



Understanding and Improving the Behavioral Health and Resilience of Farmers, Annie's Project

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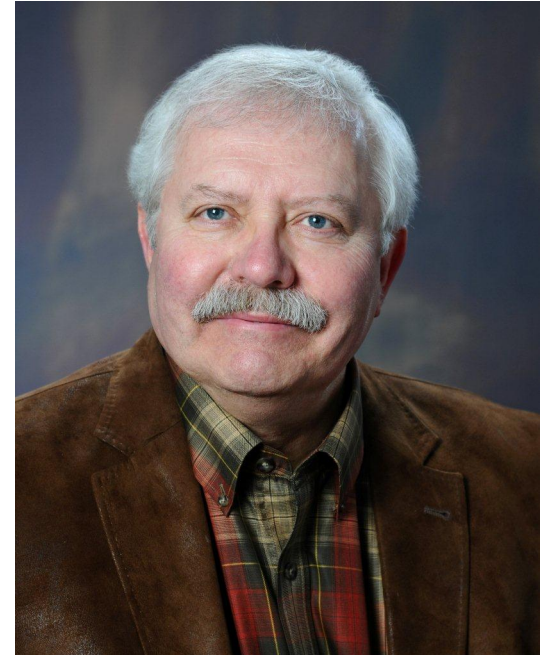
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Aims of Today's Presentation

- Learn what are the main stressors that affect agricultural producers and their indicators
- Improve understanding of the behavioral health of agricultural producers, how it differs from the general population, and how to lessen negative stigma about seeking behavioral healthcare assistance when needed
- Learn skills to better manage behaviors that affect the well-being of agricultural producers
- Answer questions and discuss matters

Many Factors That Affect Agriculture Are Changing

- Climate change is influencing many choices about what and when agricultural producers plant crops and how they raise livestock, poultry, fish, and more
- Consumer choices affect how agriculture is undertaken
- Large-scale corporate and very large farm operations continue to dominate portions of agriculture but consumer preferences are benefitting other methods of production such as organic, regenerative and sustainable farming
- About 85% of current producers, mostly family-sized farms, are somewhere in between these two approaches to farming and are the most vulnerable to leaving agriculture
- Farmers who view farming more as a calling than only as a business are increasing, along with minorities and women

Farmer Demographics Are Changing

- According to the 2017 U.S. Census of Agriculture, 95% of farmers are non-Hispanic Whites, who produce about 95% of agricultural sales
- Hispanics accounted for 2.2% of agricultural sales in 2017, which increased significantly from 2012
- Asians accounted for 1.3% of agricultural sales, which is a small increase from 2012
- Native Americans accounted for .5% of agricultural sales in 2017 but own 5.6% of U.S. farmland, mostly sparse grasslands and other land unsuited for agriculture

Farmer Demographics are Changing cont.

- Farms operated by Blacks accounted for .4% of agricultural sales and 1.4% of the U.S producers in 2017
- From 2012 to 2017 the number of Black producers increased 5% but the number of Black-operated farms decreased 3%
- 88% of Black farmers and ranchers live in 12 southern states
- Addressing systemic racism is an important matter for the current federal administration

Behavioral Well-being Is a Key to Healthy Food Production

- The most important asset for consumers in the food chain is the agricultural producers
- Farmers' and ranchers' behavioral health is positively correlated with optimal livestock health, crop production, sound decision-making, personal and family well-being
- Unlike the weather, government policies, consumer preferences, and COVID, farmers can control their behavior for the most part

Why Use “Behavioral” Instead of “Mental”

- “Behavioral” is more comprehensive and holistic: Includes addictions treatments, psychiatric care, psychological services, and any interventions that impact our behavior
- “Mental” suggests medications and counseling from others are necessary treatments, whereas behavioral health is more understandable and makes us responsible for our thoughts and actions
- We are in charge of most of our behaviors and can manage ourselves
- Behavioral is less stigmatizing and preferred by most US government agencies

There Is More Good Than Bad News About the Well-being of Farmers

- Regenerative practices, organic farming, and sequestering carbon-dioxide are increasing
- Prices for farm commodities have improved recently
- But uncertainties about the near and longer term future are rampant due to: the possibility of drought this year, COVID and its economic recovery, changing foreign markets for U.S farm commodities, the loosening or tightening of regulations, and political uncertainties
- Will farm bankruptcy filings moderate after 3 yrs. of increases?

More Good News

- Despite the worst economic recession in agriculture since the 1980s, the rates of bankruptcy, suicide, and farm loss are not nearly as great as during the 1980s' Farm Crisis
- Farmer-lender solution-seeking efforts have become collegial rather than adversarial since then
- There are better resources today to assist farmers, such as dispute mediation, helplines, ag safety & health programs, behavioral health services suited to farmers and rural residents such as the Farm and the Ranch Assistance Network that is part of the current Farm Bill

AFBF Polls Indicate Improved Understanding of Mental Health

- Morning Consult conducted polls in April 2019 and December 2020 for the American Farm Bureau Federation
- Both polls were with the same 2,004 rural residents, which included 81 farmers and farmworkers; the margin of error was plus or minus 2 percentage points
- In 2019, 30% of farmers said poor mental health was a major problem for them or their workers; in 2020 66% of farmers said COVID was an added strain
- In 2020, farmers were 7% more likely than rural residents to say they were experiencing mental health challenges; younger persons felt the most vulnerable
- In 2019, 31% of rural residents sought assistance and 21% of the farmers and farm workers sought assistance

AFBF Poll Findings cont.

- Two of three rural respondents and farmers said in 2019 that they knew where to seek mental health assistance and they knew the warning signs of a mental health condition
- 82% of farm respondents said their mental health is important to them and/or their family in 2019, and slightly more in 2020
- 91% of farmers/farmworkers said financial issues and fear of losing their farm impact their mental health
- Stigma, cost, and lack of access to competent assistance remained major factors to not seeking help for both rural and farm residents
- Rural residents and farmers/farmworkers would like their primary care providers and mental health service providers to have specialized training about rural life and agricultural behavioral health

The Most Common Diagnosed Behavioral Health Conditions of Distressed Farm People

- Relationship problems, such as partner and marital problems, domestic and child abuse, quarreling with elders, blame and anger are usually the first symptoms, about 40% of diagnoses*
- Adjustment problems, which are temporary exacerbations of anxiety, depression and other behavior problems that remit when stress diminishes, about 24% of diagnoses*
- Anxiety disorders, including excessive worry, panic, PTSD, 11% of diagnoses*

*Rosmann and Delworth, 1993; Rosmann and Stucker, 2008. Some people had more than one diagnosis. The 1993 study involved 122 cases; the 2008 study involved 43,852 farmers & 7,238 cases.

Behavioral Health Problems of the Agricultural Population, cont.*

- Forms of depression, with major depression more common than bipolar disorder, 18-33% of diagnoses, leading to increased risk of suicide
- Substance misuse, either alcohol, street drugs or prescribed medications, 7%, but often co-occurs about 40% of the time with other diagnoses
- Personality disorders are uncommon in the agricultural population, about 1.5%
- Psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia are rare, <1% of the agricultural population

*

Rosmann and Delworth, 1993; Rosmann and Stucker, 2008.

Differences Between the Agricultural & General Populations in Their Behavioral Health

- Ag producers are more likely to experience anxiety and depressive illnesses than the general population, due to genetic predispositions toward ADHD and heightened alertness for threats
- Ag producers have fewer disabling behavioral health conditions than the general population
- Agriculture remains one of the most hazardous occupations, with high rates of physical injuries, illnesses, and fatalities, including psychological perils

The Agrarian Imperative Theory Explains Much about Successful Farmers, and Their Major Struggles

Like many animal species, humans have a basic need to acquire sufficient territory and the necessary resources (e.g., capital, equipment, buildings, livestock) to produce the food and shelter required by their families and communities. Also called “the agrarian personality,” this genetically programmed instinct drives farmers to hang onto their land at all costs. The agrarian imperative instills farmers to work incredibly hard, to tolerate unusual pain and adversity, to trust their own judgment, and to take uncommon risks.*

*Rosmann, MR (2010). The Agrarian Imperative. Journal of Agromedicine, 15, 71-75.

Genetic Predispositions Contribute to Farmers' Behaviors

- Successful farmers have a propensity to exhibit ADHD (Yes, there is an upside to ADHD)
- ADHD also inclines these persons to sometimes take unwise risks, especially when under duress
- Successful farmers have a genetic tendency to react strongly to threats to the extent that they may sacrifice their own well-being to achieve success
- The tendency to react strongly to threats, and sometimes to overreact, is especially prevalent in persons with Teutonic lineage
- Farmers do not readily share their distress with others, but this tendency is changing

Suicide by the Agricultural Population is Among the Highest of Any Occupational Group

- Includes farmers, ranchers, farm workers, migrant laborers, fishers, and foresters
- Suicide in general has become a national crisis, and among farmers in particular
- Farmer suicide is higher than the rate of suicide among military veterans
- Farmer suicide is worsening in most agricultural countries, but not the U.S. just recently
- Early signs point to reductions of suicide by farmers during the past two years

Factors That Increase the Risk of Suicide by Farmers

- Three or more severe simultaneous stressors, with threatened loss of the land or other essential resources to farm being the most serious, the death of a child in a farming event or essential person in the farm operation second, serious personal health compromise third, followed by divorce, living alone, perceived loss of esteem within the community, substance misuse, etc.
- Exposure to toxic pesticides (especially organophosphates, but others also) increase the risks for depression and suicide (Stallones, 2006)

Danger Signals of Excessive Stress, Depression, and Suicide

- Verbalizations about hopelessness (e.g., It's no use, nothing I do works; I can't do this anymore")
- Verbalizations about loss of interest and pleasure in everything (e.g., Nothing is fun anymore; I haven't laughed for weeks")
- Dramatic threats (e.g., I'll shoot all my livestock before I let the court have them")
- Lump in the throat phenomenon, in which the person wants to cry but can't

Danger Signals cont.

- Avoiding public events such as church or kids' school activities and meetings that he/she usually attends
- Flat affect, retreating behaviors and isolation
- Deterioration in personal appearance, the farmstead, livestock health
- Inability to sleep or very limited sleep despite feeling tired for 3 or more nights in succession
- During tax and loan repayment seasons, planting and harvest of farm crops

Managing Our Behavior

- Behavior, like a feed ration, has ingredients that can be varied to maximize our well-being.
- Just as animals need an ideal ration to grow the fastest or to produce the most milk, we humans can manage our behavioral well-being: Our daily and weekly behavior rations include how much and how hard we work, sleep, recreate, pray, laugh, talk, engage in stress management, etc.
- Insufficiencies in any of these can lead to health compromises (e.g., 10 hrs. of sleep debt is similar to .08 alcohol in our blood and nervous system)

Specific Behaviors that Help Us Deal with Stress

- Construct a family and/or business plan for dealing with stress and who to contact for help
- Look out for the welfare of others as well as ourselves, it makes us feel useful, affirms our self-worth, and reduces self-absorption
- Sleep well by turning off lights, sounds, and in a cool place; it's normal to awaken 3 or more times but don't allow yourself to fret when you awaken
- Build a support team of trusted persons who confer regularly in person, or by telephone, email and methods to maintain physical distance

Specific Behaviors that Help Us Deal with Stress cont.

- Talk honestly and confidentially with family members about your and their personal concerns
- Engage daily in prayer, meditation, physical exercise and/or farm work to stay healthy mentally, physically, and spiritually
- Take breaks and recreate away from home when feeling compassion fatigue and serious distress
- Give and request hugs with family members and persons we know well, similar to how animals also affirm bonds by licking and grooming each other; these actions produce the beneficial hormones: serotonin, norepinephrine, and oxytocin

Ag Behavioral Health Services That Are Best Practices

- Telephone and email hotlines/helplines that are culturally acceptable, confidential, accessible when needed and free
- Follow-up counseling that is culturally appropriate, that is, provided by professionals who understand the culture of those needing assistance and they should be racially and ethnically compatible; services should be free, like EAPs
- Capacity to refer for ancillary assistance such as legal, medical, emergency, mediation, business consultation and other desired and useful services
- Community workshops that build relationships and provide education and emotional support
- Promote the services through the FSA, on radio, in local church and news bulletins, newspapers, and through personal appearances

Minority Farmers Experience Historical and Systemic Disadvantages in Addition to the Usual Behavioral Health Perils

- Historical disadvantage refers to long-term, culturally embedded prejudicial behaviors that discriminate against targeted minorities
- Systemic prejudice refers to practices that are carried out by government, public and private organizations, society in general, and individuals that do not treat all people equitably
- Historical and systemic disadvantage contribute to economic and behavioral health distress experienced by many Black, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian farmers
- Historical and systemic prejudice are often such serious stressors that they contribute to threatened loss of the farm, personal well-being, and dignity
- These factors lead to long-term societal disadvantages of minority farmers

Agricultural Behavioral Health Services That Are A++++

- Affordable and preferably without cost so as to not worsen financial problems or insurance costs
- Available at times and places suited to agricultural producers, such as during evenings, weekends, and on rainy days
- Attuned culturally to the needs of farmers, ranchers and farm workers because the providers understand agricultural behavioral health and racial/ethnic matters
- Accessible with acceptable driving distance, in-home counseling, or via telehealth

Actions We Can Undertake

- Contact legislators to fully continue the 2018 Farm Bill with its provisions for the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network (FRSAN) into the future
- Encourage collaboration among farm businesses, ag industries, ag organizations, and local producers to provide resources and to conduct community workshops about agricultural behavioral health and how to minimize social disadvantage for minorities
- Integrate ag behavioral health into FFA, 4H, high school, community college, undergrad and grad training and education programs

2018 Farm Bill

- The Farmers First Act, sponsored by Senators Joni Ernst and Tami Baldwin, authorizes behavioral health supports and resources as part of the USDA Farm Bill
- Authorizes \$10M annually for 5 years; but appropriation of funds must be finalized annually
- Establishes 4 regional Centers to provide technical assistance, train professionals, evaluate local and state FRSAN programs, and conduct research in ag behavioral health
- Competitive grants set up farm crisis hotlines, free follow-up counseling, community workshops and other best practices that are culturally appropriate
- A joint program of the USDA and DHHS

Seeding the Rural Resistance Act

- Passed in 2020, the bill was sponsored by Senators Chuck Grassley and Jon Tester to train employees of the USDA Farm Service Agencies and the Natural Resources Conservation Service in the management of stress experienced by farmers and ranchers, including the detection of stress and possible suicide, and to prevent their suicide
- Augments the FRSAN by promoting its services in places farmers regularly visit to report their farm operation information
- Can market behavioral health services at times, in places, and by methods that reach distressed farmers

Conclusions about the Behavioral Health of Farmers

- Rural residents and the agricultural population are better informed than ever before about managing their behavioral health, and should learn more
- They are more likely to reach out for help and to keep an eye on family and neighbors in need of behavioral health assistance than in the past
- There are inadequate resources for behavioral health assistance in farming areas, but improvements are in sight, such as the FRSAN, this workshop, and Annie's Project
- Suicide is still a perplexing problem among agricultural producers, but receding somewhat

Thank You

- For participating in the webinar today
- For continuing the necessary work of farming and giving of yourselves in order to produce essentials for life: food, fibers, biofuels, and to maintaining a democratic society
- For contributing to healthy agricultural producers and to industries that benefit consumers, as well as our environment and the nation as a whole
- Special appreciation to the Louisiana State University Ag Center for bringing attention to key issues, to agricultural behavioral health, and to social disadvantages that require correction