. What do you do instead? Simply focus your thinking on what you’re doing right in front of you. Are you walking? Focus on how the bottoms of your feet feel against the ground. Are you shoveling manure? Focus on how the shovel feels against your hand. Notice what you smell. Take a vacation from all your distorted thinking and worries. This is called mindfulness. Your goal is to bring your thinking to the very present moment and to steer it gently away from all thoughts and worry about the future. Doing this can often amazingly shift your mood over time. Either gradually or suddenly and unexpectedly, we may find ourselves in a more positive state of mind. It’s only when solidly in those positive states of mind that anyone should do any serious thinking about the future.

Appendix D. More on Emotions as a Coping Strategy

The article “5 Emotion-Focused Coping Techniques for Stress Relief” provides concrete recommendations and explanations of some common and effective strategies for managing chronic stress (Scott, 2020). Much stress is life is situational, which means that the stress felt is in response to certain people, places, or things. Stress is our body’s response and sets off our arousal system. In situational stress, that

response resets when the situation changes or we take a break from it. Chronic stress is a term used to describe the experience of being in the stress response mode to the point that the body does not have the opportunity to reset, and people are in a near constant state of arousal. This is the type of stress that can be detrimental to physical health and mental well-being.

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Appendix E. More on the Role of Spirituality

Here are some examples that spirituality can reduce stress:

- It can provide a source of hope.
- It can provide a sense of purpose. For example, following one’s values can bring meaning to one’s life. If someone perceives their purpose as following certain values, then the results of what they accomplish financially, for instance, may become less important.
- It can help connect to others. Seeing that one is part of a whole community of beings may help a person realize that they are far from alone with their problems.
- Connecting with a higher power (e.g., God) or nature can help people to release stress and have faith in something greater than themselves.

Here are some ways to make spirituality a bigger part of life:

- You may be able to think back in your life to a time that you felt this type of strength. Maybe it was part of your early family life and a connection to a particular religion. Give it a try again—if it worked once, it may well work for you again.
- You can also look around you and notice the people who you would describe as typically positive in their attitudes and steady in their moods. You might describe these people as serene or peaceful. This isn’t to say that these people are somehow removed from all that is going on around them. They may be some of the most productive and vibrant people you know! Consider talking to these people, or at least paying close attention to them so you can begin to understand what it is that they have working for them that you could use.
- Talking to a religious leader about your struggles is another option. It might help you feel safer to know that your sharing is confidential. Many religious leaders are also trained counselors and have woven mental health strategies into their beliefs and understandings.

Farm Stress And Emotional Well-Being, Part I

By Farm First, with Andy Pressman, NCAT FR SAN-NE
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farmfirst.org
877-493-6216 (24/7 hotline)

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Agriculture is an economic and social bedrock of the United States, yet for decades, farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers have endured growing challenges that increase their levels of stress. The Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network Northeast (FRSAN-NE) aims to improve behavioral health awareness, literacy, access, and outcomes for farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers in the Northeast by developing a service provider network that can assist and meet the unique needs of agricultural workers. FRSAN-NE Network members developed a Resource Working Group to focus specifically on providing information and materials designed to inform those who interact with this population. The resources provided here were created to provide information needed by those who want to offer support but don't have expertise in the mental health profession.

This is the second part of a two-part guide that briefly describes some of the issues contributing to the challenges of farming and provides helpful strategies and resources to aid farmers in building and maintaining the resilience needed to be successful. It was developed to be used by anyone who lives or works in the world of farming. This publication addresses substance-use disorder, family relationships, suicide, and therapy.



Photo: Kevin Channell

Counseling: When Prevention and Maintenance Are Not Enough

Sometimes, the difficulties a person has been struggling with become overwhelming, and strategies that usually work well to maintain well-being and prevent mental health challenges are no longer sufficient. The situation can become dangerous or unsafe and calls for intervention, often including professional support. Several

situations of this type are briefly explored below, and more about these types of challenges can be found in the publication *Preventing Farm-related Stress, Depression, Substance Abuse, and Suicide* (Dudensing et al., no date). It's important to be aware of the likely benefits of professional counseling and have a basic understanding of how it works.

In addition to learning and practicing resilience-building skills on one's own or with someone who has experience in a particular strategy (yoga, mindfulness, etc.), many people decide to consider a professional therapist for help dealing with stress or other struggles. Indeed, as stated above, this may be essential for some. Counseling can be helpful, whether the goal is to learn some new skills for managing day-to-day life as effectively as possible, to obtain help with overwhelming emotions, or to deal with behaviors that feel out of control and destructive.

Signals that outside help should be sought include:

- Panic attacks
- Difficulty concentrating due to anxiety or depression
- Excessive drinking or the use of other drugs
- Thoughts of suicide
- Frequent crying
- Frequent fatigue
- Physical fighting where one spouse hits, shoves, or kicks the other
- Frequent physical ailments
- Frequent despondency
- Difficulty sleeping

Although any of these signs warrant referral to a counselor, realize that almost anyone can benefit from speaking with a counselor, even when these signs may not be apparent. The decision to seek counseling can feel complicated for farmers and their families. The free online publication *When Do You Need a Counselor?* provides more information. Although it's an older study, the research done for the journal article "Farm

Families' Preferences Toward Personal Social Services" provides a helpful exploration of the factors still causing reluctance in the farm families of today as they consider seeking mental health support (Martinez-Brawley and Blundell, 1989).

One way to counteract this reluctance is to provide farmers with some basic information about what they can expect from counseling. There are numerous forms and styles of counseling, but with any type, the help is provided by a trained mental-health professional who works with people to help them learn how to improve aspects of their lives. Someone going to counseling for the first time should expect to spend some time discussing challenging situations, emotions, and behaviors that are adversely affecting them. It can feel uncomfortable to discuss mental-health symptoms and personal thoughts with a stranger. This often gets easier with time. As the experience will likely involve working through some negative events or distressing thoughts, it may be difficult in the moment, but the result is usually a happier, more fulfilling life.

Ultimately, whether to seek counseling, what type, and with whom, are all choices that the person getting counseling should be allowed to make, excepting situations where someone is in immediate danger of harming themselves or someone else. Whether it's in response to going through a rough time or to having a mental-health issue that causes serious distress, therapists are trained to help without judgment. People should be encouraged to let their counselor know if they are not finding the experience helpful. If that doesn't improve the situation, it's time to consider seeking something (or someone) different.

Some of the typical areas of focus in therapy include:

- **Stronger communication skills** – Most of us can benefit from strengthening our communication skills. Individual therapy helps people learn how to communicate more effectively by both speaking and listening.
- **Develop problem-solving skills** – Individual counseling helps to develop problem-solving skills that may have been missing previously. During sessions, there is an opportunity to partner with the therapist to dissect a problem and determine how to solve it. Doing this allows people to learn and practice, so they can develop and use these skills to solve problems on their own in the future.

Related FRSAN-NE Resources

Farm Stress
and Emotional
Well-being, Part I

Helping Farmers in
Financial Crisis

I'm a Farmer. When
Do I Need a Lawyer?

Weathering the
Storm: A Guide
to Preparing for
Disaster and Finding
Disaster Assistance
for Your Farm
or Ranch



Photo: investeap.org

- **Mental health management** – Stress, anxiety, and depression can affect anyone. Even if issues don't seem to be having a huge impact, it's always helpful for people to know more about managing mental health appropriately. Individual counseling can teach skills for handling stress in healthy ways to avoid the situation becoming worse.

For more information related to sorting through options and deciding about whether counseling is a good next step, and to learn more about finding a therapist, health insurance, and different types of counseling, consult Appendix A: Paths to Finding the Right Therapist.

Anxiety and Depression

Anxiety and depression are two of the most common mental health issues, and they frequently are factors in the decision to seek professional help. Sometimes people struggle with one or the other, but they are also often called “co-occurring,” meaning that they are experienced together. It is not unusual for the emotions and symptoms connected with depression and anxiety to “feed one another.” For instance, if farmers are depressed and don't have the energy or focus to address needed farm repairs, they are likely to worry about them more and become anxious. If they are anxious and that stress keeps them from sleeping or eating well, they are more likely to get overwhelmed and begin to suffer from depression.

Everyone feels anxious, worried, sad, or depressed sometimes. However, if someone feels anxious or depressed all or most of the time, and the feelings are significantly impacting their work, relationships, or health, they may have developed an anxiety disorder or some form of clinical depression. Life may feel more and more difficult to manage and they may need help to begin to feel better.

The ideas and suggestions in this publication have all been shown to be helpful in decreasing anxiety levels and alleviating depression. The most effective approach for treating anxiety and/or depression is often a combination of counseling and self-care. In addition to the strategies in this guide, exercise is an important self-care option. It's possible that a farmer is getting a tremendous amount of physical activity already, but it is worth noting that exercise is a well-researched strategy for reducing both anxiety and depression symptoms (Mayo Clinic, 2017). Nutrition is also an important part of mental well-being, and there are easy tweaks that can be made to improve diet (Tello, 2020).



Photo: investeap.org

Alcohol and Other Drug Use

One especially common behavioral health issue is Substance-Use Disorder (SUD). More common terms might be alcoholism, drug abuse, misuse of prescriptions, or addiction. SUD is a broader term used to describe situations in which the recurrent use of alcohol and/or drugs has significant negative impacts. The impacts may include health problems, disability, and failure to meet major responsibilities at work, school, or home.

Our culture has historically supported drinking or the use of other substances to “relax” or feel better. This has led to many people mis-using such substances through no fault of their own. Yet the risks of a substance-use disorder going unaddressed are significant. These can include risk of accidents and injury, family relationship problems, diminishing health, struggles with work, and legal complications.

Information is key in helping to identify problems early and in decreasing the chances of serious consequences.

It can be hard to know where to start when faced with these issues. Problems don't look the same for everyone, and the most observable behaviors don't necessarily give us the most pertinent information. It may be easy to observe how much and how often a substance is being used, but these factors provide only basic clues regarding the severity of the problem. A person's age, weight, gender, experience with the substance, current environment, and countless other things will factor into the equation. The most informative signs of a substance problem are the negative impacts, and these are often obscured. Sometimes,

Science now offers a public-health-oriented approach to translate the available science into effective, practical, and sustainable policies and practices to prevent substance “use” before it starts, identify and intervene early with emerging cases of substance “misuse,” and effectively treat serious substance-use disorders (McLellan, 2017).

even the person experiencing the problem may not recognize the indications that they have developed a problem. If the issues are unrecognized, they will go unaddressed. This is unfortunate, because scientific research has equipped us with effective strategies to support successful recovery.

Stigma can interfere with addressing the topic of substance use, even when it is recognized as a potential problem. For some, talking about substance use can seem intrusive, and there may be concern that doing so will cause a defensive reaction. One way to overcome this barrier is to make talking about substance use part of your conversations with farmers as a matter of course. You may have noticed that many healthcare providers have adopted this practice, and it has proven to be a highly effective intervention (Agerwala and McCance-Katz, 2012).

The concept of the “universal approach” is that if a specific problem is common enough in a population—and serious enough that missing out on a chance to identify it is risky—it is easier to check on everyone than to try to figure out who to check. Universal approaches can play a role in reducing stigma. Bringing up the topic in a relaxed and easygoing way can convey several things:

- I am comfortable with this topic if someone wants to talk about it.
- I won't be surprised or shocked if substance use is a problem.
- Substance-use problems are common and not an unexpected response to stress.

These messages can help people be more comfortable sharing any concerns they may have. If someone is concerned about their use of substances, there are steps they can take.

For help in determining if a problem exists or is developing, and to learn more about how to connect with support, including treatment



Photo: investeap.org

options and resources for ongoing recovery from substance-use problems, see Appendix B: More on Substance-Use Disorder.

Opioid Crisis

The opioid crisis has been a frequent focus in the news and in our communities, and there is good reason for the topic to be a concern. Opioids are potent drugs with high risk of addiction and overdose. The National Institutes of Health provide information on overdose death rates (NIH, 2021).

Unfortunately, opioids are easy to access, and their potency can seem very attractive to anyone looking for a way to feel better when they are not doing well for one reason or another. Farmers have been particularly hard-hit by this crisis, and overdose deaths have become common enough that it's unusual for people not to know someone who has been impacted. You can find more information about the opioid crisis in the United States in Appendix B: More on Substance-Use Disorder.

Family and Relationship Problems

One of the most rewarding parts of life is connections with other people. Relationships are important to physical and emotional health, and they can make good times better and bad times a little easier. There are many kinds of relationships, all of which are important to well-being. Most people find it helpful to have a good balance of relationships in their lives. For instance, being a parent may be extremely rewarding, but it doesn't take the place of reminiscing with an old friend. It's helpful to have relationships with people who can be called on in an emergency, no matter what time of day it is, as well as people to have fun with on a Saturday night. The quality of relationships and the approach to forming and sustaining them are important to one's sense of self and confidence.

As rewarding as connections with others often are, when these important relationships become challenging, there can be negative



Photo: investeap.org

impacts on many parts of life, including moods and disposition. No one is immune from the challenges that relationships bring. Problems with communication, differences of opinion or values, fears and anger, disappointments, a lack of time and energy – these are all things that can challenge a relationship, but they don't have to put a relationship at risk or keep it locked in constant struggles. When a relationship is struggling, intentionally nurturing it can make all the difference in the world. Strong relationships don't just magically happen – they require constant feeding, self-awareness, and generosity of time, thought, and care.

As in so many other situations, regularly practicing resilience-building will provide a solid foundation for relationships. It can be impossible for someone who is feeling drained to give care and attention to others.

Whether the relationship is with a spouse, life partner, children, or parents, family relationships are particularly important, and they are often the most challenging ones, as well. Sometimes, people mistakenly believe that family relationships should be easier than others, but the opposite is usually true. Family problems can trigger strong feelings, such as discouragement, fear, anger, and hopelessness. Thinking sometimes seems to get off track, too, either because the same thoughts repeat or because the ability to form a coherent thought disappears. Between the swirling emotions and the compromised thinking, distraction can become a risk factor for accidents and injuries, as well as behaviors that make the problem worse rather than better. Learning and practicing some of the stress-management approaches presented throughout this guide can be important in carrying farmers through challenging times safely and in helping the relationship return to thriving. Iowa State University Extension and Outreach offers a resource on farm stress and marriage (Tranel, 2019).

A relationship is like a house. When a light bulb burns out, you do not go and buy a new house, you fix the light bulb.
–Bernajoy Vaal

To learn more about improving relationships, consult Appendix C: More on Families and Relationships.

Suicide

Suicide can be difficult to talk about, yet it has become one of the leading causes of death in the United States (Crosby et al., 2011), and it must be understood if that trend is to be reversed.

Some Important Facts

Considering the prevalence of suicide in the United States, many of us can expect to be impacted by a suicide in our lifetime. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) *WISQARS Leading Causes of Death Reports* (2020), in 2018:

- Suicide was the tenth-leading cause of death overall in the United States, claiming the lives of more than 48,000 people.
- Suicide was the second-leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 10 and 34, and the fourth-leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 35 and 54.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide rates overall have increased by 40% in less than two decades (Peterson et al., 2020).

The same study showed that farmers are among the most likely to die by suicide, compared to other occupations. One likely factor in this is that most common means of suicide are generally easy to access on a farms, such as firearms and poison.

The CDC *WISQARS Leading Causes of Death Reports* reveals that firearms are used in over half of all male suicides (2020). The means used in suicide for women change over time. Although younger women are most likely to die by suffocation, poisoning becomes a more common means of suicide as women age. Farmers are often isolated, as well, another key risk factor in suicide.

One of the reasons these statistics are news to many people is that suicide carries a great deal of stigma in our society. This encourages people

Farmers are among the most likely to die by suicide, compared to other occupations. One likely factor in this is that most common means of suicide are generally easy to access on a farms, such as firearms and poison.



Photo: investeap.org

to hide problems and try to keep them secret. It also often discourages people from seeking help. Much of that stigma is the result of commonly held beliefs that are not accurate. Learning accurate information about suicide can reduce the shame and fear of judgement often experienced both by people considering suicide and by their families and others who are concerned. More information about myths related to suicide is available from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (Fuller, 2020).

Suicide Prevention for Everyone

- Learn about suicide prevention before there is a need to know:
 - Understand suicide in the community. How is it similar to or different from national statistics?
 - Find out what local resources are available to provide support.
 - Find a warmline. The term “hotlines” has become commonplace, and most people recognize them as places to reach out to in a crisis. The term “warmline” may be less familiar; it is a resource available when a person just needs someone to talk with while upset or struggling emotionally. Warmlines are answered by people who are trained to provide immediate and confidential support to callers, prior to a crisis. Sometimes talking to someone who understands can make all the difference (Mental Health America, no date).
 - Hope is an essential element to providing support. It’s important that anyone in the role of offering comfort and assistance believe that things can improve. Find stories of hope and recovery and examples of people overcoming difficulties and finding new meaning in their lives at the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (listed in the Further Resources section).

Hope is an essential element to providing support. It’s important that anyone in the role of offering comfort and assistance believe that things can improve.

Steps to help someone who may be considering suicide:

- Ask the person if they are thinking about killing themselves.
- Listen without judging and demonstrate caring.
- Stay with the person (or make sure the person is in a private, secure place with another caring person) until further help is engaged.
- Remove any objects that could be used in a suicide attempt.
- Connect them with a friend, family member, or loved one who can stay with them.
- Get them connected to a counselor

- Consider getting guidance by attending a training session. There are several trainings designed specifically for the typical family and community member. Often called “gateway” trainings, they are not meant for teaching professionals how to treat a suicidal person, but instead provide basic information and focus on helping anyone feel better-equipped to deal with the topic of suicide. For more information about training opportunities, consult Appendix D: More about Suicide Prevention.
- Know the options for emergency help.

Given the prevalence of suicide, it is reasonable to consider the possibility that you may find yourself in an emergency at some point. It is critical to have a plan of what to do should such a situation arise.

- If danger of self-harm seems imminent, call 911.
- If danger does not seem imminent, you need to consider the best resource for the situation.
 - If you know the person is working with a counselor or psychiatrist, they may want you to reach out to that person.
 - You may want to consider the availability of farming-specific resources that provide crisis support. It is always helpful to be supported by someone who understands the issues at hand.
 - The Farm First program provides Vermont farmers with 24/7 access to licensed clinicians trained to respond to just such situations. They can be reached at 877- 493-6216. Other states may offer similar resources.
 - The hotline at 800-FARM-AID (800-327-6243) has trained Farmer Services staff answering Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time.
 - A veteran may want to talk with someone who is specifically trained with that population. Call 800-273-8255 and press 1, or text 838255.
 - Many communities have mental-health centers that publish a hotline number.

- You can also call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (8255) and follow their guidance. They may provide you with assistance or help you to locate a local resource.

More information specific to these steps within an agricultural context can be found in the publication *Preventing Farm-related Stress, Depression, Substance Abuse, and Suicide* (Dudensing et al., no date).

Preventing Farmer Suicide: Collaboration and Communication, a five-minute video from Rural Health Information Hub, covers a great deal of information specific to farmers and suicide.

- Talk about it!
 - Talking openly about suicide helps break down stigma.
 - Some word choices, such as referring to someone “committing suicide” can sound judgmental and be stigmatizing. Learning language that conveys support and hope is important. *Words Matter*, from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, offers recommendations.
 - Play a role in ensuring everyone in the community knows how significant a problem suicide is.
 - There are many ways for people to learn more and be prepared to be helpful.
 - Put an editorial in the newspaper.
 - Invite a speaker to a community meeting.
 - Make sure the topic of suicide is appropriately discussed in schools.

Asking someone if they are suicidal will not make them decide to kill themselves. It does not plant the idea in anyone’s head. Asking lets them know

that someone sees they are hurting; someone cares and is not afraid to know the truth.

- It doesn’t have to be complicated or formal. For example, someone might ask: “*You’ve been dealing with a lot and I’m concerned about you. Sometimes people in these hard situations find themselves feeling hopeless and may think about suicide. Have you found yourself thinking of hurting or killing yourself?*”
- What **not** to do:
 - Trying to “fix” the person contemplating suicide is unlikely to be helpful. It’s not the job of anyone but a trained professional to assess risk and respond appropriately.
 - A person who cares and wants to be helpful should follow the steps above for responding to an emergency. The objective is to keep the person safe while waiting for further response. Engaging in discussion about the suicidal thoughts is very rarely appropriate.
 - Ignoring indications that someone might be suicidal is extremely risky.

For more information about suicide, including learning warning signs, training opportunities, and risk factors related to suicide, read Appendix D: More about Suicide Prevention.

Grief and Loss

Grief and loss are part of all lives. Loss comes in many forms, and the range of grief responses is just as varied. It helps to know that there is no right or wrong way for people to respond to loss, and no one has the answer about what is “right.” People suffering a loss should be encouraged to be kind and gentle with themselves and to discount any well-meaning advice that doesn’t seem right to them.



Video stills from *Preventing Farmer Suicide: Collaboration and Communication*. Courtesy: Rural Health Information Hub

Conversation is not always necessary. Sometimes it's important to just listen, and sometimes it's just about being present even when someone doesn't want to talk.

Here are some tips that may be helpful when you're with anyone grieving a significant loss:

- Don't ignore the person grieving, or their loss, because you don't know what to say or you're afraid to say the wrong thing. In fact, a person deeply grieving will likely remember only whether you showed up for them. It is unlikely they will remember what you said. A simple statement that says, "I see your pain and I care" is all that is needed.
- Conversation is not always necessary. Sometimes it's important to just listen, and sometimes it's just about being present even when someone doesn't want to talk.
- It may be uncomfortable to witness pain and grief, but don't try to fix it. If a saturation point is reached, take a break and come back later.
- If you want to be supportive, asking about what the grieving person would find helpful is fine, but the question may not get an answer. It's best to pay attention and try to determine what specific and practical things may need to be done. Do the cows need to get in? Is there an area that needs cultivating? "Can I pick the kids up from school for you today?" "I'm going to the store—do you need bread?"
- Keep in mind that grief is dealt with differently from one culture to another. Some things may be unfamiliar. There may be traditions, behaviors, and reactions that seem strange. Consider this an opportunity to learn something new.

Here are some guidelines that others have found helpful and that you may want to share with a person grieving a significant loss.

- People may be surprised at their emotional responses. It is not odd if they find themselves having feelings other than sadness. Anger, relief, denial, numbness, fear, and guilt are all "normal" responses.
- It may be especially hard for people to accept their emotional responses when they include positive feelings. Relief is not an unusual reaction. It may arise from situations where the relationship or situation has been very challenging or because the loss has been slow and difficult and now that part has ended. People may feel joy when losing a loved one if that person's suffering has ended or their faith tells them the person is now in a better place.

- Don't be confused if the "stages of grief" that people talk about don't seem to fit. The so-called "stages," often referred to as denial, sadness, bargaining, anger, and acceptance, are responses experienced by some people. Some may experience all and others may experience just one or none. People don't travel from one stage to another in a neat sequence where one feeling replaces another until crossing some invisible finish line. They may come in an order different than described, and some are revisited multiple times or may not be experienced at all. The process is messy. Many have described it more like rolling waves than stages. Stages can be a helpful way to understand some reactions, but they are just a concept and have not been definitively established by scientific research.
- When a loss is experienced by a family, it is likely that each family member will have a different grieving process. Each family member is likely to have their own timeline, needs, capacity to provide support to others, and potentially many other differences. This can be a disappointing surprise for people who assume that those who suffered the same loss will be able to understand better than an outsider.
- Expect that people grieving profound loss may experience changes in their sleep patterns and appetite.
- When it's possible, it can be important for grieving individuals to let others know what they need – no one is a mind reader and able to know what someone else needs. It is not unusual for the grieving person to feel like they don't know what they need either. When their needs become clear to them, they can articulate them.
- It's helpful to encourage grieving individuals to keep regular routines of self-care in place, when possible.

Hallucinations are another common response to grief, but they may be unexpected because it is an occurrence that is not frequently discussed. It can be surprising or alarming if someone hears or sees a loved one who has died. Sometimes people don't raise the issue for fear they may seem "crazy." For this reason, it can be helpful to normalize the situation by including it in any conversations about what someone might face. For many, it is a comfort to have these experiences.

Loss of a Farm

Losing a farm, or a portion of it, or the potential risk of such a loss, is complex and challenging. This is partly because there are many other losses wrapped up within it. Losing the farm may be traumatic if it also portends the loss of the means to earn a living, a daily routine, social relationships, animals, a place to live, or a connection to the past. For many families, the farm has been a significant part of their identity and how they interact with the world.

Like all grief, this misfortune will likely involve a multitude of feelings, and the strategies for understanding and coping with emotions that are recommended for other losses will also be helpful for this situation. It may, however, be especially important for a farmer or farm family in this position to connect with others who have had suffered through the same circumstance. Although guilt and shame are common in grief, they may play a particularly strong role in farm loss. The message that others have found ways to survive such a loss is important.

It is crucial that anyone in this situation have access to the professional support they need. This may include expertise in financial, legal, and disaster assistance, and, of course, counseling. For some practical information about managing such a loss, consult the publication *Coping with Restructuring or Sale of the Family Farm*. This guide includes helpful sections related to legal and financial issues.



Photo: Leanne Porter

Anger

Everyone experiences anger, and it is a normal and healthy emotion. Anger can help a person recognize when something in life is not working. However, out-of-control anger responses can be devastating to an individual, their family, and those with whom they work. It can be very frightening to those who feel out of control and difficult to know that they may be scaring those they care about, or maybe even hurting them. This type of anger is more likely when stress levels are high and when there is a feeling of being trapped and having no way out of a situation. People who grew up in homes where anger was expressed in hurtful ways are more likely to experience anger problems as adults. Substance-use problems and mental illness often co-exist with anger problems.

It's important for people to be aware that there are skills to help them manage anger in ways that don't cause problems. Two specific resources that may be helpful are *11 Anger Management Strategies to Help You Calm Down and Anger Management: Your questions answered*, listed in the Further Resources section.

The strategies suggested in other sections of this document can be highly effective for helping to keep anger from being harmful. For example, counseling is often used to treat anger issues.

Violent Behavior

Embarrassment and shame may make it difficult for someone to reach out for help with anger issues. This can be especially true if the circumstances have included violent behavior. Resistance to asking for help may be present for both the person acting out violently and anyone who is being subjected to the violence. Other factors that prevent reaching out for help may include isolation, lack of a trusted source of help, and fear of potential consequences. Two particularly common types of violence in the United States are domestic violence and child abuse.

It's important to realize that attempting to confront or address these behaviors without the proper training and support can increase the risk of danger for all involved. If violent behavior is suspected, the safest and most effective approach is to utilize the resources available to obtain help in creating a safe action plan.

Many resources are available to address these issues, and the best time to become familiar with options is before they are needed. It's important to keep in mind that child abuse and domestic violence are often co-occurring.

- The National Domestic Violence Hotline: thehotline.org, 800-799-7233. The hotline can offer support and information, as well as provide connections to local resources.
- National Indigenous Women's Resource Center: niwrc.org.
- Every state has a reporting system that is always available for people who need to report suspected child abuse. Find your state's information in the list of State Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Numbers.

States vary regarding regulations about the definition of suspected child abuse, who is mandated to report child abuse based on their profession, and other related topics. Every state is required to make this information available to the public.

Medication Therapy

Whether medication should be an option for treating mental-health problems can be a complicated subject. It's important to have what is needed to make an informed decision, and that requires a consultation with someone who has expertise in the topic, so that the right choices are made and both potential side effects and effectiveness can be monitored.

Medication is often considered when counseling alone is not sufficient. Counseling is often the first step, as it can be as effective or more effective than medication, has a clear end point, and does not typically produce side effects. Ideally, an individual would seek a counselor who is skilled and experienced at assessing when medication is a viable option. The best scenario is one where the counselor has access to a consulting psychiatrist to whom they can refer clients seeking to further explore medication options.

If such a counselor is not available, then individuals can seek help from their primary care doctor. Unfortunately, many primary care doctors only have a cursory knowledge of how best to care for psychiatric needs. They are likely to have prescribed different medications, but there is much to know about getting the right

medication for a particular person. Ideally, as with counselors, it is best if the doctor has a consulting relationship with a psychiatrist.

Some of the most commonly used medications for mental health symptoms are antidepressant, antianxiety, antipsychotic, mood stabilizing, and stimulant medications (WebMD, 2020). Each type focuses on different symptoms. Medication should be combined with counseling to be most effective. It's important for anyone taking medication to know that the medications often take time—even many weeks—before they work fully, and it's not unusual for people to need to try different dosages or other medications before finding what works best.

A solid understanding of potential side effects is important, including what one might expect, situations that would require medical care, and activities that should be avoided while taking the medication. For example, drowsiness is a side effect of many medications, and it is essential that people steer clear of dangerous tasks when they are drowsy. Changes may be needed in dose or type of medication to keep a farmer safe.

One other important factor that prescribers should consider is whether there is a personal or family history of alcoholism or other drug addiction—even if it's in the past. They should ask their patient about this, and if the prescriber does not ask, the patient should volunteer the information. The question, when unexpected, can be surprising or unsettling, so it can be helpful if the person seeking support has been told that revealing any such history is important. This is because some medications have a higher potential of causing problems when mixed with other substances, or of creating a dependence. An open and honest relationship between patient and prescriber will result in the safest and most effective plan.

Peer Support

Peer support consists of individuals trained to provide support to others in the same profession who are having difficult experiences. Peer supporters offer emotional support, share knowledge, teach skills, provide practical assistance, and connect people with resources (such as professional counselors), opportunities, communities of support, and other people (Mead, 2003; Solomon, 2004).

A *Alert: some medications carry a high risk for abuse or addiction. This does not mean that the medication is not a good idea, but it is vital to consider when making decisions.*

This model is used as a strategy in dealing with many different situations, including substance-use disorders, mental-health issues, parenting, caregiving, veterans, and chronic health issues such as diabetes. By sharing experiences, peers share hope with one another and learn together how to move past the difficult situations in their lives. There are also support groups available that offer the opportunity to be with others who share their struggles. A helpful article from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, “Who Are Peer Workers,” is included in the Further Resources section.

Conclusion

Although there are many risk factors and situations that may cause concern for farmers, there are also many useful strategies that can help remediate emotional pain. With the right information and resources, it becomes easier to understand these problems. Learning more about them also makes it easier to find strategies and supports that can alleviate them. We hope that the information in this second volume, coupled with the strategies covered in Part I, provides a helpful guide for agricultural service providers, farmers, and others in the field.



Photo: investeap.org

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Appendix A. Paths to Finding the Right Therapist

There are a variety of approaches to finding a therapist:

- One option is looking through the American Psychological Association’s database of therapists in private practice. The brief descriptions of their services can be informative, and they are categorized by location.
- Many areas have community mental health centers that offer an array of services, including counseling. These can be found in area phone directories or on the Internet.

- Counselors in private practice often advertise their services in these same ways.
- Probably the most common first step is a recommendation from a health care provider or from friends and family members.

While it can be helpful to have a place to start, these options should be considered just the beginning of the process to determine if a particular counselor is the best choice in a specific situation. When someone decides to contact potential therapists, there are some things to explore in making good choices:

- What issues do they want to address? These can be specific or vague, but it's important to ensure that the potential counselor is able to describe clearly what issues they are qualified and interested in addressing. Many counselors have specialties such as substance use disorder, family/relationship problems, struggles with chronic pain, etc.
- Are there any specific characteristics that are important? Gender? Age?
- Does the potential choice under consideration offer a free initial session? Many do—especially if asked.
- Does the farmer have health insurance? University of Delaware Cooperative Extension offers online information about Farm Operations and Health Care Insurance Options.

When a person has a therapist in mind, there are some questions that should be asked during the decision-making process:

If a health insurance plan is in place, is it one that this counselor accepts?

- Does the plan include special processes (like a referral from a primary care doctor) to access a specialty service like counseling?
- If there is no health insurance plan in place, how much can the farmer realistically afford to spend? Even with insurance, there are often uncovered charges such as co-payments and/or deductibles. It's important to gather the information that allows for an informed decision.
- Are sliding-scale prices or payment plans available? These are not unusual.
- Where will therapy fit into the farmer's schedule? Do they need a therapist who can see them on a specific day of the week? Or someone who has evening sessions? What is the distance they're able to travel for appointments?

Another consideration is the counseling approach or model used. Counselors may identify themselves as having a specific approach, such as cognitive or cognitive behavioral, solution-focused, psychodynamic, humanistic, etc. It's okay to ask questions about what that all means. There is a considerable amount of research that compares models for different people or different situations. No single type of counseling is best for everyone, and exploration is worth the time spent. An article on [PositivePsychology.com](https://www.positivepsychology.com) provides *12 Popular Counseling Approaches to Consider*.

For stress management and overall well-being, many people find *cognitive therapy* or *cognitive behavior therapy* (CBT) to be effective. Working with these models, counselors often take a

focused, action-oriented approach. Some types of treatment rely heavily on gaining insight into why a person thinks, feels, and acts as they do. Cognitive therapies focus more on working to change those things. This can be very appealing for people who dislike the idea of “touchy-feely” work. These approaches to counseling are often short-term and focus on building skills and learning to reframe negative thinking to be more realistic. CBT has been particularly well-researched and has a strong basis in evidence. Learn more from the American Psychological Association's post, “What is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy?”

As stated earlier, the relationship between the client and counselor is an important component of success. People should be encouraged to try out one or two counselors to be sure the fit is a good one. It may seem like wasted time in the beginning, but it can save a lot of time in the long run.

Appendix A: Further Resources

12 Popular Counseling Approaches to Consider. 2021. By Heather S. Lonczak. [positivepsychology.com/popular-counseling-approaches](https://www.positivepsychology.com/popular-counseling-approaches)

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Photo: [investeap.org](https://www.investeap.org)

Appendix B. More on Substance-Use Disorder

I'm Not Sure if I Have a Problem

Take our simple and confidential self-assessment. It will help you answer the question of whether or not you have a problem. Better yet, you can call a licensed drug and alcohol counselor who can confidentially help you explore your relationship with alcohol or other substances.

Getting Assistance

Treatment and help are often a lot easier than people think. You may have heard of residential 30-day treatment programs, and although such programs exist, most people can be helped through simple outpatient counseling. This kind of counseling can even happen remotely, through the computer. A licensed counselor can help you sort through options. For more information about counseling in general, review the counseling section of this publication.

More on the Opioid Crisis

A 2017 survey of U.S. farmers revealed the alarming scope of the problem:

- 74% of farmers or farm workers are or have been impacted by opioid misuse.
- 26% of farmers and farm workers have abused, been addicted, or have taken an opioid without a prescription.
- 77% of farmers or farm workers believe it would be easy to access opioid painkillers without a prescription.

Some examples of opioids that can be prescribed by a doctor include oxycodone (OxyContin, Percocet), hydrocodone (Vicodin, Lortab, Lorcet, Norco), hydromorphone (Dilaudid), meperidine, Demerol), oxymorphone (Opana), fentanyl, morphine, and codeine.

Historically, U.S. healthcare providers routinely overprescribed opioids because they were less aware of the risk of dependence. Between 2006 and 2015, the prescription dispensing rate per 100,000 people ranged from 72.4 per to as high as 81.3. By 2016, the rates began to trend down as new research and policies began to impact prescribing customs. This trend has continued, with each year showing a decrease, and the most recent data available showed a rate of 46.7 in 2019 (CDC, 2021).

Learn more about the national response strategy in *Epidemic: Responding to America's Prescription Drug Abuse Crisis*.

Information on the extent of the problem is critical, as it demonstrates the degree to which the problem can be effectively addressed, and this awareness can spark advocacy for targeting a reduction in prescribing rates or farmers. It is still common for these drugs to be prescribed for pain, and farmers commonly experience pain as the years of heavy work take their toll on the body. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states that

opioids are prescribed for about 20% of farmers and the farm workforce who are injured and unable to work on any given day.

The more these drugs are used, the greater the risk of addiction and overdose. In addition, drugs like heroin and fentanyl are readily available in most places, even if prescription drugs are not. Find information on non-prescription opioid use in the publication *Pain Management and the Opioid Epidemic: Balancing Societal and Individual Benefits and Risks of Prescription Opioid Use*, listed below in Further Resources.

The reasons for the high rates of overdose are complex, and it can be helpful to understand the waves the epidemic has experienced in the United States. CDC offers a post, *Understanding the Epidemic*, that can help. Fortunately, there are successful interventions if an overdose is recognized quickly and the right preparation is made. Anyone working with the public in any capacity is encouraged to learn effective overdose response so that they have the capacity to recognize a potential overdose victim and know what actions to take. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services offers information in "How to Respond to an Opioid Overdose."

According to the American Farm Bureau Federation and the National Farmers Union, the opioid crisis has impacted farm and ranch families much harder than the rest of rural America. These organizations have teamed up to bring attention to the epidemic in farm country and provide information and resources to help those struggling with opioids. The initiative is called Farm Town Strong and more information is available online.

Appendix B: References

CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). 2021. U.S. Opioid Dispensing Rate Maps. cdc.gov/drugoverdose/maps/rxrate-maps.html

Appendix B: Further Resources

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Appendix C. More on Families and Relationships

To make relationships work, people must first recognize the value of them. An exercise that can help people begin is to list all the relationships they have—family, work, friends and neighbors, and so on. As they take a moment to reflect on each of these, they will likely find that thinking of some immediately makes them smile. They might find it useful to try to remember the last time they told this person how they feel about them. Appreciating others is an important part of nurturing relationships. They may find that some relationships that come to their minds will more likely leave them feeling indifferent or unsettled. It can be helpful for them to realize that whatever their reaction may be, it's not a reason to judge themselves harshly. Determining if some relationships are troubling and others fulfilling can be very helpful in preparing for change. Sometimes, relationships have become just habits and no longer add much to life. People may identify some trouble spots and consider whether they'd like to work on them, perhaps with a counselor. They may realize that some relationships bring so much joy that they decide they want to devote more time to them...and less to the non-fulfilling ones. Concentrating on important relationships provides the time and emotional energy to work on them.

This work can include:

- Appreciation
- Commitment
- Communication
- Humility – or acceptance of our own flaws
- Patience
- Thoughtfulness
- Understanding

These are not always easy things to do. Sometimes it becomes clear that to work on one relationship requires the aid of another. Perhaps, when struggling with a teen's behavior or attitude, it can be very helpful to talk with their own parents or a trusted friend. These other relationships can yield support and a new perspective that, in turn, helps to improve the relationship that is under stress. At other times, it is important to seek the help of an objective, experienced professional in the form of counseling. See Appendix A for help in finding a counselor.

Creating space in life to focus on these ways of being with others is essential because time is often the most important thing there is to offer to others. It can also be one of the hardest things for a farmer to find. People will often falter in their efforts because they mistakenly assume that worthwhile investments of time only happen when a large amount of time can be carved out. This is what is happening when one starts thinking “we'll be able to spend time together once we save up enough for that trip to Disney World.” Or maybe, “I'll be able to spend time once winter comes around again.” A useful strategy is to start by thinking small. It is much easier to dedicate a few minutes of time frequently, and it doesn't have to be anything exotic. Family relationships are built on daily interactions. Consider the list below as a place to encourage someone to start.

10 ways to spend more time with your family.

- Eat dinner together. Or breakfast if that's easier.
- Cut back on non-farm commitments.
- Go for a walk with the whole family.
- Take the family to an event at the grange.
- Run errands together.
- Ask a neighbor to care for your animals one day and get away with your spouse. You can return the favor.
- Have your kids invite their friends to spend time on your farm.
- Work on projects together.
- Decide to do some things routinely: coffee with a spouse/partner before the day begins, bedtime stories with the kids, pancakes on Sunday mornings, ice cream for dessert on Tuesdays, a family game night or maybe a movie and popcorn one...simple things that can give life an important sense of rhythm.
- Ask your family for their ideas.

Parenting and Family Relationships, a resource that provides helpful information about family life throughout the lifespan, is available online from University of Wisconsin Extension.

Appendix C: Further Resources

Parenting and Family Relationships. 2021. By University of Wisconsin Extension. parenting.extension.wisc.edu

Appendix D. More about Suicide Prevention

The National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has a program on suicide prevention, with information available online.

Training programs

No amount of information in a resource guide is an adequate substitute for training. Anyone who works with a population that is at an unusually high risk of suicide (and this includes farmers) should be trained in the topic. One does not need to be a mental-health professional to help prevent suicide. Mental-health professionals are trained to both recognize and treat people who are suicidal, but everyone can be trained to better recognize and respond. Suicide training for lay people is often called “gatekeeper” training. It is readily available in most communities and often targets specific populations, such as youth or veterans. A descriptive list of 40 different options is available from the Suicide Prevention Resource Center in *Choosing a Suicide Prevention Gatekeeper Training Program: A Comparison Table*.

- These trainings are currently being used extensively in the field of agriculture:
 - SafeTALK stands for “Tell Ask-Listen-Keep Safe.” Although used with broad audiences, the program has also been tailored specifically to meet the needs of those who work with farmers daily. Read more about this initiative on its website.
 - QPR Gatekeeper Training stands for Question, Persuade- Refer. The QPR Institute also makes the course available online.
- Other related trainings:
 - Mental Health First Aid is a program that has many commonalities with gatekeeper trainings for suicide, in that it focuses on being able to identify a potential problem and respond appropriately by connecting the struggling person with the right resources. In this case, although the topics address suicide, the training focuses on a broad array of mental-health and substance-use issues. Many University Extension Service programs provide this training virtually or face-to-face and there is now also an online option.
 - The Vermont Suicide Prevention Center offers a variety of trainings, including gatekeeper training, U Matter, for various populations. The center has demonstrated willingness and ability to work with specific communities (first responders, schools, faith communities, etc.) to tailor its trainings to be responsive to those needs.

Know the Warning Signs

It is not always possible to know that someone is considering ending or has decided to end their life, but there are often observable warning signs. These signs are particularly concerning when the onset is sudden, or there is an abrupt increase in them, especially closely following a loss or other painful event. Tuning in to notice warning signs takes deliberate focus. Pay attention to what you hear and see. Pay attention to your gut instincts when something just doesn’t feel right.

Of course, people may exhibit these signs without being suicidal, but the signs indicate that there is likely a problem of some sort. It’s important not to ignore these signals, as they could be indicative of several serious situations.

- Things you may hear:
 - Talk about or hints at suicide
 - A statement that they wish they were dead
 - Talk of feeling hopeless or trapped
 - Talk about feeling unbearable pain
 - Talk about being a burden/that others would be better off without them
 - Preoccupation with death
- Things you may observe or discover:
 - Making a will or other last arrangements, giving away possessions
 - Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as getting a gun
 - Withdrawing from family, friends, and routines that were pleasurable
 - Behaving aggressively and disruptively; acting recklessly
 - Exhibiting increased irritability and criticism
 - Frequently thinking of suicide with a plan in mind
 - Changing sleep and/or eating patterns
 - Not taking medication as prescribed or hoarding medication
 - Increasing use of alcohol or other drugs
 - Sleeping too much or too little
 - Showing rage or threatening revenge
 - Displaying huge mood swings

Learn Risk Factors

Warning signs are observable and can indicate that suicide has been, or is being, planned. *Risk factors* for suicide, on the other hand, are characteristics of a person or his or her environment that increase the likelihood that he or she will die by suicide at some point. A person does not need to wait until warning signs emerge to recognize that they have a higher-than-average risk of becoming suicidal at some point. Because being aware of

that allows for a proactive response, it's important for people to consider risk and plan accordingly.

- Major suicide risks include:
 - Personal characteristics
 - Prior suicide attempt(s)
 - Mental disorders, particularly depression and other mood disorders
 - Substance-use disorder (use of alcohol and/or other drugs that cause problems)
 - Impulsive or aggressive tendencies
 - Connection to someone who died by suicide, particularly a family member
 - Social isolation, a feeling of being cut off from other people
 - Chronic disease and disability
 - Family history of child maltreatment
 - Unwillingness to seek help because of the stigma attached to mental-health and substance-use disorders or to suicidal thoughts
- Environmental factors
 - Access to lethal means
 - Lack of access to behavioral health care
 - Cultural and religious beliefs (a situation where suicide may be considered heroic self-sacrifice)
 - Local epidemics of suicide
 - Barriers to accessing mental health treatment

Many of these are considered “static” factors, meaning that if it becomes a risk, it will not change, although of course people can change their response to the factor. For instance, if a person has already exhibited suicidal behaviors, they will always be someone who has exhibited suicidal behaviors and it will have an impact of their risk level on an ongoing basis. Other factors are dynamic because there are ways to reduce or even eliminate the impact on risk. Access to lethal means is a particularly poignant factor in this respect. Reducing access will reduce suicide. For some people, this obstacle will only delay their actions or produce a decision to choose different means, although it's important to note that for many people, that is not what happens.

Many people who attempt suicide act with little planning during a short-term crisis, and 90% of those who survive an attempt do NOT go on to die by suicide later. This indicates that anything that delays action can have a significant impact on the eventual outcome. We also know that some means are simply more lethal than others, and limiting access to those can have a dramatic impact. For example, about 85% of attempts with a firearm are fatal; that's a much higher case-fatality rate than for nearly every other method. Many of the most widely used suicide-attempt methods have case-fatality rates below 5% (Harvard, 2021).

It can also be helpful to be aware of common precipitating factors. These are stressful events that can trigger a suicidal crisis in a vulnerable person, often because they bring on thoughts that things will never get better now that “this” has happened. These thoughts can trigger a dangerous sense of hopelessness.

Examples include the following:

- End of a relationship or marriage
- Loss of the farm or business
- Death of a loved one
- An arrest or other serious legal problems, such as being sued
- Serious financial problems—especially when these problems have been kept relatively private but appear likely to become more well-known due to some new circumstance

Identify and Support Protective Factors

Protective factors are what help to balance out any risk factors that a person might have. In other words, in the case of suicide, they can buffer people from suicidal thoughts and behavior that risk factors may make more likely. Unfortunately, protective factors have not been studied as extensively as risk factors, but it is vital to recognize the importance of protective factors, as they can often be strengths to build upon.

The CDC identifies the following protective factors (2021):

- Coping and problem-solving skills
- Cultural and religious beliefs that discourage suicide
- Connections to friends, family, and community support
- Supportive relationships with care providers
- Availability of physical and mental health care
- Limited access to lethal means among people at risk

Special Issues in Suicide

The term *suicide survivor* is often used by people who have lost someone who is important to them through suicide. There are numerous ways in which a death by suicide can complicate the typical grief response, and it is important to be aware of these to be ready to support those in this situation. Harvard Medical School addressed this topic in a blog post (Harvard Women's Health Watch, 2020).

Suicides among children and young people aged 10 to 24 rose 57% from 2007 to 2018, according to a report from the CDC. Although this is not the age band with the highest rates overall, it is by far the fastest growing. Theories and ongoing research to further understand this increase are also growing quickly. Adolescents and children are not just “little adults,” and there are special considerations that need to be understood to for suicide prevention in this group. Learn more about the situation and ways to be active in prevention at the websites listed in the Further Resources section.

Appendix D: References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 2021. Suicide Prevention: Risk and Protective Factors. cdc.gov/suicide/factors/index.html

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Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. 2021. Lethality of Suicide Methods. hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter/case-fatality

Appendix D: Further Resources

Choosing a Suicide Prevention Gatekeeper Training Program: A Comparison Table. 2018. Suicide Prevention Resource Center. sprc.org/resources-programs/choosing-suicide-prevention-gatekeeper-training-program-comparison-table

Comprehensive Suicide Prevention. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. cdc.gov/suicide/programs/csp/index.html

Mental Health First Aid. mentalhealthfirstaid.org

QPR Training. qprinstitute.com/individual-training

Vermont Suicide Prevention Center. vtspc.org/about-vtspc/training

Notes

Notes

Farm Stress And Emotional Well-Being, Part II

By Farm First, with Andy Pressman, NCAT FR SAN-NE
Project Leader.

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