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# Western Dairy News

for the West, about the West, from the West

## Recognizing stress, depression, and suicidal thinking

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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 men-

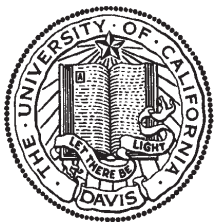
tal health problems than the general population. Neither has the incidence of depression among the Hispanic population working long distances from their family support group been well studied, but could easily be a population on the farms and ranches at risk for depression.

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.

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## Figure 1: Signs of Farm and Ranch Stress.

The last few years have been difficult for farm and ranch families. Many are experiencing financial and emotional stress as a result. There are several signs or symptoms when a farm family may be in need of help. These are signs that can be observed by friends, extended family members, neighbors, milk haulers, veterinarians, clergy persons, school personnel or health and human service workers. They include:

- **Change in routines.** The rancher or ranch family stops attending church, drops out of 4-H, Home-makers or other groups, or no longer stops in at the local coffee shop or feed mill.
- **Increase in illness.** Farmers or farm family members may experience more upper respiratory illnesses (colds, flu) or other chronic conditions (aches, pains, persistent cough).
- **Appearance of farmstead declines.** The farm family no longer takes pride in the way farm buildings and grounds appear, or no longer has the time to do maintenance work.
- **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.
- **Increase in farm or ranch accidents.** 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.
- **Children show signs of stress.** Farm and ranch children may act out, decline in academic performance or be increasingly absent from school. They may also show signs of physical abuse or neglect.

### 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 their urban counterparts after controlling for divorce and ethnicity, and the rate is increasing. The most common suicide method was firearms, in the United Kingdom, Australia, Scotland, and the U.S.

No clear answer was found in the literature for why farmers and ranchers commit suicide at higher rates than the general population. Researchers found no support for the sometimes hypothesized relationship between farming residents and increased levels of mental health problems. They identified the following difficulties that farmers and ranchers reported facing when seeking mental health assistance: the demands of family farms; the culture of farming communities; and the shortage of health care professionals with rural farming communities.

Other researchers used the psychological autopsies of 84 farmers who died between 1991 and 1994 in England and Wales and hypothesized the following possible causes of high suicide rates: high accessibility to firearms; occupational stress; financial difficulties; and family problems. They also found that retirement seemed to be a trying transition for farmers in the sample.

In summary, in the U.S. increased access

to firearms may account for elevated levels of completed suicide, but pesticides, financial loss, and barriers to seeking mental health treatment may be related as well. However, considering some researchers' findings that farmers and ranchers experience fewer mental health problems than the general population, the link between farmers and ranchers and an elevated risk for suicide is not well understood and warrants further research.

### 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://therapists.psychologytoday.com/ppc/prof_search.php?iorb=4764)

[http://www.networktherapy.com/directory/find\\_t](http://www.networktherapy.com/directory/find_t)

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## Figure 2: Signs of Depression or Suicidal Intent.

The greater the number of signs or symptoms a ranch or farm family is experiencing, the greater your concern should be. In addition, if family members are exhibiting the following signs of depression or suicidal intent, it is important that you connect them with professional help as soon as possible. All cries for help should be taken seriously.

### Signs of depression:

- **Appearance:** Sad face, slow movements, unkempt look.
- **Unhappy feelings:** Feeling sad, hopeless, discouraged, and listless.
- **Negative thoughts:** "I'm a failure"; "I'm no good"; "No one cares."
- **Reduced activity and pleasure in usual activities:** "Doing anything is just too much of an effort."
- **People problems:** "I don't want anyone to see me"; "I feel so lonely."
- **Physical problems:** Sleeping problems, decreased sexual interest, headaches.
- **Guilt and low self esteem:** "It's all my fault"; "I should be punished."

### Signs of suicidal intent:

- **Anxiety or depression:** Severe, intense feelings of anxiety or depression.
- **Withdrawal or isolation:** Withdrawn, alone, lack of friends and supports.
- **Helpless and hopeless:** Sense of complete powerlessness, a hopeless feeling.
- **Alcohol abuse:** There is often a link between alcoholism and suicide.
- **Previous suicidal attempts:** May have been previous attempts of low to high lethality.
- **Suicidal plan:** Frequent or constant thoughts with a specific plan in mind.
- **Cries for help:** Making a will, giving possessions away, making statements such as "I'm calling it quits" or "Maybe my family would be better off without me."

### herapist.asp

<http://therapists.americanmentalhealth.com/therapistlocator.papel>

If necessary, you can always call 1-800-SUICIDE, which is a suicide prevention, crisis intervention, and referral telephone number that offers a live human being to listen well to depressed and suicidal callers and refer them to local resources 24 hours per day.

Third, connect. (See Figure 2.) Make an excuse to stop by and visit with the person you are concerned about. Sit down with them face-to-face. Say something like: "Joe, how long have we known each other – 22 years? We've been friends and neighbors for a long time and I have to say that I am worried about you. I see your sad face. I hear how hopeless you sound. When you say, 'I'm calling it quits; let's have a last cigarette together,' I'm afraid. I'm afraid that you're thinking about hurting yourself. Are you? Tell me about it. I've got all the time in the world. Tell me what's going on."

Then listen. Do not moralize. Don't say, "Cowboy it up, Joe!" Do not say, "You've got to look at the bright side." Those comments may set up roadblocks so that Joe will stop talking with you. Instead, paraphrase what you are hearing. "Sounds like things have gotten so bad financially that you don't know what to do next. And you're thinking that maybe your family would be better off without you. Am I getting it right what's going on for you?"

If you recognize signs of depression and suicidal thinking in a family member, friend, or yourself, call 1-800-SUICIDE for help and local resources. Connect Joe with a professional. You can always call 911 or transport your friend to an emergency room at the nearest hospital.

For additional trustworthy information, call Colorado State University Extension (970-491-6281) or call their "Other Bookstore" (970-491-6198).