



Farm Stress And Emotional Well-Being, Part I

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FarmFirst

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Agriculture is an economic and social bedrock of the United States, yet for decades, farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers have endured growing challenges that increase their levels of stress. The Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network Northeast (FRSAN-NE) aims to improve behavioral health awareness, literacy, access, and outcomes for farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers in the Northeast by developing a service provider network that can assist and meet the unique needs of agricultural workers. FRSAN-NE Network members developed a Resource Working Group to focus specifically on providing information and materials designed to inform those who interact with this population. The resources provided here were created to provide information needed by those who want to offer support but don't have expertise in the mental health profession.

This is part one of a two-part guide that briefly describes some of the issues contributing to the challenges of farming and provides helpful strategies and resources to aid farmers in building and maintaining the resilience needed to be successful. It was developed to be used by anyone who lives or works in the world of farming. This publication addresses reducing and managing stress, risk factors, emotions, and spirituality.



Photo: investeap.org

Introduction

Why do farmers farm, given their economic adversities on top of the many frustrations and difficulties normal to farming? And always the answer is: "Love. They must do it for love." Farmers farm for the love of farming. They love to watch and nurture the growth of plants. They love to live in the presence of animals. They love to work outdoors. They love the weather, maybe even when it is making them miserable. They love to live where they work and to work where they live. If the scale of their farming is small enough, they like to work in the company of their children and with the help of their children. They love the measure

of independence that farm life can still provide. I have an idea that a lot of farmers have gone to a lot of trouble merely to be self-employed to live at least a part of their lives without a boss.

—Wendell Berry, *Bringing it to the Table: On Farming and Food*

There's so much to love about farm life, but working on a farm, owning a farm, and being part of a farm family are not easy, even at the best of times. It's important that anyone in a position to support this population recognize that, for many, it's hard to imagine living any other way.

Acknowledging the struggles farmers face, while respecting the commitment they feel, is a starting place for being able to offer information and resources that can ease those struggles.

Countless farmers talk about their land and their work as a way of life that they knew from childhood would be central to who they are and how they live. Farmers, and often their families, work hard and feel pride for both their success and their persistence. It's rare for a line of work to require the diversity of skills and knowledge as is the case for farming. Think about the number of different things done in a typical day! The work might include fixing a tractor, tending to the birth of a cow, filing a new business plan with the bank, and calculating the amount of feed needed for the week.

The broad diversity of skills and knowledge required is just one challenge that contributes to farming being a high-stress occupation. Weather, economics, injury, relationships with employees, governmental policies, and many other factors combine to create what can feel overwhelming. The intention of this guide is to briefly describe some of the issues contributing to the challenges of farming and to provide strategies and resources to help farmers build and maintain the *resilience* needed to be successful.

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from challenges and continue to feel good about one's life, no matter how difficult life events may be. Focusing on resilience is important because farming often includes stressful, demanding, and dangerous work. It's not always possible to eliminate, or even reduce, some of the stressors: for example, farmers can't change the weather. Building resilience is what helps people to better

manage these challenges and minimize the impact stress has on relationships, health, and the well-being of the farm. If left unaddressed, stress can lead to chronic disease, as well as family and economic problems that can ultimately hurt the farm. The good news is that farmers can learn skills to build resilience and reduce stress.

To learn more about resilience, consult these free online resources from the American Psychological Association:

- *The Road to Resilience*
- *Building Your Resilience*

This resource guide provides information and resources designed to support farmers, their families, and employees and help them thrive, despite experiencing the struggles that are common to farm life. It was developed to be used by anyone who lives or works in the world of farming, and it includes information and suggested strategies that are accessible to people who aren't mental health professionals. Everyone can play an important role in this work.

The Agrarian Imperative

Dr. Michael Rosmann, a farmer and psychologist who works in the field of agricultural behavioral health, wrote:

"Farmers are providers with a deep commitment to feeding their communities and caring for their land. Agrarian Imperative impels farmers to hang on to their land at all costs. The agrarian imperative instills farmers to work incredibly hard, to endure unusual pain and hardship, and to take uncommon risks." (Rosmann, 2010)

This statement resonates with people who recognize that a farmer's connection to the land and work can be all-encompassing and represent a commitment beyond what one would generally expect from other occupations.



Photo: Earl Dotter

Related FRSAN-NE Resources

Farm Stress
and Emotional
Well-Being, Part II

Helping Farmers in
Financial Crisis

I'm a Farmer. When
Do I Need a Lawyer?

Weathering the
Storm: A Guide
to Preparing for
Disaster and Finding
Disaster Assistance
for Your Farm or
Ranch



Photo: Earl Dotter

Farm Stressors and Risk Factors

Farming is recognized as one of the most psychologically dangerous professions, evidenced in part by a higher suicide rate than most occupations (Peterson et al., 2020). Understanding the common stressors and risk factors that make farming dangerous is important for reducing farmer stress. What are the most common farm stresses and risk factors?

First, farm work is often performed alone. Although many farmers may be content with such an arrangement, social isolation has been demonstrated to take a toll. For example, a meta-analysis of multiple studies, conducted by group of researchers at Brigham Young University, found that lack of social connection heightens health risks as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day or having alcohol-use disorder. They also found that loneliness and social isolation are twice as harmful to physical and mental health as obesity (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). This suggests that it may be important for farmers to take time to maintain social connections. Obviously, the hours required by farm work and the physical distances between farms can make such efforts a challenge.

Second, farm work often involves long hours of physically tiring activity. Although physical exercise is protective of health, constant physical exhaustion is not. Exhaustion can often lead people to be more vulnerable to their emotions. A difficult or challenging situation can leave one feeling much more despondent when exhausted than the same situation would feel when one is well rested and refreshed.

Economic challenges are another risk factor common among farmers of all types. The United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (USDA-ERS) reports that since 2013 farmers have experienced a 50% decrease in net farm income—a drop so severe that, in 2018, median farm income was *negative* \$1,553 (USDA-ERS, 2021).

Being aware of this data can add considerable perspective to the economic stress experienced by any individual farmer. It puts one's problems into perspective to realize that everyone is struggling and that personal struggles are not likely the result of simply underperforming.

Another situation that negatively impacts farmer well-being is lack of easy access to health care (both physical and behavioral). Although farming is not exclusively a rural endeavor, most farms are in rural areas where services are less available and less accessible. Clinics may be at some distance from the farm. There is often a dearth of providers in rural areas. Access to specialists may not exist, and this can be especially true for behavioral health issues. As of September 30, 2020, the Health Resources and Service Administration (HRSA) had designated 3,363 Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas in rural areas. It is estimated that it would take 1,676 additional practitioners in these areas to remove the designations (Bureau of Health Workforce Health Resources and Services Administration, 2021).

Even when it's available, care can be difficult to access due to problems with transportation, lack of Internet connection for tele-health services, language barriers, and the challenges of taking time away from the farm. Additionally, the lack of mental health services likely contributes to the fact that counseling is unfamiliar to many. Because people are unaccustomed to hearing about it, obtaining professional help may be viewed askance or as evidence of being "crazy." The stigma created by these types of beliefs forms a barrier to seeking such care.

Another source of stress for farmers is the multiple uncertainties they must deal with as part of a profession so dependent on nature. There are numerous unpredictable outcomes posed by the uncertainties of climate change, weather events, insects, and crop performance. Any one of these uncertainties can produce severe consequences for the health of the farm and the stress experienced by farmers. The multiple cascading effects of the global climate crisis have exacerbated these uncertainties in recent years.

The legacy of the family farm and a sense of history bring with them both great pride and the potential of great shame, another source of stress. It is difficult enough for anyone to face the potential loss of a job. When that loss also represents the loss of a family legacy, it can place enormous stress on the person impacted.

Finally, it is important to recognize that farming is also a physically dangerous profession (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 2020). Farmers frequently work with heavy machinery, work amongst large animals, and

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incur exposures to multiple toxic substances in pesticides and herbicides, amongst other risks. These dangers can lead to accidents, injuries, and disabilities, all carrying their own additional sources of stress.

A Brief Overview of Farming Demographics in the United States

Many of the above risk factors are at play for most farmers. However, there are groups of farmers that face additional stressors. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) farmers are some of these groups. Some of these additional stressors are best understood in historical context.

According to *Farm Producers*, a USDA brief reporting findings from the 2017 Census of Agriculture, currently:

- 95% of U.S. producers are white.
- 64% are male.
- The average producer is 57.5 years old (USDA-NASS, 2019).

For many, this is the picture that comes to mind when they think about farming. However, it is an incomplete picture. This current snapshot is one that has been cultivated over time by policies and attitudes that create barriers and challenges for those who don't fit this description.



Photo: investeap.org

How Has this Picture Changed over Time?

Early in the 20th century, farming was the primary occupation of most African Americans in the South. By 1920, 14% of all farms in the United States were Black-owned (about 925,000 farms). Decades of systemic discrimination and the abuse of legal loopholes robbed Black families of farmland and forced most out of the industry. By 1975, just 45,000 Black-owned farms remained. Today, African Americans compose less than 2% of the nation's farmers and 1% of its rural landowners (Douglas, 2017).

Indigenous farmers, who were at one point the only farmers in what is now North America, also experienced devastating losses of their ability to farm. Since 1776, the United States government has taken more than 1.5 billion acres of land from Native Americans. Native Americans were assigned to "reservations." In the 1880s, the U.S. enacted legislation that resulted in Native Americans losing ownership and control of two-thirds of their reservation lands. The loss totaled 90 million acres – an area about the size of Montana. The results were devastating, as generations of Native Americans were robbed of their economic, cultural, and human potential. This massive shift unsurprisingly had a tremendous impact on farming (Indian Land Tenure Foundation, no date).

Some groups of indigenous people have included farming as one of the traditional practices they strive to revive. Regaining food sovereignty has become a global movement that is just one part of an effort to build resilience in native communities.

Many other farmers don't see themselves reflected in the description of the "average" older, white male that the Census of 2017 provides. However, many groups that have faced injustice and marginalization that kept their success in farming limited are now beginning to see resources and support designed specifically to focus on what they, themselves, consider valuable. These include resources for BIPOC farmers, women, people with disabilities, socially disadvantaged farmers, veterans, and young farmers.

Find more information about both the history and current situation among diverse farmers in Appendix A: More on Diversity in Farming.

Impacts of Stress

Stress can impact one’s physical, emotional, and behavioral health. It’s important to be aware of the symptoms of stress, as the stress experienced by an individual farmer is not always obvious, particularly given the stoic exterior of many farmers. Any significant changes in how a farmer experiences emotion, behaves, or feels physically can be a clue that stress may be adversely impacting them.

The symptoms of stress are different for everyone, but here are some common ones.

More information is available in Appendix B: More on Stress and Its Impacts.



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Physical	Emotional	Behavioral
Headaches	Impatience	Increased use of alcohol or recreational drugs, or misuse of prescription medication
Stomach issues	Frustration	Yelling more
Increased blood pressure	Depression	Lack of communication
Clenched teeth, jaw	Difficulty controlling emotions	Physically harming others
Muscle tension	Anxiousness	Difficulty relaxing
Sudden perspiration	Anger	Sleep issues
Rapid heartbeat	Difficulty with change	
Back pain		

Managing and Reducing Stress: The Path to Wellbeing

The previous sections focused on identifying stressors common to farmers and how to recognize their effects. This section explores what can be done about stress.

The Role of Agricultural Service Providers

Agricultural service providers, fellow farmers, and others can do a great deal to help farmers and their families manage their stress and stay healthy and productive. Sometimes, people mistakenly think that only trained professionals can tackle issues of well-being, but the most important asset anyone has to offer is a true connection of caring and a desire to help.



Photo: Earl Dotter

Research confirms that the relationship itself is a strong component of the success that many experience from psychotherapy (Lambert and Barley, 2001). Some studies have even called it the most important common factor in successful outcomes to psychotherapy (Stamoulos et al., 2016). When a task force put together by the American Psychological Association's (APA) Society of Clinical Psychology set out to identify empirically supported treatments, they found that the "therapy relationship makes substantial and consistent contributions to psychotherapy outcome independent of the specific type of treatment" and that "the therapy relationship accounts for why clients improve (or fail to improve) at least as much as the particular treatment method" (Stamoulos et al., 2016).

attitude is accurately depicted with a great deal of humor in the Bob Newhart comedy sketch "Stop It!" that is available online at [youtube.com/watch?v=4BjKS1-vjPs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BjKS1-vjPs)

Although this is a humorous depiction of Bob Newhart doing everything wrong if he truly wants to be helpful to someone looking to make some changes, it is easy to imagine how frustrated and misunderstood the client felt. This example points out that there is more to the process of change than may appear. There are multiple steps that people must undertake, moving them from that first inkling that a change may be needed to the point where they are consistently behaving in a different way. When making small changes, individuals may go through these steps so quickly that they may not even be aware of them. Large changes may take longer, and the process may be more obvious.

There are numerous models of this change process, and they all describe things a bit differently. What they have in common is the recognition that change is not a magical event that spontaneously happens. Most models are uncomplicated and are not difficult to understand. Learning about change can help us have realistic expectations of people who are struggling with behaviors that are hurtful to themselves and others. This improved understanding can help us be patient and empathic while someone struggles through the process.

- It will benefit the helper to share some knowledge or interests with the farmer. This should not be taken to mean that to be helpful one must know everything about farming. It does mean that a farmer who is sharing concerns wants to know that their world is important enough that the person they are sharing with is investing in learning and understanding more about it. Taking the time to master some basic terminology and learning the source of local farmers' biggest worries are great places to start.
- Having extensive knowledge of resources and support is essential. This way, even without having all the answers, it is still possible to identify connections and other sources of help quickly and accurately. Offering something concrete, like a referral to someone who has expertise in an area of need, can generate a surge of hopefulness that may be greatly needed. When that

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What Makes a Connection Helpful?

- Showing up. Showing up means making the effort to be available when needed and being accessible in a variety of ways (calls, visits, email, etc.) to meet individual preferences.
- Empathy. It is important to demonstrate to farmers that you appreciate the gravitas of their situation and that you care.
- Genuineness. It is important to be honest about what you say, and to say things that are commensurate with how you feel. It's easy to tell when someone says they care but really do not.
- Nonjudgmental. Although you may disagree with some things that a farmer says or does, your role in providing support is to listen without judgment. If you judge someone's thoughts or behaviors, they will tend to shut down and stop talking.
- Active listening. Active listening fosters trust and helps people feel cared about and understood. These skills are not difficult to learn but may take some practice to seem like a natural way of approaching a conversation. One simple way to define the term is that active listening is *listening for meaning*. More information is available from the publication *How to Talk with Farmers Under Stress*, listed in the Further Resources section.
- One more thing that helps make a connection helpful is understanding how change works. On the surface, it may seem simple. If someone's behaviors are causing them pain and anguish, it seems clear that they should change those behaviors. This

information is not readily available, it's essential to do the work of obtaining it and coming back to close that loop. The farmer should not be expected to do the research and exploration. Instead, a more helpful approach is to show up well-equipped to share information about common concerns and situations.

Some of the more common resource areas to become familiar with include these:

- Financial
- Legal (including agricultural mediation)
- Disaster relief
- Disability



Photo: investeap.org

What Can Farmers Do About Stress?

Before focusing on strategies, it's important to realize that eliminating all stress is not the goal. That is not realistic, and it's not a good idea, anyway. Although we frequently talk about stress as something negative, some stress serves a purpose and is, in fact, important to well-being. It plays a role in keeping us safe and functioning well. It even plays a role in survival, by giving our bodies the boost they need to be able to fight off or flee from danger.

Is stress helpful or harmful?

That usually depends on:

- The amount of stress being experienced.
- The person's response to the stress.

The objective is to keep stress in balance. Times of higher-than-usual stress are inevitable. They may be precipitated by bad weather, a sick animal, or a broken-down piece of equipment. The amount and the timing are often not in the farmer's control. Because of the negative impact that too much stress can have on physical and mental health, relationships, and behaviors, it's important to balance out times like these by increasing activities that manage the stress response.

Increased stressors + Increased stress management = Less negative impact

Fortunately, there is a lot that farmers can learn in the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral realms that will mitigate their responses to stress. Learning and practicing these strategies can help a farmer maintain a sense of having some control during hard times and alleviate the negative impact.

GOOD NEWS: A healthy balance is determined less by what is happening in life than by thoughts, actions, and feelings.

Thoughts, behaviors, and feelings are all key factors in managing stress. We will explore each of these in more detail.



Photo: Earl Dotter

Cognitive (Thinking)

Farmers don't have much of a say in how many potentially stressful events happen in their lives. They have little control over whether crops experience a season with insufficient rain or whether milk prices suddenly fall. Still, how farmers think about such events can have a big impact on how they feel. If a farmer engages in catastrophic thinking and, for example, tells themselves that their life is now finished, they will experience much more stress. On the other hand, farmers can learn to remind themselves that they have no control over such events, realize that such events impact most farmers, and tell themselves that all they can do is to do the best they can. In this way, they can feel good knowing that whatever happens, they will understand that they did their best, and they will experience a greater sense of internal power and feel less stress (Beck, 1976).

P sychologists have studied thinking patterns and found that there are common patterns of that often trap all of us and that can lead to a low state of mind, where things may appear hopeless. These patterns are sometimes referred to as distorted thinking.

When people engage in thinking that exacerbates their stress, their thinking often narrows and, ironically, they see fewer options for themselves. This can be a scary place because when farmers may be feeling their worst and need to be able to see that they have options, they may not be able to. That's why it can be important for farmers to learn and practice ways of thinking that enable them to maintain a more open perspective. It's part of building resilience.

Psychologists have studied thinking patterns and found that there are common patterns that often trap all of us and that can lead to a low state of mind, where things may appear hopeless. These patterns are sometimes referred to as distorted thinking. The patterns are called *distorted* because our thinking at such moments frequently distorts reality, making events around us seem much worse than they really are. It's helpful to learn about frequent distorted thinking patterns to be able to identify them easily and correct such thinking to avoid the traps of hopelessness and increased anxiety (Burns, 1989). More information about common distorted thinking patterns is available in Appendix C: More about How People Think.

Behaviors

People's actions and behaviors also have an impact on the stress response. In fact, some behaviors can lead to a downward spiral. For example, anxiety is often alleviated by connecting with others. However, for many, the feeling of anxiety leads

them to want to isolate themselves. Isolation can then lead to feeling worse. If, instead, anxiety is met with a positive stress-response strategy, such as connecting with others for mutual support, people often feel better. From this better place, it is easier to keep making positive choices, and people move in a more upward trajectory, spiraling upwards, as it were. There are many actions that can have this effect. Helping others is a particularly effective one. In fact, scientists have verified that helping others causes a positive chemical reaction in our brains. One study that monitored 846 people over five years found that although stress was generally linked to a higher chance of dying, this was not the case among those who helped others. It may seem counterintuitive for struggling individuals to help others, but that may be just the recipe for feeling better (Poulin et al., 2013).

There is strong evidence of other activities being able to trigger these upward spirals of behavior and mood. It usually takes some time for people to learn and practice how to feel their best during stressful times, but everyone can increase their resilience to stress. More information can be found in the Strategies section.

Emotions

Farmers have historically been known as a stoic lot. Their mantra is one of self-sufficiency and endurance of hardship without showing feelings or complaining. Someone once suggested that ignoring feelings is a lot like saying, "There is no sense in getting thirsty when there is no water around to drink." The human body just doesn't work that way. Emotions are natural and trying to bury them can contribute to many physical ailments. It's important to support farmers in expressing their feelings and to reassure them that feelings are okay. In this way, people can learn to not to be so overwhelmed by feelings that they experience. Ideally, people learn to simply notice or observe their feelings and not to become absorbed by them. A feeling can come up, be noticed without judgment, and then released. This release is what's happening when someone cries when upset or laughs with happiness. It's a natural way to release emotions, can feel good, and is an important defense against the negative impacts of stress.

If people pay attention to their feelings, their emotions may provide them with useful information about what is, or isn't, working in their lives. For example, it can be useful if

people notice when they're feeling happy and try to repeat the experience that produced that happiness. Similarly, when people notice when they're feeling upset, that may lead them to see some patterns about parts of their lives that might need some change. On the other hand, pushing away these emotions eliminates the chance to use those discoveries to improve things.

It can feel scary to pay attention and express emotions for those used to ignoring them. Many people grew up in families where it wasn't acceptable to show feelings, or at least some feelings, and breaking that rule can add to the fear. It gets less scary as people get more used to it. Some people find it helpful to work with a counselor if the whole idea seems too uncomfortable or frightening.

At the other end of the spectrum of stoicism, some may find that, rather than getting pushed down, emotions seem to be constantly bubbling up with little warning. Some people may just be more emotionally expressive, by temperament. Childhood experiences may also play a role. Interestingly, sometimes people who have avoided their feelings for a long time can simply get so overwhelmed by emotions that they can no longer keep them under wraps. Instead of the person noticing their emotions and then releasing them, the feelings have exploded before the person even realizes what is happening. It is scary to feel like emotions have taken control.

Both suppressing feelings and being overwhelmed by them are extremes. Balance is the goal. Learn more in the Spirituality section.

Emotional regulation is a term used to describe turning emotions up or down, by degrees, as appropriate to the situation at hand. Emotional regulation is about learning to respond rather than react. A farmer may tend to react to a strong feeling by pushing it down before they even recognize what it is or by simply letting it fly with no consideration of consequences. When someone rationally responds, they are engaging their conscious mind to choose to decide the best way to handle the emotion in that moment.

Recognizing that someone can stop and decide how they are going to respond to a situation may seem unrealistic, especially for someone who has

developed strong habits over the years. However, people can learn to recognize emotions when they first start to build and to avoid impulsive responses. Self-awareness can be developed. Find more information online in the article "5 Emotion-Focused Coping Techniques for Stress Relief," listed in the Further Resources section.

How you think and behave makes a difference in how you feel.

Everyone feels lonely sometimes.

You are not alone.

For more information regarding emotion-focused responses to stress, consult Appendix D: More on Emotions as a Coping Strategy.

Strategies and Tools

There are many ways that people can minimize the impact that stress has on their lives. Searching for strategies can feel overwhelming. Scientific research has provided evidence about the effectiveness of some strategies and has strengthened the understanding of why these strategies have the impact they do. Beginning exploration by focusing on research-informed strategies can make the search much more manageable. Some of the more common approaches are briefly described below and more information can be found in the Michigan State University Extension publication *Managing Stress for Farmers and Farm Families*.



Photo: investeap.org

Mindfulness

By learning to focus awareness on our physical body and surroundings, or to notice one's thinking in the moment, mindfulness allows people to become more centered and calmer (more emotionally regulated). In the process, people learn to observe their thoughts rather than "be" their thoughts. People can then notice an anxious thought as an anxious thought instead of taking that thought as "the single truth" (Hofmann et al., 2010). Research shows that mindfulness can reduce anxiety.

With mindfulness practice, farmers can learn how to respond to stress by focusing their awareness on what is happening in the present moment, rather than worrying about the future. As with any new skill, developing mindfulness requires practice. The good news is that in any moment, people can choose to practice mindfulness.

Spirituality

Psychologists know what many people have always believed to be true: spirituality can add positivity to life and reduce stress. This is often evident in someone whose spirituality seems to hold them up when their life gets challenging. What is spirituality? Spirituality can mean different things to different people, but, generally, it's a practice that helps people maintain their overall life in perspective amidst chaos. It has a lot to do with how someone makes sense of the world, their life, and their purpose on the planet. Spirituality for some is based in a religious belief; for others, it may have more to do with nature or being a part of a community. Sometimes, it involves a belief in something greater than oneself, such as a higher being or the universe.

One of the reasons spirituality helps is that it makes it easier to stop worrying about things that aren't within one's control. At times, it seems most everything fits into that category. Obviously, as we've stated previously, farmers can't control the weather or commodity prices. It can be easier to let go to a certain extent when one has a belief that, overall, life makes sense. There is purpose in living and the universe spins as it is supposed to. Believing this can help people have faith that things will be okay.

For more thoughts on spirituality, consult Appendix E: More on the Role of Spirituality.

Other Helpful Approaches to Consider

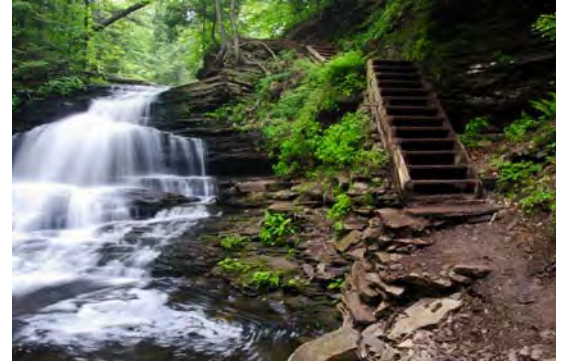


Photo: investeap.org

Countless ways to improve how one feels and functions in the world have been learned and practiced by people over many years. The list below is a small sampling of a few that have been well-researched and that people may have heard of already. Practices such as these are often considered "new-age" or maybe as something only religious monks would use. They have, however, become quite mainstream in the Western world. Suggesting them as options to be considered among strategies that may be more familiar and recognizing the science behind them may make them feel more approachable. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a data brief about the use of meditation, yoga, and chiropractors that provides information about the increase in usage and breaks that down to consider differences in age, gender, race, and Hispanic origin (National Center for Health Statistics, 2018).

- *Meditation* is a practice that has long existed and been studied extensively. Mindfulness, is just one approach to meditation. Because there are many different types of meditation, publishing clear and consistent findings is complicated. The bottom line is that there is a significant body of research supporting the practice as an effective tool for overall physical and mental well-being, and it has been adopted broadly. In fact, there are estimates that as many as 5 million people worldwide meditate.
- *Yoga* is another practice that is ancient and has evolved in many different directions through the years. Yoga is used both as a spiritual practice and as a form of exercise, and some of the adaptations emphasize one aspect more than the other. Yoga has been shown to improve flexibility and strength

If you let go a little, you will have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you will know complete peace and freedom. Your struggles with the world will have come to an end.

– Achaan Chah,
Thai forest monk,
from his book, *A Still Forest Pool*

in ways that can help prevent injury and help the body withstand intensely physical work. In fact, yoga routines developed specifically to help build resilience to the most common physical problems of farmers are becoming quite common, and many are easy to do on the farm during the workday. A quick tour of YouTube immediately brings up at least 20 of them. Here are a couple that may be helpful:

- *Yoga for Fruit Pickers and Farmers.* This video introduces a quick routine to try. Its 10-minute length makes it easy to build into a daily routine.
- *Yoga for Farmers and Ranchers.* This is a longer video—about 45 minutes—that both demonstrates helpful poses and teaches more about yoga and its benefits.

In addition to keeping the body fit for the work to be done, there are clear indications that yoga helps many people manage their stress and maintain clear focus. Like meditation, there are numerous approaches to explore, and people are likely to find something they like that works well for them.

- Since ancient times, *martial arts* have been employed for everything from combat and self-defense to discipline and self-knowledge and for physical fitness. Like meditation and yoga, these practices have impacts on body, mind, and spirit and there are many distinct types of practice that have been well-researched. It is interesting to note that farmers and farm tools played a role in the early history of martial arts. It may be particularly helpful to visit the Further Resources section to learn more about two martial arts programs with connections to farming: Nature and Martial Arts and Kung Food: Mixing Martial Arts With Urban Agriculture.
- *Breathing* as a stress management strategy may seem silly. After all, breathing is one of only a few things that humans are born with the capacity to do right away. Still, for many people—especially those under stress—how they breathe may have become a problem that can have significant impact. For more information, see the article “How to Breathe Properly” in the Further Resources section. Breathwork is often taught in conjunction with yoga and meditation and is, at its core, intentional breathing. Most people find breathwork easy to learn, it’s always accessible, and it’s also free!

- *Music and art* can be used in many ways to help with stress and emotional challenges. Both are sometimes used as a central part of therapy practice with someone who has been trained and certified in these areas. Both music and art, of course, can always add joy and relaxation to life without going to see a therapist. There is a considerable amount of information available on how music and art have a positive impact.

A review of research led one author to share the following conclusions:

- Art and music can lower anxiety and depression.
- There are plenty of ways to practice from home.
- Even a few minutes can improve your mood and well-being.
- Working on a project with loved ones can bring you closer together.

When Prevention and Maintenance Are Not Enough

These strategies are all great for preventing too much stress and helping people maintain equilibrium when things get hard. Sometimes though, hard times overcome usual coping strategies and people get off course in concerning ways. Others may struggle due to genetic differences or early childhood experiences that impact their ability to practice and experience resilience easily. FRSAN-NE has produced a second volume of this guide specifically to address these issues.

In *Farm Stress and Emotional Well-being, Part II*, you will find information and resources related to the following topics:

- Counseling as a strategy, including how to choose a counselor and insurance information
- Anxiety and Depression
- Alcohol and Other Drugs, including the opioid crisis
- Family and Relationship Challenges
- Suicide, including prevention strategies for everyone
- Grief and Loss, including the loss of a farm
- Anger
- Medications
- Peer Support

For many people—especially those under stress—how they breathe may have become a problem that can have significant impact.

Conclusion

The information and strategies in this guide are stepping stones to resilience, which is a key factor of success in overall well-being and in farming. Sharing these tools with farmers, farm families, and farm workers can equip them to thrive despite the challenges inherent in their work. It is essential to recognize that resilience is, in fact, built through practice and is not a character or personality trait.

Acknowledging and learning to recognize stressors that are common in the world of farming creates an opportunity to make connections

and to be well-positioned to share insights and concrete tools that fit the person and the situation well. The commitment and persistence that may make it hard for some people to admit that they are struggling or need to make changes must be respected. It's important to remember that many of these tools will be new introductions to farmers with whom you speak, which they may or may not be ready to embrace. Keep in mind that people change behaviors in small steps, from contemplation to small actions; as such, it is important to understand how to best to support farmers to move incrementally toward their goals.

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Appendix A. More on Diversity in Farming

In addition to the losses suffered by Black and indigenous people during the 20th Century, there were many other changes in the demographics of farmers. Gender and age of producers were two other areas of fast-moving change. In fact, even the definition of “farm producer” was changed to encompass anyone with a decision-making role on a farm. For more information, *Farm Producers* provides an overview of informative data from the 2017 Census of Agriculture, and AgrAbility Resources offers a comprehensive range of resources for specific populations or characteristics.

Women Farmers

The number of female farmers has fluctuated over time. There was a large increase in women farmers when men left their farms during the Second World War either to enter the armed services or to have better paying jobs while industry was booming.

The Bureau of Agricultural Economics reported that more than two million men left farm jobs between April 1940 and July 1942. By the time the war ended, that number had climbed to six million, while U.S. food production had grown by 32% over prewar levels, according to the USDA (Prater, 2018).

After a dip in their number following the war, female farmers are again experiencing a surge in growth and efforts are being made to better represent and meet the needs of female farmers. Explore The Female Farmer Project and “A History of ‘Women’s Work’” to learn more.

Young and Beginning Farmers

Concentrated efforts are being made to encourage younger farmers to consider agriculture as a viable occupation. Data from the 2017 Census of Agriculture provides us with the average age of farmers, but it’s important to note that some 27% of farmers are categorized as new and beginning producers, with 10 years or less of experience in agriculture (Abbott, 2019). Early research on the topic suggests that young farmers may be at increased risk of mental health disorders when compared to more experienced farmers, due to some additional stressors they may face (Ahearn, 2011). Among farmers, young farmers may suffer most from economic distress. They carry high burdens of depression and anxiety about finances and time pressures (Rosino, 2016).

Information specific to new farmers can be found at USDA New Farmers. Also, the National Young Farmers Coalition is an advocacy organization with a mission is to represent, mobilize, and engage young farmers to ensure their success.

People with Disabilities

Recent ERS research estimated that an average of about 19% of U.S. farmers (395,000 people) and 9% of U.S. farmworkers (134,000 people) had a disability at some point between 2008 and 2016 (Miller, 2019). As farm communities have made adaptations and adjustments to help those who become disabled in the dangerous work of farming, people with pre-existing disabilities are also experiencing more access and being able to farm. AgrAbility provides many additional resources for those interested in learning more.

Veterans

An additional trend worth noting is the surge in U.S. veterans turning to farming careers. Like other groups, veterans bring their own unique strengths and challenges to the industry. There is an increasing number of programs being established to support vets in making this transition, and program descriptions often note the perseverance and ingenuity that many vets bring with them from their previous experience.

A significant portion of veterans need mental health services. According to the VA National Suicide Data Report 2005-2016, the age- and gender-adjusted rate of suicide among veterans was 26.1 per 100,000, compared to 17.4 among non-veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018). Pair this information with the high suicide rates amongst farmers and it becomes clear why resources developed to meet the needs of veteran farmers need to address mental health needs. Also see Appendix I: More About Suicide Prevention. Additional resources for this population are available from Veterans to Farmers, USDA New Farmers, Farmer Veteran Coalition, and AgrAbility.

Socially Disadvantaged Farmers

According to the USDA definition, many of the diverse sub-populations of farmers described above are defined as socially disadvantaged.

The Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act (Public Law 87-128; 75 Stat. 294) defines a socially disadvantaged group as one whose members have been subject to racial, ethnic, or gender prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual characteristics.

USDA Economic Research Service addresses how women and other farmers fit the definition of socially disadvantaged farmers (USDA-ERS, 2021). As a group, socially disadvantaged farmers face many of the same challenges as one another. On average, socially disadvantaged farmers have smaller farms, which produce less. There are multiple factors that contribute to this situation, and they are complex and most often systemic. A USDA Economic Research Service report to Congress provides a wide range of comparative data that illustrates this situation (USDA-ERS, 1995). More resources can be found at USDA Farm Service Agency's Minority and Women Farmers and Ranchers Web page.

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National Young Farmers Coalition. youngfarmers.org

USDA New Farmers. newfarmers.usda.gov

Veterans to Farmers. veteranstofarmers.org

Appendix B.

More on Stress and Its Impacts

University of Maryland Extension and University of Delaware Cooperative Extension have published *Farm and Farm Family Risk and Resilience: A Guide for Extension Educational Programming* as part of a toolkit that is available online. The guide contributes to the growing body of research that focuses on the serious consequences of unmanaged stress on the farm.

When stress piles up, the ability to make sound decisions decreases (Friborg et al., 2003), the ability to adopt agricultural best practices and take appropriate action decreases (Burnett, 2014), and injury and illness increase (Jackson et al., 2015). The farm, and those who farm, become at-risk.

Studies show that injury is prevalent on farms due to dangerous equipment, work with animals, and numerous other farm dangers. Stress increases the likelihood of accidents, as it has also been associated with injuries (Thu et al., 1997).

One study of injuries on Iowa farms found that hurry (38%), fatigue (15%), and stress (14%) were commonly reported as contributing factors. Interventions aimed at reducing hurry, fatigue, and stress should be emphasized in injury prevention. Behavioral interventions aimed at reducing stress are key (Rautiainen et al., 2004).

In addition to stress making farm life more dangerous, it is also closely linked to dozens of short and long-term health issues. In fact, emotional stress is a major contributing factor to the six leading causes of death in the United States: cancer, coronary heart disease, accidental injuries, respiratory disorders, cirrhosis of the liver, and suicide (Simmons and Simmons, 1997). The connection between stress and health problems is not surprising when you learn a bit more about the fight or flight response and the ways our bodies and brains partner to try to keep us safe. Learn more from the Mayo Clinic publication *Chronic Stress Puts Your Health at Risk*.

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Appendix B Further Resources

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Appendix C.

More About How People Think

Many of these types of distorted thinking overlap with one another but do have some unique characteristics. See if any seem familiar.

- *Perfectionism.* You tend to think everything should be perfect: how your farm runs, how your crops grow, how your family behaves. The problem is, life seldom works like that.
- *All-or-nothing thinking.* If a situation falls short of expectations, you see it as a complete failure. Everything is either all good or all bad. Because things are rarely all good for anyone, you in turn view them as all bad.
- *Overgeneralization.* You view a single negative event, such as flood damage, as a never-ending pattern of things not working in your life by using words such as “always” or “never.”
- *Filtering.* You focus on a single negative detail exclusively, so your vision of the broader reality becomes blinded. Maybe your marriage is good; that doesn’t matter at to you at these moments when you’re so focused on this one bad thing.
- *Negative focus.* Related to filtering, you discount the positive in your life. You reject positive experiences by insisting they “don’t count” as much. You fail to regularly feel grateful for what is good.
- *Mind-reading.* Without checking it out, you assume someone is thinking negatively about you.
- *Fortune-telling.* You predict that things will turn out badly. Spoiler alert: no one can predict the future. Studies show 80% of what we worry about never happens.
- *Magnification.* You exaggerate the importance of your problems and shortcomings or minimize your desirable qualities.
- *Emotional reasoning.* You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are. You assume that because you feel a certain way—scared or depressed—that those feelings accurately reflect reality. Often, they do not.
- *“Should” statements.* You tell yourself that things should be the way you hoped or expected them to be.
- *Labeling.* (Extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking.) Instead of saying “I made a mistake,” you say, “I’m a loser.”
- *Personalization and blame.* You believe that everything that happens is about you. You literally take everything personally, even when something is not meant in that way. You hold yourself personally responsible for events that aren’t entirely under your control or perhaps blame others for personal mistakes.
- *Overestimating.* You tend to overestimate the realistic chances of some negative event happening when compared to the objective or scientific reality.
- *Catastrophizing.* You tend to assume or imagine that if some worrisome event happens, the result will be a catastrophe and you won’t be able to cope. You tend to ignore the objective reality and your current coping skills.

Almost everyone engages in some of these forms of distorted thinking occasionally or frequently. If we engage in many of these forms of distorted thinking often, it can lead to serious

depression. It doesn’t need to, though. The good news, if you find a number of these types of thinking familiar, is that you have a lot to work with that you can change to feel better! This is what the field of cognitive therapy is all about and research shows it really works! Our thinking patterns are highly malleable. If you “tend” to engage in a lot of the above types of thinking, you can practice and develop new thinking patterns that will have you experiencing life quite differently. Brain research shows that thinking patterns are a lot like a well-worn path in the woods. Once the path is worn, we tend to take it over and over; however, what’s exciting about the brain is that these patterns can be changed. Just as we can cut a new path in the woods, we can develop new, healthier patterns of thinking.

One way to do this is to stop what you’re doing when you’re feeling bad and take the time to review this list. Do you notice that you’re engaged in some of these forms of distorted thinking? If so, challenge yourself with the facts. Think about how you can reframe your thinking so that it’s less distorted. Many people find it most helpful to write this all down.

Here’s an example: You find yourself feeling highly anxious about the future of your farm. You review the checklist above. You see that you’re engaging in catastrophic thinking. You’re thinking the absolute worst will happen. Maybe you even go to an extreme and picture yourself as destitute and out on the street. Even with catastrophic farm failures, that scenario almost never happens. People usually land on their feet. Other things that they can’t possibly imagine happen, many of them quite positive. We note all of this and reframe our thoughts. “My farm will fail, and I will be out on the streets” becomes “I have a lot of strengths. The farm may not fail, but even in that worst-case scenario, unknown possibilities will likely emerge.”

When we engage in thinking that exacerbates our stress, our thinking often narrows and, at the very moment when it’s most important for us to see that we have options, our narrow forms of thinking prevent us from seeing them. Sometimes we’re able to stop and review our distorted thinking patterns, as suggested above. What do we do when that fails, or when we just can’t seem to muster the energy to do such a review? In those moments, it’s simply important to stop – stop all thinking. In those moments, label your thinking as part of a low state of mind and don’t trust any of it. Being at that point is like climbing into a garbage can. When you look around from inside a garbage can, all you can see is the inside of the garbage can. Attribute all your thoughts at that time to “being inside the garbage can.” Don’t take them seriously. What do you do instead? Simply focus your thinking on what you’re doing right in front of you. Are you walking? Focus on how the bottoms of your feet feel against the ground. Are you shoveling manure? Focus on how the shovel feels against your hand. Notice what you smell. Take a vacation from all your distorted thinking and worries. This is called mindfulness. Your goal is to bring your thinking to the very present moment and to steer it gently away from all thoughts and worry about the future. Doing this can often amazingly shift your mood over time. Either gradually or suddenly and unexpectedly, we may find ourselves in a more positive state of mind. It’s only when solidly in those positive states of mind that anyone should do any serious thinking about the future.

Appendix D. More on Emotions as a Coping Strategy

The article “5 Emotion-Focused Coping Techniques for Stress Relief” provides concrete recommendations and explanations of some common and effective strategies for managing chronic stress (Scott, 2020). Much stress is life is situational, which means that the stress felt is in response to certain people, places, or things. Stress is our body’s response and sets off our arousal system. In situational stress, that

response resets when the situation changes or we take a break from it. Chronic stress is a term used to describe the experience of being in the stress response mode to the point that the body does not have the opportunity to reset, and people are in a near constant state of arousal. This is the type of stress that can be detrimental to physical health and mental well-being.

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Appendix E. More on the Role of Spirituality

Here are some examples that spirituality can reduce stress:

- It can provide a source of hope.
- It can provide a sense of purpose. For example, following one’s values can bring meaning to one’s life. If someone perceives their purpose as following certain values, then the results of what they accomplish financially, for instance, may become less important.
- It can help connect to others. Seeing that one is part of a whole community of beings may help a person realize that they are far from alone with their problems.
- Connecting with a higher power (e.g., God) or nature can help people to release stress and have faith in something greater than themselves.

Here are some ways to make spirituality a bigger part of life:

- You may be able to think back in your life to a time that you felt this type of strength. Maybe it was part of your early family life and a connection to a particular religion. Give it a try again—if it worked once, it may well work for you again.
- You can also look around you and notice the people who you would describe as typically positive in their attitudes and steady in their moods. You might describe these people as serene or peaceful. This isn’t to say that these people are somehow removed from all that is going on around them. They may be some of the most productive and vibrant people you know! Consider talking to these people, or at least paying close attention to them so you can begin to understand what it is that they have working for them that you could use.
- Talking to a religious leader about your struggles is another option. It might help you feel safer to know that your sharing is confidential. Many religious leaders are also trained counselors and have woven mental health strategies into their beliefs and understandings.

Farm Stress And Emotional Well-Being, Part I

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