



Farm Safety, Health, and Wellness Resource: Mental Health Case Studies

The Dunlap's Beef Cattle: The Impact of Intergenerational Farm Transfer

Hannah Coffey, Occupational Therapy Student, Mary Baldwin University; Haley Adducci, Occupational Therapy Student, Mary Baldwin University; Laura Ashley Samuels, Physical Therapy Student, Mary Baldwin University; Jessica Wyker, Physical Therapy Student, Mary Baldwin University; Garland Mason, Graduate Research Assistant Department of Agricultural Leadership, Community, and Education, Virginia Tech; Kim Niewolny, Associate Professor and Extension Specialist, Department of Agricultural Leadership, Community, and Education, Virginia Tech

These case studies are tools to help extension agents and other health care professionals identify common stressors among the farming community. Our case studies aim to bring awareness to problems Virginia farmers face and to promote appropriate problem-solving in coping with mental health issues. We hope the farming community will utilize these tools to build their knowledge about mental health and the mental health resources available to them. Our goal is to educate farmers, farm families, and extension professionals about farm stress and mental health resources in order to improve mental health within the farming community. We have incorporated discussion questions throughout the case studies to allow readers to practice applying their knowledge of stressors, symptoms, appropriate referrals and treatment strategies.

Instructions

Read the case study thoroughly. When you get to a superscript in the passage, refer to the corresponding discussion questions located on the right side of the page. Take a few minutes to think about the question and answer it thoughtfully. We suggest you write down your answers and/or discuss them with peers. After you feel that each question has been appropriately addressed, continue reading the case study until you reach another superscript and repeat the processes explained above. For further reflection on the questions, you may refer to our discussion at the end of the case study. The discussion is oriented to address key topics and is by no means an exhaustive list of all the possible answers.



The Dunlap's Beef Cattle: The Impact of Intergenerational Farm Transfer

James and Louise Dunlap own a beef cattle farm in the Shenandoah Valley. Their son Thomas and his wife, Sophie, also live and work on the farm. It is currently the middle of November and it is again time to sell some cattle to meet the year's budget plan. James and Louise are approaching the typical retirement age. They have chosen to continue working on the business side of their beef farm for this year while Thomas and Sophie are taking care of most of the hands-on work. Thomas and Sophie are getting aggravated with the James and Louise's anxieties about meeting their budget goal for the year.

A veterinarian has recently visited the farm because several cattle have suddenly died. It turns out the creek running through the farm has blue-green algae growing in it and the cattle have drank the water, resulting in sickness and death. This sudden loss has decreased their anticipated income from cattle sales. James is concerned that they will be in the hole but is trying to help out as much as possible when he can by selling additional crops or excess animals. This is causing Thomas to feel undermined by his father. Thomas believes his father's oversight indicates that he is not capable of taking care of the farm and its animals. This results in Thomas's stress and feelings of failure and worthlessness. This is quickly leading to symptoms of depression like withdrawal from family and friends, lack of appetite, flat affect, and consistent overworking. ¹

The holidays are approaching and Louise is trying to ease the stress and tension. She is inviting Thomas and Sophie over for dinner at least twice a week and is assuring the family that all will work out and the budget will be met. Worries start to creep in as she notices that the more she pushes and reassures, the further Thomas withdraws. He rarely comes to dinner. Instead, he says 'I'm not hungry' and goes to work on the farm or makes wooden ornaments and furniture to sell to make a profit for the farm.

One evening, Sophie goes out to ask if he would like some help. She finds him sitting in the garage quickly tapping his foot and staring at the wood pile. She says, 'Hi, I came out to help you. What can I do?' Thomas immediately snaps back saying 'Nothing! I can do this myself. I don't need anyone else. I can fail all alone. Go back to the house and just leave me alone.' Sophie doesn't know what to say so she quietly walks back to the house to confide in Louise and James.

1 Discussion

1. What concerns you about this scenario? What factors are contributing to stress and for whom?
2. If these stressors are not addressed, what may result?
3. What are the risk factors for Thomas? What assets (broadly defined) does this family have that could help relieve some of the interpersonal and individual stress?

The three of them chat and decide that they need to take action. James decides that he is going to get in contact with a Farm Service Agency (FSA) loan officer the following day. He plans to invite the loan officer to come out and visit the farm to discuss obtaining a loan of \$100,000 to make up for the lost income this year.

When the loan officer arrives at the farm the next day, the first person she sees is Thomas, who is sleeping in the grass under a tree. He wakes when the car turns onto the gravel driveway. He greets her and in return she responds and then asks if he was enjoying his nap. He says he doesn't sleep much these days because his mind is racing and there's no time for sleep right now. He asks what exactly she's here for. She explains that she is an FSA loan officer and that she is looking for James who has invited her to assess the farm and determine the appropriate loan amount. Thomas immediately takes off his hat and slams it to the ground, yelling 'I don't know why he does these things behind my back. The farm is failing and I'm the one responsible for it. He doesn't need to do things behind my back! I'll go find him for you.'

At this time, James, Louise, and Sophie all come out of the house. Thomas tries to yell and express his frustrations to them but starts sobbing instead. Sophie consoles Thomas and tells the others to go inside to start the meeting and that they'll join them in a minute. ²

Inside, James and Louise tell the FSA officer that Thomas is under a lot of stress and feels guilty that the farm is falling short this year. He feels responsible since he tends to the cows. They briefly mention that he won't sleep, eat, or even have fun with them at all.

As this conversation draws to a close and James, Louise and the FSA officer move on to discuss the numbers, Thomas and Sophie join the others inside. Sophie quietly apologizes for the incident saying that this week has been stressful and this is not Thomas's usual attitude or personality. Thomas sits quietly and stares at the kitchen table while listening to the others. ³

The officer discusses the loan contract and all the ins and outs. As she prepares to leave, Thomas gets up from the table and meanders outside. The officer expresses her concerns to the family and recommends a visit to a primary care practitioner (PCP) to address the symptoms that Thomas has been exhibiting, which could be indicators of depression. The family decides to wait until after Thanksgiving because Thomas is already stressed and upset with them. They decide they will broach the subject after the holiday has passed.

² Discussion

4. Does anything concern you about Thomas's demeanor and actions? What red flags arise?
5. What should be the next step for this FSA loan officer?

³ Discussion

6. What could the FSA officer say to the family?
7. What resources could the FSA officer direct them toward? What resources exist that might help relieve stress or help the family develop more effective communication and coping mechanisms?

Four days later, the day before Thanksgiving, Sophie and Louise arrive at the barn together after returning from the grocery store. They walk up the driveway hollering for Thomas to invite him in for lunch. No response. After walking the perimeter of the barn, they enter to find Thomas slouched in a corner of the barn with a gunshot wound. Sophie rushes to apply pressure to the wound while Louise calls 911.

Luckily, EMS arrives in time to get the bleeding under control and bring Thomas to the hospital. The FSA officer becomes aware of Thomas's suicide attempt when she calls to confirm her appointment to return to the farm. She had planned to visit the following day to obtain the final signatures for the loan. She decides to visit the family at the hospital to express her condolences and offer support. She encourages the family to connect with local support groups, mental health professionals, and extension agents as they navigate through these struggles and offers to follow-up to ensure that they are able to access the help they need.⁴

⁴ Discussion

8. How could this situation have been different? Both in a good way and in a bad way.
9. What kinds of professional support or counseling could this family benefit from?



Discussion

The discussion is oriented to address key topics and is by no means an exhaustive list of all the possible answers. It is intended to encourage individual and group reflection and guide discussion.

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Periods surrounding intergenerational farm transfer often coincide with heightened stress and interpersonal tension as roles and responsibilities shift and farm operators are forced to renegotiate both their relationships with one another as well as their own identities as they step into or out of positions of authority. The case of the Dunlap family demonstrates some of the perils that present during these times of change.

Identifying indicators of declining mental health

Thomas, who is moving toward heightened responsibility on the farm, is struggling to cope. Throughout this case study, he exhibits several behaviors that are indicative of depression. These include irritability, increased withdrawal and isolation, lack of appetite, flat affect, trouble sleeping, overworking, and feelings of stress, failure, and worthlessness. If it is not addressed, depression can lead to family and marital strain, decreased quality of life and wellbeing, decreased hygiene, and suicide attempts.

Identifying risks

Risk factors leading to Thomas's condition include stress related to his job and responsibility, financial precarity and stress, self-doubt, and constant work. If they are involved in an intervention, Thomas's parents and his wife could be assets contributing to his recovery. In this scenario, the FSA officer may have unique insight that could alert the family and help them stage an intervention.

The role of an agent or officer

If the FSA officer feels comfortable doing so, it could be appropriate for the officer to consider bringing up their concerns to the family. Often, families have trouble seeing a slow decline in a family member's mental health, may be in denial, or may be reluctant or unable to bring up their concerns due to established roles and entrenched family dynamics. To encourage the family to recognize and talk more openly about Thomas's decline, the FSA officer could say something like "I am worried about Thomas. I know this can be hard to address with a family member, but I am genuinely worried for his health and wellbeing. He is irritable and was sleeping outside near the road. Has anyone noticed any other symptoms that may look like depression in Thomas?"

These symptoms could include appetite gain or loss, feelings of guilt, being sad or hopeless constantly, pessimism, restlessness or trouble focusing, and even suicidal thoughts or explanations or attempts. I don't want to sound too harsh or cross a fine line, however, I am worried, and it is my job to reach out and address the wellbeing of this farm." Comments must be gentle in nature but also must address the potentially grave reality of what is happening with Thomas and what these symptoms can lead to.

Here, the FSA officer may recommend that the family encourage Thomas to visit his primary care provider (PCP) to discuss the symptoms he is experiencing. His PCP can make a referral to a counselor or other mental health professional (e.g. a psychiatrist or psychologist), or to a faith or community leader,. The FSA officer can also raise awareness about other mental health resources, such as support groups or mental health hotlines.

In this scenario, the agent explained their concerns to the family and allowed the family to take care of the matter themselves, so the agent did not cross a fine line of privacy. Potentially, the worker could have asked if the family would like any other resources or would like them to find a professional to come out and address this with Thomas, so they did not have to bring it up to him themselves. However, the family didn't seem to have a problem with this and told the worker they would address the issue. No suicide attempt or success is another person's fault!

Follow-up support

Following Thomas's suicide attempt, it is important that Thomas and his family access professional support and counseling to help them process this traumatic event. This could include discussions about farm finance with an extension agent or FSA officer, input on farm management practices from an extension agent, counseling (both as a family and individual, as recommended by a professional), and participation in relevant support groups if they exist in the community.

Resources for Additional Assistance

1. **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
Available 24/7 to anyone in emotional distress or at risk for suicide
2. **Crisis Text Line:** Text "CONNECT" to 741741
Available 24/7 to provide crisis intervention via mobile messaging
3. **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI):** www.nami.org
NAMI provides free classes and webinars for individuals who have family members experiencing a mental illness. The organization also provides support groups for individuals who may be struggling with negative thoughts, actions, or specific diagnoses. Information on diagnoses, symptoms, medications, and treatments are available on the website, as well.
4. **Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services:**
www.dbhds.virginia.gov
5. **Mental Health America (MHA):** www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/searchMHA
MHA provides information on diagnoses, symptoms, treatments, payment help, and referrals. Users can find their local MHA office through the website. Also, screenings are available via the website to use with individuals and then decide on appropriate referrals for future assistance.
6. **Virginia AgrAbility:** www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/AEE/AEE-150/AEE-150.html
Virginia AgrAbility's website provides a PDF document discussing what stress is and the other diagnoses it can lead to, how to recognize these, why mental health is important, and additional resources on where to turn.

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