

Farm Stress: Facts, Impact of COVID-19, and Resource and Training Needs of Mental Health Care Providers

In this brief, unless otherwise specified, “farm” and “farmer” refer to ranchers, farmers, farm managers/owners, and agricultural workers collectively. Many of the recommendations and farm stressors identified do not address the unique stress and barriers to mental health services that are experienced among seasonal and migrant agricultural workers. Future products will address the unique mental health needs of that farm population.

Farmer and Rancher Mental Health

Agricultural and ranching communities encounter unique challenges related to the accessibility, availability, and acceptability of mental health services. Farmers and ranchers have demanding jobs that are often compounded by economic uncertainty, vulnerability to weather events, and isolation. According to the Rural Health Information Hub (RHIIhub), rural agricultural communities may also have limited access to health and mental healthcare services, which can make it difficult for farm and ranch families to receive support when they are experiencing extreme stress, anxiety, depression, or another mental health crisis. Like chronic pain, poor mental health can make it difficult to manage other stressors that are common in farmers’ lives.¹

More recent data provided by the Agricultural Health Study led by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences have been illustrating a correlation between particular pesticides and diagnosis of depression. In fact, a study among farmers in Colorado who had suffered pesticide poisoning (a large dose in a short period of time) found these individuals had double the risk of depression during the next three years.²

An unfortunate outcome of untreated mental health disorders among farmers is death by suicide. For males in the farmers, ranchers, and other occupational managers’ category, the 2012 suicide rate was 44.9 per 100,000 civilian working persons compared to 32.2 in 2015. For males in the agricultural workers category, the 2012 suicide rate was 20.4 per 100,000 working persons compared to 17.3 in 2015.³

Farmers and Ranchers in United States

- As of 2017, there were 2.04 million farms and ranches with roughly 3.4 million farmers (this is down 3.2% from 2012).⁴
- A vast majority (96%) of farms and ranches are family owned.⁴
- Roughly 75% of farms have internet access.⁴
- The average age of farmers / ranchers is 57.5; the average age has continued to increase since 1980.⁴
- One in four producers is a beginning farmer with 10 or fewer years of experience.⁴
- More than half (56%) of all farms have at least one female decision maker.⁴



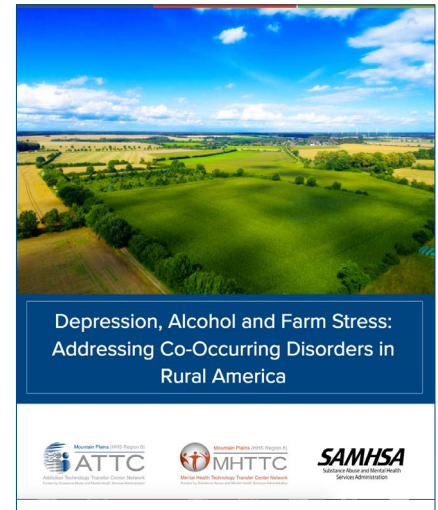
Defining Farm Stress

Farm stress is the stress experienced by farmers and their families as a result of the unique agricultural work environment. It can be experienced by the farmer/producer, agricultural workers, and members of farm families to include spouses and children.

Factors that Contribute to Farm Stress

Farm stress is impacted by several variables, many of which relate to a loss of control. For example, farmers are impacted by, and have little control over, market variability, weather, and mental health care service access.

Following the release of a new product ([Depression, Alcohol and Farm Stress: Addressing Co-Occurring Disorders in Rural America](#))⁵ by authors at the Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (MHTTC) and the Mountain Plains Addiction Technology Transfer Center, MHTTC team members from two regions contacted key stakeholders in May 2020 to assess the impact of the farm crisis and perceptions regarding next steps. Feedback from these providers and key stakeholders is included in the content below with updated data related to farm stress and mental health implications. These interviews and data will guide future activity for both the Mountain Plains and Mid-America ATTCs and MHTTCs.



Weather Realities for Owners and Agricultural Workers



- Extreme outdoor work conditions.
- Fatigue or excessive workload.
- Weather creating an inability to work or an urgency to finish work.
- Floods, droughts, tornadoes, hail, and other weather extremes impact the ability to work, the quality of crops, and the health of livestock.

Market Realities

- Livestock and crop farmers experience increased stress and frustration as losses are being realized/ projected while there is uncertainty about future financial relief.
- Famers experience the stress of selling at a significant loss, or being required to euthanize livestock at a complete loss.
- The markets are volatile with Wall Street controlling commodity prices.
- Expenses related to purchasing are not off-setting production, and livestock producers experience anger and resentment over doing labor intensive work while packers draw a bulk of the profit.

Realities around Mental Health Care Access and Availability

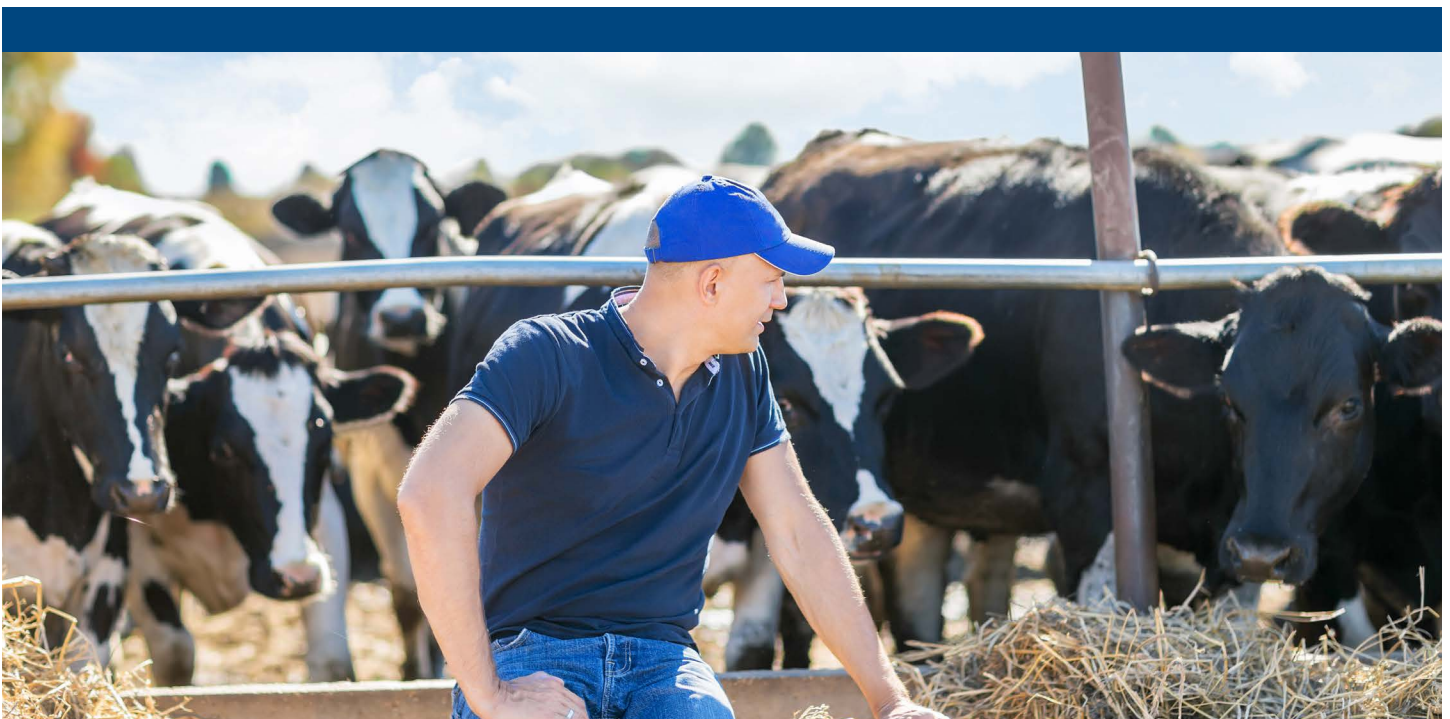
- Stigma around help-seeking, and lack of mental health awareness and available resources.
- Low availability of mental health workforce in rural areas.
- Lack of health insurance or lack of coverage for mental health services.
- Primary care providers not prepared to address the topics of:
 - Depression verse toxic reaction to farm chemicals.
 - Agricultural medicine.
 - Agricultural mental health.

How COVID-19 Impacts Farm Stress

- Markets have crashed for crops and livestock.
 - Farmers may feel it is pointless to plant unless markets go up.
 - Animals may have to be euthanized with little ability for farmers to plan financially.
 - With fewer resources and damaged crops, there is less work available for farm workers.
- It is unknown how long this period will last, and what the long-term future will provide.
- There has been disruption in packing plants and supply chains.
- General public concern around personal health and safety and worker health.
- Isolation and less community engagement.
- Meatpacking plants have been epicenters for the spread of COVID-19.

In the interviews, providers have shared that the mental health disorders they are witnessing among farmers during COVID-19 include:

- Alcohol abuse
- Depression
- Meltdown
- Denial
- Suicide
- Anxiety
- Loss of hope



Assisting Mental Health Treatment Providers in Caring for Farmers

In order To make mental health care accessible and acceptable among farm communities, supports are needed for those providing mental health treatment. Some of these recommendations include:

- Community, family, and primary care providers support for seeking mental health services.
- Expand funding for farm stress support by utilizing disaster dollars.
- Provide crisis counseling to farmers and their families.
- Effort must be made to go to, and directly provide supports, where the farmers/ranchers are.
- Allow farmers to seek supports on their own time through mail, videoconference, YouTube videos, social networks, and email.
- Ensure that developed and available supports are accessible and consider the work schedule of farm communities.
- States need to build, and/or rebuild, mental health supports and services in rural areas.
- Work with community groups and services to develop a way to identify individuals at high-risk of mental duress. Use feedback from bankers, church leaders, doctors, other farmers, and community members who know those who are most at-risk.
- Look for opportunities to grow access to tele-mental health services in rural areas with increased access to broadband.
- Need to recognize regional differences in order to develop applicable resources and provide relevant care. As an example, the percent of producers where farming is the primary occupation is highest in the Midwest.

Suggested Stakeholders as Partners

Although not an exhaustive list, there are many organizations and groups that can be identified as partners in developing a community response to address farm stress. Some of these organizations include those listed below.

- Agricultural extension offices⁶
- Agricultural councils/ associations (soybean growers, livestock producers, sugar beet growers, farm networks, etc.)
- Agronomy experts
- American Farm Bureau⁷
- Community mental health centers
- Conferences of churches
- Critical Access Hospitals
- Faith leaders
- Farm Aid⁸
- Farm Crisis Center
- Farm focused Community Coalitions
- Federally Qualified Health Centers
- Lenders (bankers, banking association, credit union associations)
- Mental Health America⁹
- National Alliance for Mental Illness¹⁰
- National Association of State Departments of Agriculture¹¹
- Primary care providers
- Local public health units
- National Farmers Union¹²
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Ag Safety Centers¹³
- Professional counseling groups [private non-profit]
- Suppliers like Cenex or John Deer
- United States Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency¹⁴



Helpful Resources for Providers who Serve the Farming Community

The Mountain Plains MHTTC has a focus on providing training and resources for individuals who address the mental health needs of individuals living in rural communities. This includes addressing farm stress. Current resources are revised, updated, and frequently added to the [Farm Stress and Mental Health page](#).¹⁵

[AgriSafe Network](#)¹⁶

The AgriSafe Network works on building the competency of health and safety professionals to deliver effective healthcare in agriculture. Their website provides many resources for professionals providing care in agricultural communities and includes topics like mental health, opioid use, COVID-19, and more.

[COVID-19 Crisis Puts Pressure on Farmers' Mental Health](#)¹⁷

This article highlights the stressors brought about by the COVID-19 crisis and how that is impacting farmers' mental health in a time when mental health has already been strained.

[Cultivating Resilience in Rural Communities](#)¹⁸

The toolkit includes a discussion guide, participant worksheet, video, and other materials that discussion leaders can use to plan, prepare, and host a group conversation on mental health in agriculture in a community setting. The resources include the “nuts and bolts” of organizing, promoting, and hosting a conversational event.

[Depression, Alcohol and Farm Stress: Addressing Co-Occurring Disorders in Rural America](#)¹⁹

This toolkit explores factors and barriers that contribute to farm stress and includes a case scenario to highlight how different stressors can interact.

[Farm Aid Resource Guide for Farm Crisis Support](#)²⁰

This guide identifies resources related to disaster response, legal needs, mental health, and other farm-related topics.



[Farm Crisis Center](#)²¹

The Farm Crisis Center was compiled by the National Farmers Union to provide resources for farmers going through tough times or needing extra support. The website provides links for national and local support organizations as well as disaster resources.

[Farmer Resource Network Online Directory](#)²²

This directory has over 750 organizations that help farmers with crisis assistance, legal help, financial counseling, and more.

[Farm State of Mind](#)²³

This article by the American Farm Bureau discusses the unique stressors associated with farming, warning signs of stress, steps to help someone at risk, and additional resources for individuals experiencing stress.

[Farm Stress and Mental Health](#)²⁴

The Mountain Plains MHTTC has compiled this list of trainings and resources to help address the many unique stressors experienced in agricultural communities.

[Farm Strong](#)²⁵

Farm Strong is a nationwide wellbeing program for rural communities, based out of New Zealand. The website shares farmer-to-farmer tips, supported and informed by wellbeing science. These tips help farmers increase their wellbeing so they can cope better with the ups and downs of farming.

[Farm Town Strong](#)²⁶

Farm Town Strong is an initiative started by the American Farm Bureau Federation and the National Farmers Union that provides resources about the opioid epidemic for farm families in need.

[Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota Wearing Out Your Bootstraps campaign²⁷](#)

This campaign aims to overcome the stigma that often accompanies mental health issues in farming communities. This page provides basics about mental health as well as local and national suicide resources.

[Managing Farm Stress²⁸](#)

This webpage from the Michigan State University Extension provides many resources for farmers to manage their stress and mental health, as well as a focus on the Farm Stress Text Message Program.

[Managing Stress²⁹](#)

This article by the Iowa Corn Growers Association provides stress management resources for farmers in Iowa including links to the Iowa Concern Hotline, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, Agrisafe Clinic Network, and Psychology Today.

[Measuring Stigma around Mental Illness in North Dakota³⁰](#)

This brief presents the results and implications of a study in North Dakota that aimed to measure stigma toward individuals with mental illness.

[Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas Map³¹](#)

This map put together by RHHub shows the distribution of Health Professional Shortage Area Scores across the United States for Mental Health Professionals.

[Mental Health Resources for Farmers and Ranchers³²](#)

This website offers a collection of articles focused on mental health, stress, depression, and suicide within agriculture.

[Psychosocial Impacts of Disasters: Assisting Community Leaders³³](#)

This webinar put on by the Mountain Plains MHTTC addressed understanding the importance of risk communication to mitigate mental health problems during disasters, reviewed the phases of disaster as it pertains to mental health, and provided an overview of risk and protective factors for individuals and communities faced with disaster.

[Resources for Farmers Affected by COVID-19³⁴](#)

Farmers are facing uncertain times as COVID-19 spreads across the country. This list of resources from Farm Aid for farmers specifically regarding COVID-19 is updated as new information becomes available.

[Rural COVID-19 Mental Health Resources³⁵](#)

This list was compiled by the Mountain Plains MHTTC and contains many resources for professionals regarding mental health wellness during COVID-19.

[Rural Primary Care Tools and Resources for Addressing Suicidal Ideation During Covid-19³⁶](#)

This webinar explores mental health tools for rural primary care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as how to implement suicide screening and referral services in the midst of a pandemic.

Rural Resilience Online Course³⁷

This online course was put together by the Michigan State University Extension and National Farmers Union to train individuals who interact with farmers to recognize the signs of stress and how to offer help. This course is only available for members of the National Farmers Union.

Rural Response to Farmer Mental Health and Suicide Prevention³⁸

Developed by RHIhub, this rural health topic guide was designed to provide information about federal, state, and nonprofit resources and promising programs in rural communities that are addressing mental health needs in farm populations. It also includes sections about key organizations working on mental health and agriculture issues, and stakeholders who may be positioned to offer support to farmers and their families.

Talking Farm Stress Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic³⁹

This interview with Dr. Andy McLean and Dr. Maridee Shogren discusses the unique stress that farmers are under with the COVID-19 pandemic, tariffs, and a tough planting season. In the podcast, they share what the University of North Dakota is doing to support individuals struggling with mental health issues in these times.

Telehealth Resources During COVID-19⁴⁰

Recognizing that many providers are new to offering mental health care via telehealth, and that rural providers may face unique challenges, the Mountain Plains MHTTC has developed products, trainings, and resource lists to assist in the transition.

Tips for Using Videoconferencing to Deliver SUD Treatment and Recovery Services⁴¹

Put together by the Mountain Plains Addiction Technology Transfer Center (ATTC), this list of resources focuses on best practices and tips to use telehealth effectively in substance use disorder treatment and recovery services.

University of Maine Cooperative Extension Publications⁴²

This page provides a basic overview of the signs of farm stress and how family members and friends can offer help. It also provides links to more detailed University of Maine Extension publications regarding farm stress and national resources.

Direct Web Addresses for Provided Resources and Citations

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Collaboration

This product was developed in partnership between Mid-America Mental Health Technology Transfer Center, Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center, Mountain Plains Addiction Technology Transfer Center, and Mid-America Addiction Technology Transfer Center. The results of these interviews will be utilized to guide future work of the technology transfer centers.

Mid-America Mental Health Technology Transfer Center

The Mid-America MHTTC serves the four states of Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri with a focus on integrated behavioral health and primary care, schools, and mental health training programs. The overall goal is to assist mental health programs and providers to establish evidence-based programs that are locally supported and sustainable over time.

mhttcnetwork.org/centers/mid-america-mhttc/home



Mid-America (HHS Region 7)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center

The primary focus of the Mountain Plains MHTTC is to provide training, resources, and technical assistance to individuals serving persons with mental health disorders. Particular attention is given to serving providers with limited access to service delivery systems with attention paid to rural and agricultural communities. They serve Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming.

mhttcnetwork.org/centers/mountain-plains-mhttc/home



Mountain Plains (HHS Region 8)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Mountain Plains Addiction Technology Transfer Center

The Mountain Plains ATTC serves stakeholders residing in Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming. The goal of the ATTC is enhancing substance use disorder treatment and recovery services for individuals and family members, especially those residing in rural and remote areas.

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Mountain Plains (HHS Region 8)

ATTC

Addiction Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Mid-America Addiction Technology Transfer Center

People accessing services for a substance use disorder in Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska must receive treatment and recovery support rooted in evidence-based and promising practices. To accomplish this, Mid-America ATTC supports multidisciplinary practitioners, agencies, and communities in implementing these practices.

attcnetwork.org/centers/mid-america-attc/home



Mid-America (HHS Region 7)

ATTC

Addiction Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

SAMHSA

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