



Farm Safety, Health, and Wellness Resource: Mental Health Case Studies

The Johnsons' Broiler Farm

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These case studies are tools to help extension agents and other health care professionals identify common stressors among the farming community. Our case studies aim to bring awareness to problems Virginia farmers face and to promote appropriate problem-solving in coping with mental health issues. We hope the farming community will utilize these tools to build their knowledge about mental health and the mental health resources available to them. Our goal is to educate farmers, farm families, and extension professionals about farm stress and mental health resources in order to improve mental health within the farming community. We have incorporated discussion questions throughout the case studies to allow readers to practice applying their knowledge of stressors, symptoms, appropriate referrals and treatment strategies.

Instructions

Read the case study thoroughly. When you get to a superscript in the passage, refer to the corresponding discussion questions located on the right side of the page. Take a few minutes to think about the question and answer it thoughtfully. We suggest you write down your answers and/or discuss them with peers. After you feel that each question has been appropriately addressed, continue reading the case study until you reach another superscript and repeat the processes explained above. For further reflection on the questions, you may refer to our discussion at the end of the case study. The discussion is oriented to address key topics and is by no means an exhaustive list of all the possible answers.



The Johnsons' Broiler Farm

As dawn appears on a small family broiler farm in Central Virginia, Mike Johnson begins his daily duties on the farm. Mike is 44 years old and bought the farm with his wife, Sarah, 18 years ago. Initially when the couple bought the farm, it was an egg laying farm. However, after a few financially trying years, they decided to convert their farm to broiler production.

Sarah is 43 and helps Mike with the farm during the busier holiday seasons. She works off the farm as a secretary for a local country club. This job helps provide health benefits for the Johnson family. In the last few years, Sarah has become less pleased with the farming life and has expressed a desire to move to the suburbs of town. Sarah and Mike have two young children, Mark and Jill. Mark is a 12-year-old who enjoys being outside and playing with trucks. Jill is a 14-year-old who loves nature and telling her brother what to do.

The Martinez family also lives on the Johnson Farm. They rent a small farmhouse from the Johnsons that is located on the back side of the property. Roberto Martinez is a 35-year-old immigrant worker who has been working on the Johnsons' farm for the past 12 years. He is Mike's most reliable worker. Roberto is married to Marta who is 33 years old. Both Roberto and Marta immigrated to Virginia from Mexico Many years ago. While Roberto has reached a working proficiency in English, Marta speaks Spanish primarily and sometimes struggles to communicate in English. This language barrier has prevented her from obtaining a formal job. She spends most of her time helping with the local church and watching their 11-year-old son, Juan. Marta also looks after the Johnson children when Sarah works late. During the busier broiler season, Marta will help the farm with packaging and distribution of the product. Juan loves playing with the Johnsons' children. All three of them will stay outside for hours running around until it's almost dark. Over the past 12 years, the two families have become very close. They invite each other over for holidays, birthday celebrations, weekend barbeques, and stop by every few days to check in on each other.¹

Roberto sends a portion of every paycheck to Marta's family in Mexico. Though the rest of the family has long aspired to immigrate to the US, deteriorating economic opportunity in Marta's hometown has resulted increased urgency. Family members in Mexico are becoming

Discussion¹:

1. Reflect on stressors that could be impacting the Johnson family.
2. Reflect on stressors that could be impacting the Martinez family.

desperate. A few weeks ago, Marta's brother, Jose, tried to cross the border and was arrested by Border Patrol. He is currently being detained by Border Patrol in El Paso, Texas. Roberto is trying to help Jose pay for a lawyer to get him out of the detention center. The lawyer fees are a significant financial burden on Roberto, but he wants Jose to be released as quickly as possible.

Complicating matters, a larger Broiler production company has recently offered to buy the Johnsons' farm. At first Mike was quick to reject the offer. He thought he would never sell his beloved farm; he has put far too much work into it. However, as the days get longer and it gets more difficult to make ends meet on a farm, Mike remembers the offer in the back of his head. With bills rolling in, the thought of the offer begins to grow until Mike is actually considering it. He mentions the offer and his feelings to Sarah and is surprised to find her excited by the idea and interested in selling. Compounding his surprise and mixed emotions, the following day, Sarah presents Mike with a list of attractive homes in the country club that the family could move into with the hefty check the larger Broiler Company is offering.

Soon after, Mike confesses to Roberto that he is strongly considering the offer made by the larger Broiler company. Mike tells Roberto that Sarah is very excited about the prospect of selling and likes the idea of moving closer to her work. This information blindsides Roberto: he knows that if a bigger company comes into the farm and replaced Mr. Johnson his job and the paycheck he relies on would be in jeopardy.²

If the Johnsons sell, Roberto may have to negotiate to keep his job on the farm and compromise by working for the larger company.—losing the close relationship and autonomy he currently has with the Johnsons as owner-operators. If Roberto manages to keep his job, he may be subject to worse working conditions, including longer hours, less pay, and less authority on the farm. He is also concerned if the Johnsons sell the farm and move away, he and his family will no longer be able to rent the home they live in, forcing them to move. This is not the news Roberto needs while trying to support his family, keep Marta's parents afloat, and free Jose.

In the coming days Mike notices a change in Roberto's personality. He isn't as friendly or present as he usually is at work. He doesn't stick around and chat at the end of the day; he just goes home. Roberto seems preoccupied and is making more mistakes at work. Mike is becoming frustrated with Roberto as a coworker but, at the same time, he is concerned for Roberto as a friend. Mike realizes that the sudden change in Roberto's character is likely tied to the news that he is considering selling the farm.³

2 Discussion:

3. What feelings may be arising for Roberto right now?
4. Is there any opportunity for an extension agent or other agricultural service professional to help these families sort through their emotions, communicate effectively with one another, and reach compromises and decisions they can all live with?
5. What assistance is available to the Johnsons in navigating the decisions and logistical considerations of selling the farm?

3 Discussion:

6. What feelings may be arising for Roberto right now?
7. What options does Mike have? What support could an extension agent or other service professional offer Mike at this time? What could they offer Roberto?
8. What stressors do Mike and Roberto face? What could Mike and Roberto do to manage these stressors?
9. List some indicators of declining mental health that present in the last paragraph.
10. What options do Mike and Roberto have?



Discussion

The discussion is oriented to address key topics and is by no means an exhaustive list of all the possible answers. It is intended to encourage individual and group reflection and guide discussion.

The Johnsons' Broiler Farm

Stressors

With the larger broiler company's offer to buy the operation, the Johnsons are presented with a difficult decision accompanied by mixed emotions. As they consider the offer, their own reactions may surprise them. The responsibility and friendship they feel for the Martinez family complicates their decisions and heightens the stress and emotional toll associated with the offer and the decision.

Stressors that the Johnson family must manage include running the day-to-day operations of the farm, while preoccupied by the offer and impending decision as well as with the financial vulnerability inherent to operating a small, family-run farm. Mike and Sarah's polarized instincts introduce the potential for intramarital stress and conflict: Mike's reaction is to reject the offer and keep the farm, while Sarah's is to sell and move away. For each, these reactions felt like a natural response to the offer, and neither felt the impulse to consider the alternative option—this may make it difficult for Mike and Sarah to communicate effectively and to give both options equal consideration. The presence of the Martinez family on the farm and the two families' close relationship adds a complicating dimension to the decision the Johnsons must make.

Though the Martinez family does not have an ownership stake in the farm, the decision to stay or to sell could be equally or even more impactful for them. As laborers with a limited social and financial safety net and without a say in the ultimate decision, stress associated with the decision to stay or sell weighs heavily on them. Roberto and Marta may experience mounting concern, anxiety and feelings of responsibility for their family in Mexico, as well as for their relative who has been detained at the border. Adding to the stress, seeming all of the members of this family are in precarious situations. Both Juan and Marta are likely to experience feelings of overwhelm, helplessness, and hopelessness, however each of these emotions may not be experienced equally by both.

Due to entrenched cultural roles of men and women in Western societies, the responsibly Juan feels for the family's wellbeing and success make him more susceptible to feelings of overwhelm, while Marta's lack of autonomy and independence (due to her limited English and to conventional gender roles) make her particularly susceptible to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Simultaneously, Juan and Marta must manage the daily tasks associated with their

work on the farm, the responsibility Marta feels to her volunteer work at the church, and the work of maintaining the household and taking care of the children. Routine tasks like these can be made to feel more difficult and taxing in times of heightened stress and preoccupation.

Strategies

Open and compassionate communication within and among each of the families will be an effective strategy for reducing the intrafamilial and interfamilial stress they experience. Talking openly about their opinions and feelings

Mike and Sarah could visit a couples counselor, or potentially even an extension agent, to help facilitate and mediate a discussion of their options, ideas and opinions. Defining and discussing their personal values, goals, and visions for the future could be a helpful exercise in helping them come to a decision that feels right for both of them. Roberto and Marta could talk to Mike about some of the pressures they face, and together they could consider contacting non-profits or religious organizations that offer assistance to those experiencing detention and deportation. By engaging in open communication, Mike, Sarah, Roberto and Marta open themselves to vulnerability and empathy which can deepen relationships and feelings of connection—powerful assets in mitigating declines in mental health. Further, they may discover that there are solutions or alternative options that they hadn't thought of, as mounting stress often results in clouded judgement and all-or-nothing thinking. Beyond the connections and resources that exist within these two families, they can reach out to their networks of friends and family, as well as the network Marta has established at the church for support. An extension agent or other service provider visiting the farm can offer assistance by encouraging and supporting these types of conversations.

Additionally, an extension agent or other service provider can help the Johnson family navigate their farm transfer through technical support. This may include referrals to a realtor, loan officer, or bank. An extension agent may also be able to make a referral to a colleague who specializes in issues related to labor and migration. Such a colleague could potentially offer support to Mike who must make difficult decisions that affect the Martinez family, and to Roberto who faces mounting pressures from family abroad and at the border at the same time as he must consider impending changes to his employment and living situation.

Indicators of Declining Mental Health

The stress that both of Mike and Roberto bear may manifest in different ways for each. These could include overworking, preoccupation and inability to focus leading to a lack of attention to detail, forgetfulness, and more frequent mistakes. Stress can also present as personality changes including irritability, oversensitivity, or being quick to anger. Other indicators of declining mental health could include social isolation or changes in presentation (such as declines in hygiene, evidence of exhaustion, or an uncharacteristically unkempt appearance).

Resources for Additional Assistance

1. **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
Available 24/7 to anyone in emotional distress or at risk for suicide
2. **Crisis Text Line:** Text "CONNECT" to 741741
Available 24/7 to provide crisis intervention via mobile messaging
3. **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.
4. **Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services:**
www.dbhds.virginia.gov
5. **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.
6. **Virginia AgrAbility:** www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/AEE/AEE-150/AEE-150.html
Virginia AgrAbility's website 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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