

Farm Stress and Feeding the World

Farmers represent only 1% of the nation's census. Whether organic, conventional row-crop, or livestock farmer, they are often an isolated, self-reliant population, full of the utmost pride. These producers are currently experiencing significant occupational stressors. Farmers and their families generally live in a constant state of fear for the livelihood of their grain and/or livestock business. A farmer's stress primarily focuses on various financial burdens due to the failing agricultural economy over the last decade and extreme weather conditions.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Census, during the peak of U.S. farms in 1935, there were 6.8 million farmsteads with the average farm being 155 acres. By 2017, this has continued to plummet to 2.05 million farms, with the average size of the farm increasing to approximately 444 acres. In 2016, it was reported there are only about 16.65 percent of the U.S. landmass that is tillable, and between 1962 to 2012 farmers lost 31 million acres of tillable ground to development.

In 2017, the average age of the U.S. farmer was 57.5 years old, with 64 percent of producers being male, and 36 percent being female. Aging farmers need to be able to pass on their immense knowledge and farmland to the next generation of producers, however succession of the family farm is yet another complicated issue which takes several years to transition without financial hardship. Beginning farmers (under the age of 35) account for only 27 percent of today's U.S. producers, this is due to the massive financial risk of entering farming. Many young farmers additionally have the stress of working another job off the farm.

With a decrease of farms and farmers, and an increased number of people in the world to feed, there is more need and pressure to produce more by each producer or rancher. Numerous advancements have been made in modern farming to enhance sustainability, production efficiency, distribution, health and safety, and infrastructure, yet many of these practices have been demonized. If there are no farms or farmers, there will be no food.

“The farmer is the only man in our economy who buys everything at retail,
sells everything at wholesale and pays the freight both ways.”

– John F. Kennedy

Over the last 2 years, COVID-19's ripple effects of ongoing supply-chain issues, global trade instability, high fuel/diesel prices, and shortages of: fertilizer, various inputs, and farm machinery/parts have continued to complex an already stressful trade. Local farmers today are particularly anxious as the 2021 fall season ended in drought, and spring of 2022 is starting with a delay due to a cold and wet spring, with further potential for drought being predicted.

Production is on a global level and Ukraine is one of the world's top agriculture producers, they grow the same crops as the Midwest. With the war going on between Ukraine and Russia, Ukrainian farmers have planted only about 31% of their normal production, and this will effect food prices worldwide. Added current stressors include the threat of a recession, with interest rates beginning to creep higher is especially concerning. In the 1980's interest rates reached 20%. It took farmers decades to get out of debt, while others lost their farms in the Farm Crisis. There may be much weighing on your local

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farmer's mind, as many of your older farmers experienced the despair of the 1980's Farm Crisis and know of their parents' experiences on the farm from the Great Depression.

Farming is risky business, requiring higher input costs than ever before for grain, livestock, and dairy operations. If the crop yields are low or your animals become sick or even dies, the producers return on investment is poor or a complete loss. Each producer's financial situation is unique, some are struggling more than others, but most producers are feeling financial strain.

Grain producers try to maintain hope that their lenders will continue to provide a loan to put in another crop, but more farmers are being declined over the last decade, due to a lack of collateral or lending is considered too high of risk. This has led some producers to sell a portion of their land, go into foreclosure, or filing for Chapter 12 bankruptcy, which is the ultimate loss to any farm family. The dairy farmer has been hit particularly hard over the last decades. In Wisconsin, 382 dairy farms sold out in 2018 over an 8-month period, a 30 percent jump from 2017. This is because it costs a producer \$1.90 to make a gallon of milk, but their return may be as minimal as \$1.35.

Beyond the potential financial problems, grain farmers experience unpredictable weather, volatile markets, noxious weeds, and concerns for soil, plant, and grain health. Livestock owners never get a break, they need to constantly plan to keep their animals safe in cold weather or extreme heat, ongoing building repairs, and lot/yard upkeep to assure the animals health and safety. While dairy producers are the most tied to their farms, as they need to milk their cows anywhere from two to four times a day. It seems recently there has been an increase in extreme weather conditions including: derechos, tornadoes/high winds, drought, significant temperature changes, and heavy rains resulting in flooding. Weather is an aspect which no farmer possesses any control, yet it is constantly effecting their farms bottom line.

Over the years more farmers and spouses required a working income, off the farm. This is often done to supplement income, pay for health insurance, and to potentially create a retirement fund. For those farmers who do not work off the farm the producer is considered self-employed, and the cost of health insurance is an astronomical expense. Many farmers avoid going to the doctor or mental health provider altogether because of high deductibles and/or high co-pays for medications. Healthcare is just another expense they cannot afford. Farmers are in desperate need of quality health care as they are prone to injuries including: farm accidents, musculoskeletal conditions, agricultural respiratory disease, noise-induced hearing loss, as well as various types of cancers.

Economic health has a vast impact on the farmers emotional and mental health, which later often manifests into physical health complications. Today, farmers are experiencing many of the same struggles experienced in the 1980's, symptoms of depression, anxiety, as well as alcohol or drug abuse, domestic abuse, and gambling. As stressors build and symptoms of depression and anxiety increase, a farmer may debate suicide to escape their financial debt.

Suicide rates among farmers are higher than any other occupation. Male farmers are more than 50 percent more likely to take their lives than they were in 1982, at the peak of the original farm crisis. The suicide rate for farmers, more than doubles the statistics of U.S. military veterans and the general

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public.

Stress symptoms are often internalized, but there are also behavioral changes or comments one may notice. These changes may include: inability to relax, increased use of alcohol/drugs, irritability, changes to routine or activity levels, and loss of interest in pleasurable things. They may begin to report various physical health symptoms, or cognitive difficulties. If you are a farmer or farm family member and you are struggling, or you know someone who is struggling, please know that there is help. Talk to someone you trust, who will simply “listen actively” and not interrupt or see a therapist. There are people and organizations who can and want to help.

Minnesota Farm & Rural Helpline: (833) 600-2670 or text FARMSTRESS 898211 or e-mail farmstress@state.mn.us.

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If someone who is struggling reaches out to you, just listen do not offer any ideas or solutions, instead ask how or if you can help, and ask them if they are thinking about hurting themselves. Often getting support through talking about how you’re feeling, getting good quality sleep, eating healthy, taking time for prayer/meditation, deep breathing, physical exercise, developing a hobby, and limiting alcohol/drug use, can help reduce mental health symptoms.



Lindsay Duenow, MSW, LADC, LGSW and 5th Generation Farmer