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Farm Safety, Health, and Wellness Resource: Decision-Making Guide for Farm Service Providers and Educators

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This decision-making guide is intended for farm service providers and educators who may work with or come across individuals in the farming community who are dealing with stress. It is sometimes difficult to know if a person is struggling, and knowing what can be done for a person in need is not always intuitive. This guide will briefly discuss examples of stressors, warning signs to look out for, and resources that can be shared with farmers who are in need of assistance.

Examples of Stressors

Many of the farmers we work with are dealing with stress related to their farms, homes, and families. Farming is a physically and emotionally demanding profession - with long hours, unpredictable weather conditions, and changing prices and demand – and many farms are family-run, adding in another layer of familial stress to the picture. Below are some examples of stressors that farmers may be dealing with at any time.

- Financial stressors:** changing costs and demand, machinery purchase and repair, land purchase
- Physical stressors:** long working hours, extreme weather conditions, demanding farming activities, aging and other health issues
- Familial Stressors:** family and marital strain, transition planning, work-life balance
- Emotional stressors:** self-doubt, pressure to succeed

What Are the Warning Signs?

As an individual working with farmers and farm families, it is important to know the warning signs of an individual who is under an abnormal amount of stress. Every person will respond differently to stress, but below are some examples of changes that a person under stress may experience.

- Physical changes:** headaches, fatigue, prolonged illness, loss of appetite
- Emotional changes:** anxiety, depression, irritability, loss of humor, negative thoughts or statements, lack of concentration, discussion of suicide
- Behavior changes:** trouble sleeping, missing meetings, opting out of social gatherings, increased drinking or drug use, violence
- Family changes:** children show signs of stress, family members expressing worry
- Farm changes:** neglect of farm animals, machinery, or fields; increased accidents, decline in farm appearance, reduced productivity

How Can You Help?

There is always a way for you to be helpful to a farmer under stress. If you have noticed that a farmer is showing some of the signs of stress listed above, you can help by doing the following:

If you believe a farmer may be thinking about committing suicide, ask directly if they are thinking about killing themselves. This has not been shown to make them more likely to attempt suicide, whether or not they are already having suicidal thoughts. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (linked below), or call 911 if you believe they may be an immediate danger to themselves or others (Dudensing, Town, & McCord, 2019).

Listen and Encourage Discussion

You have already listened and paid enough attention to notice that the farmer is struggling. Listening to what the farmer is saying may both help the farmer feel supported and help you understand how you can assist them. Listening lets the individual know that their feelings are not a burden to you and that you care about them. If you are trying to initiate the conversation about their stress, gently bring the subject up and allow them to move the conversation forward.

Things you can say, as suggested by Bacigalupo Sanguesa & Thompson, 2019

- I hear you saying ____ (repeat back the main concerns the farmer is expressing)
- This sounds like a lot to manage. How are you coping with this? (or, What are you doing to take care of yourself?)
- It sounds like the current situation is very difficult. What can I do to support you?
- These are some tough challenges. How can I help?
- Would it be helpful if we work together on an action plan for how to manage your concerns?
- Every situation is different. In a similar situation on another farm, they tried _____. What do you think about that?
- Are there other people who have been helpful or supportive when times have been tough in the past? Are any of those people able to help now?

Point Them to the Right Resources

Depending on the issues you have discussed with the farmer, there may be a number of resources you can point them to. You may recommend an agricultural resource for farm-specific help, recommend they visit their primary care provider for physical pain, or suggest they see a counselor to begin discussing and managing the stress they are feeling. Below is a list of resources that you may find useful to suggest, though it is also recommended that you become familiar with the resources in your area for more targeted recommendations.

What Resources are Available?

Farm-Specific Resources

Extension Agents

Local extension agents may have an established relationship with the farmer. The agent may be able to provide farm assistance and recommendations, or connect the farmer with other resources, programs, and providers.

Other Farmers

Farmers may be interested in talking with other farmers – both who grow the same commodities and others – to hear that they are not alone in their situations. Farmers' markets are a place where farmers can connect with one another, or consider asking another farmer you know if you can give their contact information to the farmer in need.

FSA Loan Officer or Bank

Financial stress is common and often not simple to address. You may suggest a farmer meets with an FSA loan officer or a local bank to discuss loan programs that are available, which may ease some of the financial burden that the farmer is experiencing.

Lawyer

If a farmer has indicated they are dealing with stress related to farm transition planning or a business management issue, it may be helpful to recommend they contact a lawyer – particularly one experienced with farm issues.

Physical and Mental Health

Primary Care Provider

Primary care providers may be able to help farmers in two ways. First, a primary care provider can address any physical issues that the farmer may be experiencing, whether they are related to stress, the physicality of farming, or underlying illness. Second, a primary care provider can be the first step a farmer takes toward receiving help from a mental health professional and may be able to make a referral.

Counselor, Psychologist, or Psychiatrist

These mental health professionals can work with individuals and/or families to address the stressors the farmers are experiencing and help them build targeted solutions. You may find it helpful to contact psychologists, psychiatrists, and counselors in your area to see if any have experience working with the farming community.

Community Support

Family and Friends

Family and friends can play a large role in helping and supporting those who are struggling with stress and physical or mental health issues. Encourage the individual to talk to their family about their feelings and issues, and consider arranging a meeting with the farmer's family to discuss what can be done to help the farmer in need.

Faith and Community Leaders

Faith and community leaders are often trusted points of contact who have an established history with the individual under stress. They may help educate individuals about mental health, offer family and marital counseling, or work within the faith community to provide other resources to the family in need, such as child care assistance or meal trains.

Support Groups

Support groups bring together people who are going through or have gone through similar experiences. They allow individuals who are suffering to share their experiences and feelings and discuss ways to cope. These groups may be formalized support groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, or may be informal groups formed within a community. It may be helpful to familiarize yourself with different support groups in your area, or consider starting a support group for the farmers you work with to come together.

Specific Resources

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

This hotline is available 24/7 to anyone in emotional distress or at risk for suicide

Crisis Text Line: Text “CONNECT” to 741741

This text line is available 24/7 to provide crisis intervention via mobile messaging

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI): www.nami.org

NAMI provides free classes and webinars for individuals who have family members experiencing a mental illness. The organization also provides support groups for individuals who may be struggling with negative thoughts, actions, or specific diagnoses. Information on diagnoses, symptoms, medications, and treatments are available on the website, as well.

Mental Health America (MHA): www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/searchMHA

MHA provides information on diagnoses, symptoms, treatments, payment help, and referrals. Users can find their local MHA office through the website. Also, screenings are available via the website to use with individuals and then decide on appropriate referrals for future assistance.

Virginia AgrAbility: <https://www.agrability.ext.vt.edu/>

Virginia AgrAbility assists individuals and their families who farm, and have illnesses, injuries, or disabilities that are impeding their ability to work safely, effectively, and productively. Their website also provides a [PDF document](#) discussing what stress is and the other diagnoses it can lead to, how to recognize these, why mental health is important, and additional resources on where to turn.

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