



Mental Health Topics for Farm Families and Caregivers: An AgrAbility Virginia Program Resource

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Rural mental health caregivers on a farm face a plethora of challenges in addition to difficulties associated with caregiving for another individual. Isolation is a large problem, which makes the development of a support group a priority. The farming population is aging causing other problems to emerge. Rural elderly living on farms are more likely to have physical or chronic diseases, live in poverty, and live alone than their urban counterparts. For this reason, AgrAbility Virginia has prepared this document to assist Virginia farm families and rural residents with information. The purpose of this document is to present you with information on mental health topics. This publication is not intended to be used as a comprehensive mental health resource.

Contact AgrAbility Virginia for more information for farmers and caregivers:

www.agrabilityvirginia.org

Visit Virginia Cooperative Extension's online resources on farm safety and health:

<https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/category/farm-health-safety.html>

The Importance of Mental Health

There is a great need for increased mental health professionals in rural America. Rural Behavioral Health's recent estimation indicates that at least 15 million rural residents, struggle with mental illness, substantial substance addiction, and/or psychiatric conditions (Mohatt, n.d.). This 16 to 20 percent of our rural population puts a demand on caregivers. These demands cause additional stress on the farm adding to an already stressful profession of farming. This can lead to more serious consequences (Schweitzer, Deboy, Jones, and Field, 2011).

Agriculture affects the lives of all community members from the food we eat to the health of the farmers who are at the heart of our subsistence. Sometimes farmers and farm workers sustain injuries, or illnesses, or experience a disability that impedes their ability to work and reach life goals. The AgrAbility Virginia program strives to enhance the quality of life of individuals and their families who farm by helping them to work safely and effectively with dignity. This program is a partnership among Virginia Tech, Virginia Cooperative Extension, and Easter

Seals UCP North Carolina & Virginia. AgrAbility Virginia uniquely integrates its programming into Virginia's rehabilitation and agricultural service delivery system to increase organizational capacity and provide the best quality education and services for farmers.

Another effective resource to address rural farmers' mental health is the Sowing the Seeds of Hope program. This program took place in seven states between 1999 and 2011. The states who were participating provided a 24/7 free crisis line designed for farmers and their families. Of 34,628 callers to the farm crisis telephone hotlines in the seven states between May 1, 2003 and April 30, 2006, 16% of the calls were from older adults over 65 years of age (AgriWellness, 2010). Reasons for contacting the hotlines included: stress over finances – 14%, problems coping with daily activities – 14%, depression/mood disorders – 14%, desired information and/or referral – 12%, marital/family problems – 9%, alcohol/drug misuse – 2%, gambling – 1%, and other – 34% (AgriWellness, 2010). Similar programs would aid in the outreach to these farmers.

Key Topics and Resources for Farmers and Farm Families

There are a wide variety of online resources dedicated to helping farmers, farm families, and caregivers who are suffering from various mental health issues. This guide is meant to help those who have limited access to other professional resources or are looking for help and support. However, it is important that you seek a qualified health care professional for your mental health needs and questions.

Coping Strategies at Work	
Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set realistic goals and expectations daily. • Emphasize what was accomplished, not what failed to be accomplished. • Be positive about change and the need for change such as using new technology, or producing what the market wanted. • Shift from worrying to problem solving. • Be persistent and take active steps to ensure sustainability.
Behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change priorities, prioritize tasks to make work habits more efficient. • Grow the business to a level where a full-time person could be employed. • Let your bank manager and accountant know of all the issues so they can help. • Reorganize farm life • Prior to stressful seasons, such as planting or harvest, determine who will take care of everyday chores. • Plan ahead – replace work machinery parts during the off season instead of at the last minute. • Change what is farmed.

Coping Strategies Outside of Work	
At home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek support from your spouse. • Accept that long work hours are needed. • Take time out off the farm and spend time with family and friends. • Turn off the phone.
In the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek support and advice from friends and colleagues. • Take a break away from farmers and talk to friends from different backgrounds. • Talk to your doctor; they will let you know what options are available.

Coping Strategies at the Individual Level	
Attitudes	<p>Be aware of and set achievable goals.</p> <p>Accept situations and adopt active coping strategies.</p> <p>Develop a strong sense of purpose particularly in relation to caring for the environment.</p> <p>Accept there will always be change, develop resiliency and the ability to survive challenges.</p> <p>Seek solutions to conflict.</p> <p>Aim to put fun and laughter in your life.</p>
Behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about your worries: talk to a friend, partner, parents, doctor, counsellor or clergy. • Allow more time for administrative tasks and free time. • Eat well and avoid foods that increase tension – coffee, tea, chocolate, alcohol, and soft drinks. • Don't always put the farm first – have other interests. • Make time to exercise. • Get sufficient sleep. • Learn to be more assertive and say no to extra commitments.

Source: *Coping Strategies for Farmers* section on Summary of coping strategies (table 6, page 18) Visit at: http://www.acc.co.nz/PRD_EXT_CSMP/groups/external_communications/documents/reports_results/wpc134609.pdf.

Self-screenings

A screening test can be the first step to recovery. It is quick, cost free, and can help give a likely diagnosis if someone is unwilling to visit a therapist, trying to determine whether to visit a therapist, or unable to access one.

- **Mental Health Screening Tools** - Self-screenings to help determine if you may be suffering from a mental illness. Depression, Anxiety, Bipolar, PTSD, Youth, Parent, Alcohol or Substance Use, Psychosis, and Work Health screenings. Please visit: <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/mental-health-screening-tools>

Stress

Farming is one of the most stressful occupations. Stressors (identified by the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association in 2005) unique to farmers are: financial insecurity, changing government policies, disease epidemic, expectations by family members to continue a family farm, physical health changes, balancing on and off-farm work, relationship difficulties (to name a few) can influence overall mental health (Rosmann, 2007). Prolonged stress leads to negative effects on your health and has the potential to lead to other illnesses including: heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, elevated depression, and anxiety disorders (NIMH, n.d). Additionally, the stress associated with financial difficulties has been shown to increase the rate of agricultural injuries (Rosmann, 2007).

Psychological stress is one of the most common mental health issues for rural women (Gerrior et al., 2008). Male farmers also experience stress. Results from the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association National Stress Survey show that 40% of male farmers feel confident in their ability to manage stress and other mental health issues. Alarmingly, almost half of the surveyed farmers were unaware of professional stress coping resources available to them (Roy et al., 2013).

Symptoms of Stress for the General Population		
Physical	Cognitive	Behavioral
Energy decrease	Anxiety	Eating too much or little
Fatigue	Restlessness	Drug or alcohol abuse
Headache	Lack of motivation or focus	Tobacco use
Tense muscles	Anger or irritability	Social withdrawal
Chest Pain	Depression	Outbursts of anger
Upset stomach	Sadness	Procrastinating/avoiding responsibilities
Sleep problems	Excessive worrying	Nail biting, fidgeting, pacing
	Pessimism	Forgetfulness
	Indifference	Increase in accidents/injuries

Source: *A Checklist and Guide for Making Referrals Section on Signs of Chronic, Prolonged Stress*. Visit at: <http://extension.colostate.edu/disaster-web-sites/farm-and-ranch-family-stress-and-depression-a-checklist-and-guide-for-making-referrals/>

Signs of Farm and Ranch Stress

- Change in routines
- Livestock care declines
- Accidents on the farm or ranch occur more frequently
- An increase of illness in the family
- Declined appearance of the farmstead
- Children are more stressed

Source: *Farm and Ranch Family Stress and Depression* section on A Checklist and Guide for Making Referrals (section on farm and ranch stress). Visit at: <http://extension.colostate.edu/disaster-web-sites/farm-and-ranch-family-stress-and-depression-a-checklist-and-guide-for-making-referrals/>

Here are additional resources about identifying and managing stress to increase on-farm safety that may be useful for farmers and farm families:

- **A Rural Stress Tool book** - introduces stress and talks about rural specific stressors. Helpful information on how to deal with stress includes 5 exercises to determine your level of stress and how you are currently managing stress. List of acceptance skills, coping skills, action skills, and skills to help prevent stress. Visit at: <http://www.fcassaa.org/sites/default/files/documents/Rural%20Stress%20Toolbook.pdf>
- **Managing the Pressures of Farming** – contains three checklists that can be used to determine stressors and help you learn tips on how to manage the stressors in your personal life, farm business, and family. Visit: http://sydney.edu.au/medicine/aghealth/pressures/pdfs/Farm_Family_Handbook.pdf
- **Safe Farm’s “Manage Farm Stress to Increase Safety”** – is a document that outlines common stressors, symptoms of stress on the farm, and different coping methods. It also includes a short quiz to check your stress level. Please visit at the following link: <https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/Manage-stress-to-increase-farm-safety-Safe-Farm>

Depression

In a given year, around 18.8 million American adults will experience a mood disorder. Women have twice the rate of depression as men do (NIH, 2001). This rate transfers over to farmers. Caregiving for a family member can be very stressful and add to the likelihood of experiencing a mood disorder. Remarkably, 40% to 70% of these caregivers showed depression symptoms in a study. Furthermore, 25% to 50% of these caregivers met the criteria for major depression (FCA, 2012). Being employed, as well as providing care, can increase depression rates. For

example, 20% of employed female caregivers over 50 reported symptoms of depression compared to 8% of their non-caregiving counterparts (FCA, 2012). Caregiving for someone who has a mental health problem increases the likelihood of the caregiver's health to decline (FCA, 2012). Caregivers who are responsible for more than 36 hours of weekly care are more likely than non-caregivers to have symptoms of depression or anxiety. This rate increases twice if the care receiver is a parent and by six times if the care receiver is a partner (Gerrior et al., 2008). In summary, these statistics point out the difficulties faced by caregivers nationwide and how these challenges can negatively impact their mental health. Caregiving in a rural community provides even more challenges, which means providing these caregivers with resources and support is vital and should be a priority.

Symptoms of Depression for the General Population	
Difficulty concentrating	Long-term aches or pains
Fatigue	Anxiety
Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness	Persistent sadness or "empty" feelings
Insomnia or excessive sleeping	Suicide contemplation or attempts
Irritability	Pessimism
Restlessness	Over or under-eating

Source: *A Checklist and Guide for Making Referrals Section on Signs of Chronic, Prolonged Stress*. Visit at: <http://extension.colostate.edu/disaster-web-sites/farm-and-ranch-family-stress-and-depression-a-checklist-and-guide-for-making-referrals/>

Suicide

Evidence shows suicide is a large problem in rural communities. The suicide rate is 34 per 100,000 male farmers, while the suicide rate for the general population is 24 per 100,000 people (Rosmann, 2007). There is no difference in the female farmer suicide rate. The highest at risk age groups for male farmers are 25-34 years, 75-84 years, and 85 years and older (Rosmann, 2007). There is a seasonality component. Farmers are more likely to commit suicide during planting and harvesting seasons, during the beginning half of the week, and from 6:00 am to noon (Rosmann, 2007). Additionally, even though women have twice the rate of diagnosed depression, suicide rates are three to four times greater among men (Roy et al., 2013).

Warning Signs that Someone May Be Suicidal:

- Talking or thinking about death frequently.
- Sudden switch of mood from being very sad to being very calm or even happy.
- Clinical depression that gets worse.
- Taking risks that could lead to death.
- Losing interest in activities previously enjoyed.

- Comments of hopelessness, worthlessness, or helplessness.
- Tying up loose ends such as changing a will.
- Talking about suicide.
- Visiting or calling people one cares about.

Source: *WebMD* section on Suicide warning signs. Visit at: <http://www.webmd.com/mental-health/recognizing-suicidal-behavior>

Professional Assistance

Rural communities lack mental health professionals, which causes the accessibility and availability of mental care to be limited. Greater than 60% of rural Americans live in a behavioral health shortage area and greater than 65% of rural patients receive assistance from their primary healthcare provider (Mohatt, n.d.). This makes access to mental health professionals challenging for many rural individuals. That said, there are many resources that are available. Many websites are designed to help individuals suffering from various mental health issues including, individuals in the farming population. However, a study completed in 2007 shows that only 25% of rural caregivers actually used the internet to obtain relevant caregiving information (ES & NAC, 2007). In order to get the benefits of these resources, more rural caregivers will need to access the internet.

There are a wide variety of free courses available in person and online to help with various caregiving and mental health challenges. Many of these programs are certified by different U.S. government organizations and written by psychologists. One noteworthy program is Virginia NAMI which offers a large selection of free courses in different locations throughout the state. A course of particular interest is the NAMI Family-to-Family. This is a 12 week program designed for family caregivers of individuals living with mental illness Visit: <http://namivirginia.org/programs/> for more information.

A support group is usually difficult to access for rural caregivers due to transportation and their caregiving duties (Talley et al., 2011). In fact, only 6% are able to attend one (ES & NAC, 2007). This makes alternative methods of getting help a viable option. There are courses offered solely online that focus on self-help through interactive programs Visit: <http://namivirginia.org/programs/for-individuals-with-mental-illness/> for more information. This may end up being a good option for farmers who do not want the perceived stigma of visiting a therapist or are unable to access one due to location.

Star Behavioral Health Providers (SBHP) is a multistate resource that assist current military members, veterans, and their families in finding local behavioral health professionals that meet their unique needs. Visit: <http://www.starproviders.org/> for more information. Additionally, <http://www.caregiver.va.gov/> includes information specifically about caregivers of military members coping with PTSD or TBI's. These resources and others can be found at: <http://www.agrability.org/resources/veterans/#caregiver>.

Teletherapy

Teletherapy allows individuals whose main barrier to accessing professional help is distance, to get help through video or other media services. One reason teletherapy is of interest is that it has the potential to transcend the rural barriers towards receiving professional service. Studies done with rural woman with depression and rural military veterans with PTSD indicate positive results using teletherapy. In fact, the rural veterans receiving teletherapy had lower scores on the Posttraumatic Diagnostic scale after six and twelve months than those receiving help from their normal healthcare clinic (Openshaw et al., 2012; Roy et al., 2013).

Virginia Mental Health Resources

These resources are meant to help Virginia caregivers find services, support, and information in the state or in their community. Many of these resources have online support groups and ways to ask experts caregiving relevant questions.

- **FCA Family Care Navigator Virginia** – Various resource, services, and programs for family caregivers in Virginia with contact information included. Visit: <https://www.helppro.com/nasw/BasicSearch.aspx>
- **NAMI: National Alliance on Mental Illness Virginia** – Information, support, and resources for residents in Virginia living with mental illness or for someone in family which is living with mental illness. This can be found at: <http://namivirginia.org/>
- **Taking Care: A Resource Guide for Caregivers in Virginia** – Large PDF document that includes normal caregiving information, as well as, information on various local aging agencies split by location. Visit: <http://www.vda.virginia.gov/pdfdocs/Caregiver%20Guide.pdf>
- **Virginia Family Caregiver Solution Center** – Helps locate local services and has links to various caregiving resources. Also includes a place to ask caregiving questions to experts or other caregivers. Visit: <http://www.virginiannavigator.org/vf>
- **Virginia Suicide Hotlines** by location. Visit: <http://www.suicide.org/hotlines/virginia-suicide-hotlines.html> for more information.

Conclusion

The AgrAbility Virginia Program and Virginia Cooperative Extension aims to support the whole farmer. That includes addressing the mental and behavioral health of farmers and their families to lead productive and dignified lives. It is our goal to help make your farm a place where you will be able to thrive. For more information, we have provided a list of additional resources for you to use that come from a number of national sources. Also visit the **National AgrAbility Project's (NAP)** resources on mental and behavioral health for farmers, agricultural workers and farm families. These resources can direct you to a number of resources that address depression, stress, addictions, and other mental/behavioral health concerns. Visit the NAP site here: <http://www.agrability.org/resources/mental-behavioral-health/>

Additional Resources

A. General Mental Health Resources for Farmers and Farm Families	
Resources that can help the individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily Strength – Over 500 different online support groups for all different types of issues. https://www.dailystrength.org/ • HEALTHPLACE America’s Mental Health Channel –“Provides comprehensive, trusted information on psychological disorders and psychiatric medications from both a consumer and expert point of view.” http://www.healthyplace.com/
Resources that can help the caregiver or family member	<p>Farm Related</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Val Farmer – Articles written by a specialist in rural mental health. A large selection from general mental health topics to rural topics. http://www.valfarmer.com/home.ec • Farmer Resource Network – For immediate assistance call 1-800-FARM-AID. Services, tools, and opportunities for farmers in need. Everything from crisis assistance to financial counseling. https://www.farmaid.org/our-work/resources-for-farmers/farmer-resource-network/ <p>General</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CAREGIVERdotORG YouTube Channel – Videos of different caregiving skills from the national center of caregiving. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFzQW5D6ROyOJlpcDy3xMYg • Choices in Recovery Caregiver Center – Website resource for caregivers of someone with schizophrenia, schizoaffective, or bipolar disorder. http://www.choicesinrecovery.com/caregiver-center/mental-health-support • Facing Disability: Family and Caregiver Support – A huge compilation of resources for caregivers of someone facing a spinal cord injury. However, many of the recommended websites could be used for other types of caregivers as well. • Gambling, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Psychosis, Schizophrenia, and Stigma. http://www.facingdisability.com/spinal-cord-injury-resources/categories/family-and-caregiver-support • Mental Illness and the Family 3 Part Series – Presents warning signs of mental illness and how to cope, guidelines for seeking care, and guidelines for hospitalization. http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/recognizing-warning-signs

B. List of Mental Health Hotlines, Helplines, and Online Resources

- Farm Aid Resource/Helpline: 1-800-FARM-AID
- Medicare Hotline: 800-638-6833
- NAMI (National Alliance for the Mentally Ill) Helpline 1-800-950-NAMI (6264) An information & referral service. You can discuss mental illness and the medications that treat them. Support offered, information and referral to local & state NAMI affiliates.
- National Association of Anorexia Nervosa & Associated Disorders 847-831-3438
- National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information 800-729-6686 website http://healthliteracy.worlded.org/docs/culture/materials/orgs_015.html.
- National Council on Aging 800-424-9046 website <https://www.ncoa.org/>.
- National Council on Compulsive Gambling 800-522-4700
- National Domestic Violence Hotline 800-799-7233
- National Foundation for Depressive Illness 800-248-4344 Referrals to doctors and depression support groups, disseminates literature, publishes quarterly newsletter, and runs outreach program for adolescents and senior citizens. Recorded message has information on the signs of depression and manic-depression.
- National Mental Health Association * 800-969-6642 (Mon-Fri, 9-5 ET) * Provides free information on over 200 mental health topics including manic-depression, bereavement, post-traumatic stress disorder, and warning signs of mental illness. Referrals to mental health providers, distributes free national directory of local mental health associations, and offers low-cost materials. Advocates to remove stigma of mental illness. Website: <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/>.
- National OCD Information Hotline: 1-800-NEWS-4-OCD
- National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-273-8255
- National Resource Center for Homelessness and Mental Illness: 1-800-444-7415
- National Youth Crisis Hotline (San Diego CA) 1-800-448-4663
- SAMSHA's Disaster Distress Hotline: 1-800-985-5990
- Veterans Crisis Line: 1-800-273-8255 press 1 or text to 838255

C. Resources Used as a Guideline for this Publication

Different resources were looked at to find trusted information and formatting that would work the best for this article. Aspects were combined from each of these resources to create the design and formatting of this reference guide.

- Responding to Youth With Mental Health Needs - A First Responder Guide
<http://www.healthandwelfare.idaho.gov/Portals/0/Children/police%20pocket%20guide1.pdf>
- AgrAbility Service Delivery Manual
<http://fyi.uwex.edu/agrability/staff-development/agrability-service-delivery-manual/agrability-service-delivery-manual-content/>
- Beating Stress: Challenges, Choices, Changes
<https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/FCS/FCS-68/FCS-68-pdf.pdf>
- Resources for Rural Families Coping with Economic Stress and Anxiety
http://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/2911/2911-1418/2911-1418_pdf.pdf

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AgrAbility Virginia Program is funded by the AgrAbility Project, USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), Special Project 2014-2018 (41590-22326). Administered by Virginia Tech, Easter Seals UCP North Carolina & Virginia, Inc. and Virginia Cooperative Extension. Visit us at: www.agrabilityvirginia.org.



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