Recognizing stress, depression, and suicidal thinking

By Robert J. Fetsch
Extension Specialist and Professor
Department of Human Development,
Colorado State University

Contrary to the myth of idyllic farm and ranch life, farm and ranch families have lots to be stressed about. Economic and market conditions change regularly so profits are uncertain, and the prices farmers and ranchers have to pay for inputs and the prices they receive for their outputs are mostly out of their control. These factors collectively contribute to feelings of powerlessness and lead to high stress levels.

Stress
Research with more than 22,000 Tennessee workers indicated that farming is one of the top 12 (out of 130) high stress occupations, but more research is needed comparing the stress levels of farmers and ranchers with the general population.

In a study of close to 1,000 New Zealand dairy farmers, the highest levels of stress were reported for time pressures, machinery failures, weather, and government policies. A study of 1,343 Iowa farm residents identified their top stressors to include death of a spouse, death of a child, disabling injury of a family member or oneself, foreclosure on a mortgage or loan, and divorce. One of the most stressful intergenerational farming/ranching issues is the transfer of the family ranch/farm from one generation to the next and the need to keep it stable and operating in order to sustain profitability.

Among two-generation farm families in which both parents and their adult children were actively involved in operating the farm or ranch, researchers found that the younger generation experienced more stress, less perceived social support, and less occupational satisfaction than the older generation. The authors inferred that feelings of powerlessness from working on a multigenerational farm where they had little power and more financial pressure and debt load may contribute to higher stress levels among younger farmers.

The most frequently occurring stressor for two-generation farm families in Iowa was living with “tight money.” For sons-and-daughters-in-law, another frequently reported stressor was not being on one’s own. For mothers and fathers the most frequently reported stressor was taking responsibility for risks and disagreements over spending. A frequently reported stressor for daughters-in-law and mothers was “not being a part of the operation.”

A study of 242 senior generation and 239 junior generation farmers found that: “…neither generation is happy with the communication in their farm family.” Overall, the integrated nature of working, playing, and living side by side day after day seems to lead to stressors that may be unique among farm and ranch families.

Stress for Hispanic workers on large agricultural operations has not been evaluated, but these workers who are the backbone of the dairy industry face numerous stressors, including language and social differences from their employers, separation from family, and, potentially, questionable residency status.

Depression
Many ranchers and farmers struggle with depression. Nevertheless, it is still not clear whether they experience lower or higher levels of depression and other mental health problems than the general population. Neither has the incidence of depression among the Hispanic population working long distances from their family support group been well studied, but could easily be a population on the farms and ranches at risk for depression.

Some researchers found lower or inconsistent levels of depression in a Colorado sample of farm residents, although those who were female, in poor physical health, and unmarried or younger tended to be more depressed than older farmers. Other researchers found higher levels of depression in farmers and ranchers than the general population.

Among Colorado farmers and ranchers researchers have found a correlation between exposure to pesticides and high levels of depression. Research with North Dakota farmers found that their depression levels were almost twice that found in past research with other rural populations. North Dakota farmers were least likely to seek help from mental health professionals or clergy and were resistant to expressing negative emotions to others. Still others found that Iowa farmers were 1.74 times more likely to exhibit signs of depression than Colorado farmers.

Iowa farm men who experienced five stressors within the previous year were more likely to experience depression if they had lost something of sentimental value, experienced substantial income decline; gone deeply into debt; faced legal problems; or experienced an increase in health problems. Researchers found that Virginia farmers’ depression rates were 1.7 times the rate of depression among the American working population, 1.4 times higher than that of Iowa farmers, and 2.3 times higher than those of Colorado farmers and ranchers. The higher levels of depression in Virginia may be attributed to lack of access to adequate medical help and having an older sample.
Suicide rates

There is extensive research evidence that farmers and ranchers have high rates of suicide. Higher rates of suicide in farmers and ranchers have been reported in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Scotland, and the United States. In Colorado the leading external causes of death on farms and ranches have historically been: suicide, animal incidents, and tractor/machinery rollovers. Between 2000 and 2004 the external cause of death for one out of five Colorado ranchers and farmers was suicide. In Colorado three out of four suicides are committed by men.

In the U.S. it has been reported that farm women, children, adolescents, and farm laborers were at a low risk of suicide, but male farmers and ranchers were 1.5 to 2.0 times more likely to commit suicide than other adult men. The suicide rate for rural men is, on average, twice that of other adult men. The risk of suicide increases due to fatigue or loss of ability to concentrate; children may be at risk if there isn’t adequate childcare.

Children show signs of stress. Farm and ranch children may act out in academic performance or be increasingly absent from school. They may also show signs of physical neglect or neglect.

Care of livestock declines. Cattle may not be cared for in the usual way; they may lose condition, appear gaunt or show signs of neglect or physical abuse.

The risk of farm accidents increases due to fatigue or loss of ability to concentrate; children may be at risk if there isn’t adequate childcare.

Higher rates of suicide in farmers and ranchers have been reported. The most common suicide method was firearms; occupational stress; financial difficulties; and family problems. They also reported facing higher levels of completed suicide, financial loss, but mental illness other than suicidal intent, it is important that you connect them with professional help as soon as possible. All crises help should be taken seriously.

What to do next?

The first thing to do is to recognize signs of farm and ranch stress in a friend, neighbor, spouse, family member, or oneself. (See Figure 1.)

Second, take action. Find out what resources are available in your area to assist folks with high levels of stress, anger, depression, and suicidal thinking. Therapist-Locator.net is a good resource for finding marriage and family therapists in your area at http://therapistlocator.net. Other good resources of therapists in your area include: http://therapists.psychologytoday.com/ppc/prof_search.php?iorb=4764

http://www.networktherapy.com/directory/find_t

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For further information contact:
Dr. Ragan Adams, Editor
ILX, CSU-VTH
300 W. Drake Road
Fort Collins, CO 80523
970-297-0371
radams@lamar.colostate.edu

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