

WEEKLY NEWS COLUMN
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RURAL STRESS

Farming is one of the most stressful jobs in America. Often times, farmers live where they work and their coworker(s) are their spouse and/or other family members. Many farmers work alone or in isolation. Farmers may have the advantage of being their own boss, but the reality is that they control very little. Many factors that affect farming including price and market uncertainty, machinery, labor, animal or plant diseases, production challenges, weather and even consumer opinions are outside of a farmer's control. These factors can seriously affect a farmer's mental, physical and emotional health in a negative way.

A 2016 study showed that people involved in agriculture have the highest overall suicide rate compared with other occupational groups. The suicide rate among farmers is 60% higher than that of other occupational groups. Let that sink in. The suicide rate among farmers- the people who grow and supply our nation's (and many others') food supply is 60% higher than the suicide rate of other occupational groups.

For many in agriculture, farming or ranching is not just a job, it's their way of life. The family operation has been in existence for multiple generations. With a downturn in the farm economy and environmental catastrophes that have hit parts of rural America in recent years, farms are experiencing increased financial stress and going out of business. Because farming/ranching has become a way of life, the threat of losing a generational legacy is a large burden for farmers to carry. Many have no concept of what they can do outside of the farm. Threat or loss of the family farm or ranch often produces multiple stress-related manifestations, which can lead to depression.

What can we do? Be prepared, keep an open eye for warning signs of stress. These vary between individuals, and their demeanor, words and behavior should be considered in context to what is normal for them. Common warning signs of stress include: ongoing changes in emotion, little enthusiasm for the future, loss of humor, depression or anxiety; changes in attitude and cognitive skills, becoming excessively critical or agitated over small things, trouble making decisions, becoming excessively hopeless; changes to routine behavior and/or appearance including being quieter than usual, difficulty sleeping, withdrawal and isolation, missing meetings, alcohol abuse, feelings of guilt; changes on the farm and ranch, reduced care given to farm/ranch tasks, increase in accidents.

Provide support and help to farmers who are going through extreme stress. Practice active listening. Listen with your eyes and ears while encouraging the person to reveal more about their thoughts and feelings when they're willing to share. Use words that affirm the concerns they are expressing and ask what they are doing to cope. Ask what you can do to support them, or how you can help. Show empathy rather than sympathy. In most cases, sympathy is not helpful to the person receiving it, however, when we make a sincere effort to understand

what the other person is going through, and offer constructive ideas to address the challenges they are facing, we are showing empathy. Empathy can go a long way to helping farmers realize they are not alone in facing challenges.

Follow up is extremely important when dealing with a person in stress for the specific purpose of helping him or her through a crisis. After meeting with a farmer under stress, make the commitment to stay in dialogue, whether you said you'd follow up or not.

Resources for individuals who are in farm/ranch supporting roles- lenders, veterinarians, seed sales- to help farmers is available. Helpful resources include the Kansas Department of Agriculture's website kansasagstress.org, Colorado State University Extension's Fact Sheet 10.255, "Managing Stress During Tough Times" and Michigan State University Extension's "How to Talk With Farmers Under Stress". Additionally, Cowley County Extension will be hosting Mental Health First-Aid February 21 and April 4. This unique program teaches participants how to assist others and make connections when help is needed. For more information, contact the Cowley County Extension Office 221-5450, 441-4565.

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