



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

Financial Strain on Dairy Farmers: The Cooper Family Story

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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.



Financial Strain on Dairy Farmers: The Cooper Family Story

Tina and David Cooper own and operate a dairy farm in Culpepper, VA. The farm was originally Tina's father's but she took over ownership and operations after his death 10 years ago. David and Tina have been married for 17 years. David, a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) by trade, transitioned to keeping the books and records on the farm when the family took over operations. Tina and David have one child: a 14-year-old son named Samuel. Samuel is a freshman in high school and has recently joined the school's basketball team. When he's not at school or basketball practice, Samuel helps his mother on the farm with operations.

The last five years have been financially challenging for the Cooper's and they have taken losses. The losses have caused financial stress within the family. The Coopers have started selling assets, including one of the family's vehicles, to make ends meet. David has stated to Tina that he believes it is time to sell the farm or convert it to a cow/calf operation in order to save themselves from bankruptcy. Tina strongly disagrees. She believes selling or converting would be disrespectful to her father's memory and sees it as a personal failure. Tina is determined to make the dairy farm work and believes that next year will be better. The difference of opinions between Tina and David on how to handle their farm struggles has caused a rift in their marriage. Although they try to conceal their fighting from Samuel, he is acutely aware of the tension, and at times anger, between them.¹

In August of this year, the family called an extension worker, Laura, out to the farm to identify a new weed that had bloomed in one of the pastures and was spreading quickly around the area. During this visit, Tina related to Laura how difficult the last five years have been for the farm. Laura shared information with Tina about the USDA-FSA loan programs available. Extension agent Laura also noted to herself that she should keep in communication with Tina as she was concerned for her well-being. Tina appeared to be tired, overworked, and more than once on the verge of tears.²

¹ Discussion:

1. What stressors can you identify for each individual?

² Discussion:

2. Are there any other resources Laura could have shared with Tina at this time?

Two weeks after Laura's visit, Samuel comes home from school to find his mom collapsed in the barn. He calls 911 immediately and paramedics take Tina to the local hospital. It appears Tina had a stroke while working in the barn. After spending several hours in the hospital, Samuel and David must leave Tina at the hospital to return to the farm and milk the cows. They milk the cows in silence, trying to process the events of the day. After milking the cows, now mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted, Samuel and David go into the house to get some rest.

As a result of her stroke, Tina now has some impairments including some loss of movement, sensation, and general weakness on the right side of her body. As part of her recovery, Tina spent four days in the hospital and two weeks in an inpatient rehabilitation facility. She has now returned home with her family and is seeing an occupational therapist and physical therapist two times a week in her home. David is now coping with medical bills in addition to the financial strain of the farm and he is now struggling to manage the farm operations that are typically handled by Tina and has had to hire outside help, furthering the financial strain. David is worried and overwhelmed. Laura, after hearing about Tina's stroke, has reached out to the family. She has put David in touch with an FSA agent, Mark, in the hope that they will be able to work out a loan to alleviate some of the family's financial stress.

Samuel is also struggling to cope with the impactful life changes he is experiencing. Since finding his mom collapsed in the barn, he has been struggling in school. Samuel's teacher contacted David to inquire about Samuel's home life as he appears withdrawn at school and has missed several assignments. This is very uncharacteristic of Samuel who usually completes assignments early and is very active in class. Samuel has also decided to quit the basketball team in order to have more time to help out on the farm with operations and has picked up a job working at the local YMCA on weekends. Samuel hopes the extra income from his job will help his parents.³

Three months following her stroke, Tina has completed her rehabilitative treatment. She still experiences the effects of her stroke as she has residual weakness on the right side of her body. Despite this, her therapy team has helped her regain the ability to fully function in her home and return to the activities she finds meaningful.

After considering all of their options, the Cooper family has decided to sell the dairy farm. David returned to work full-time as a CPA and Tina has taken a part-time job as a secretary with a local real estate business. When she isn't at work, Tina has taken up volunteering, at Laura's suggestion, with the community's 4-H program helping elementary aged children learn about dairy cattle and

³ Discussion:

3. What new stressors are you able to identify that are impacting the Coopers?
4. What are some resources the family could utilize to reduce familial farm stress? What mental health resources exist?
5. What are some positive coping methods the family could use?

milk production. The decision to sell the farm was difficult, but Tina and David decided this was ultimately the best decision for them. Their reconciliation over how to handle the financial strain of the farm has improved their marital relationship and alleviated this strain as well. Tina continues with counseling, although she goes less frequently now, to help her better manage her stress. Her therapist has given her a variety of coping methods to practice using and find the right fit for her.

Samuel continues to work at the YMCA but has started saving his money as he hopes to buy a car in the future. His grades at school have improved and his teachers have noted that he seems more engaged in class. Samuel still sees his counselor once a week but finds himself better able to cope with the trauma of finding his mother and to manage the stress he is dealing with at home. As Samuel no longer needs to balance school, work, and farm duties, he is planning on trying out for the basketball team again next year.⁴

⁴ Discussion:

6. Reflecting on the Cooper family's solution, how might things have gone differently?
7. In what ways could Laura (or another extension worker) have supported the Cooper family?



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.

Financial Strain on Dairy Farmers: The Cooper Family Story

Stressors

Small, family-operated dairy like the Cooper family are facing financial crisis across the United State. In this scenario, Tina's health crisis compounds the strain this family is feeling. Throughout this case, marital stress and financial stress are the principal issues. For Tina, the anxiety associated with the farm's intergenerational legacy contribute to an especially high level of stress and emotional turmoil. Tina is desperate to carry on the family's agricultural legacy that she inherited from her father. For Samuel, the family's stress is complicated by the typical stressors and angst that accompany adolescence.

Following Tina's stroke, each member of the family is confronted with additional stressors. For Tina, these include the engaging in the often physically and mentally demanding processes of recovery and coping with life changes due to new physical impairments (including loss of movement, sensation, and general weakness on her right side). David faces the added financial pressures of Tina's medical bills, as well as the costs associated with hiring additional help to manage farm operations. In addition to this, caring for Tina and worrying about her health is adding to David's stress. Last, as a result of his reluctance to worry Tina with concerns about farm operations while she recovers, David feels forced to make farm decisions alone or defer decision making until Tina recovers. This dilemma contributes to his feelings of overwhelming anxiety. Additionally, David has been forced to overwork consistently while Tina takes leave. Last, Samuel must cope with the trauma of having discovered his mother incapacitated in the barn and residual guilt from having to leave her alone in the hospital shortly after she had arrived in order to return to the farm to milk the cows.

Available mental health resources

There are several resources that the family can access in this time of crisis. A mental health provider such as a counselor or social worker may be able to help Samuel develop coping strategies and process the trauma of having found his mother after her stroke and having to leave her at the hospital shortly after she was admitted. For David, mental health services could also help him develop coping strategies, while engaging couples therapy with Tina could help the pair to establish new ways of communicating that could help them navigate the impending decisions and process the life changes that accompany the sale of the farm. Last, Tina needs to continue

regular visits with the physical and occupational therapists supporting her rehabilitation. A counselor or social worker may also help her grapple with the differences in physical functionality and other life changes that she has experienced as a result of her stroke.

These resources could benefit the family by helping them discover ways to problem solve rather than engaging in unproductive worrying. Further, the resources and strategies provided by a couples or family therapist or extension agent could help the family find new ways to communicate with one another, set achievable and mutually-defined goals, and engage in creative visioning to help them make difficult decisions regarding farm and life changes. Other positive coping mechanisms the family could practice include reaching out to friends, the broader farming community (either locally or online), and to extended family to seek support or advice. They can also set the intention of doing something fun as a family every week and to be playful and laugh with one another, and to take time to prioritize other hobbies, interests, and social engagements, rather than always putting the farm first.

Though these strategies may not be able to reverse the difficult economic circumstances the Coopers and other small dairy operators face, they can help the family make sound decisions about what works best for them as individuals, whether that means restructuring the farm operation to increase financial viability or whether leaving farming would be better for the family members' mental and physical wellbeing.

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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