

12-1-2023

## Who Do Farmers Trust? Identifying Farmer Support Systems During Times of Stress and Suicide Risk

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### Recommended Citation

Scheyett, A. M., Johnson, L. P., Bowie, M., & Garcia, A. (2023). Who Do Farmers Trust? Identifying Farmer Support Systems During Times of Stress and Suicide Risk. *The Journal of Extension*, 61(3), Article 8. <https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.61.03.08>

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# Who Do Farmers Trust? Identifying Farmer Support Systems During Times of Stress and Suicide Risk

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**Abstract.** Farmers experience high stress and elevated suicide risk. Using surveys distributed at a regional agricultural exposition, our study identified those who are closest to farmers and trusted during times of high stress, and how to communicate stress-related information to farmers. We found farmers were most likely to trust spouses, other farmers, friends, and faith leaders and preferred information from other farmers, agricultural publications, social media, churches, and Extension offices. Farmers and non-farmers differed significantly in views on these questions. This work identifies potential partners for Extension programming on farmer stress, highlighting the importance of including farmers in program development/delivery.

## INTRODUCTION

Farming is a difficult and stressful job, and studies show that suicide rates among farmers are some of the highest of any occupation in the United States (Lavender et al., 2016; Reed et al., 2020). Studies show that multiple stressors are associated with farmer suicide. Health problems and injuries that limit a farmer's ability to work are a significant stressor (Bower & Emerson, 2021), compounded by lack of available healthcare providers and high costs of care due to lack of health insurance or high deductibles (Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, 2019). A lack of mental health providers, the stigma of receiving mental health care, and highly valued independence and stoicism limit farmers' ability to seek help when experiencing depression or anxiety (Hayslip et al., 2010; Roy et al., 2017). Relationship conflicts and loss are additional stressors that farmers may experience in isolated communities (Scheyett et al., 2019). These challenges are compounded by external stressors outside of farmers' control, such as crop-damaging weather, high input costs, uncertain commodity prices, and shifting agricultural policies—all of which can put farmers in precarious financial situations (Brennan et al., 2021; Scheyett, 2020).

Researchers have developed some interventions to address farmer stress and suicide, but the research is limited and rigorous evaluations are few (Yunker & Radunovich, 2021). Promising interventions include trainings meant to increase mental health literacy and crisis literacy among farmers and farm families (Hagen et al., 2020; Yunker &

Radunovich, 2021); mental health literacy training programs for Extension agents and agribusiness professionals (Cuthbertson et al., 2021); and training for healthcare providers to develop a better understanding of farming life and farmer stress (Adams et al., 2020). Outside of mental health literacy training, there is also evidence that peer support, support groups, hotlines, and strengthened integration of rural service networks can be effective (Yunker & Radunovich, 2021).

A commonality among most of these interventions is a community-based focus on informal supports and helpers outside of the mental health system, since formal health resources are few and the stigma attached to seeking formal mental health services can be high. There is strong evidence for the importance of informal support networks in developing both mental health and stress resilience (Morina et al., 2021; Ozbay et al., 2007). Extension has much to contribute here. Across the country, Extension Offices in land grant universities are turning their attention to the needs of farmers who deal with stressors and emotional challenges each day. Extension provides resources on stress management and mental health through websites (e.g. University of Georgia, <https://extension.uga.edu/topic-areas/timely-topics/Rural.html>), programming (e.g. Michigan State <https://www.canr.msu.edu/courses/rural-resilience-farm-stress-training-massive-open-online-course>), and, as mentioned above, training for Extension agents on mental health and suicide risk by programs such as Mental Health First Aid (Cuthbertson et al., 2021).

Local Extension agents are committed to promoting the holistic wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities, but developing programming to address farmer stress and suicide can be challenging; agents are stretched thin in their roles and have multiple demands. There are resources and toolkits made to support Extension agents in program development (Ketterman et al., 2020), and Cooperative Extension's National Framework for Health Equity and Wellbeing is a tremendously useful scaffolding for program development (Burton et al., 2021). Despite these resources, Extension agents continue to report feeling unprepared to provide advice on mental health issues and express a need for more education and support to address farmer stress (Wilson et al., 2019).

The Cooperative Extension's National Framework (Burton et al., 2021) illustrates the centrality of collaboration across multiple community levels and systems to address health needs. Clearly, Extension agents cannot address the problems of farmer stress and suicide alone. Partnerships are essential to reaching farmers who are experiencing extreme stress or suicidal ideation, providing education and connection, and building communities that can support farmers and their families during times of stress.

To be effective in addressing farmer stress and suicide, Extension offices need partnerships, and these partners need to be people whom farmers trust and see as meaningful parts of their support network. Additionally, partners should provide support and educational messages regarding stress and suicide prevention through methods that are accessible and acceptable to farmers. Hearing farmers' views on acceptable supports and information-sharing methods is important—others in the community who are close to farmers may *think* they know farmer preferences, but that is not a certainty. Placing farmer choice at the center of program design is crucial for success (Burton et al., 2021; Eastwood et al., 2017; LaChance et al., 2015).

We completed this study to provide information that can be useful to Extension agents as they develop programming and interventions to address farmer stress and suicide. Specifically, we sought to: a) identify who farmers see as close and trusted people with whom they can talk about issues of extreme stress; b) understand the breadth of farmers' trusted support network (i.e. how many categories of people farmers see as part of their network); c) identify the most acceptable methods by which information on stress can be shared with farmers; and d) determine whether those close to farmers have an accurate understanding of farmer views on trusted people, support networks, and communication methods.

## METHODS

### PARTICIPANTS

#### Sampling Procedures

We recruited participants over a two-day period during an agricultural exposition in the Southeastern United States. One researcher staffed a data collection site at the University Extension Office display booth and invited individuals who passed by to participate. Only English-speaking individuals 18 years of age or older were eligible to participate in the study. We gave everyone who completed the survey a small university souvenir as a token of thanks. This study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board prior to beginning participant recruitment.

#### Participant Characteristics

Our participant sample included 220 adults ages 18 and over. Of the 220 participants, 115 (52%) were female and 105 (48%) were male. The majority of participants were white (n=192, 87%) and non-Hispanic (n=123, 56%), with 43% of participants not identifying their ethnicity. Ninety-three (42%) participants identified themselves as farmers by occupation. The responses to the question "what do you farm?" (which allowed participants to identify more than one crop or animal) were livestock (n=39), row crops (n=24), trees (n=14), hay (n=14), and specialty crops (n=7). Three participants did not specify their crop, and eight participants identified more than one crop type. Of the 127 (58%) non-farmers, the most common occupations or employment statuses were retired (n=26), Extension agents (n=19), agricultural sales/business (n=10), agricultural educator (n=9), farm bureau (n=7), nursing (n=4), agricultural student (n=4), USDA risk manager (n=3), and homemaker (n=3). The remaining 42 participants reported widely varied forms of employment, with only one or two participants per category.

### MEASURES

Our research team gathered data using an ad hoc survey developed by our team. Prior to use, we shared a pilot draft of the survey with three individuals from University Extension for feedback and revision. The paper survey asked participants to respond to three questions: 1) Who is most likely to *notice* when a farmer is feeling extreme stress?; 2) Who is a farmer most likely to *trust and talk with* about extreme stress?; and 3) What are the best *methods* to get messages out to farmers about managing extreme stress and taking care?. Each question included multiple-choice answer options based on both academic literature and feedback from our University Extension reviewers, as well as an "other" option. Participants could select multiple responses for each question. The survey also prompted participants to indicate their gender, race, ethnicity, and employment; those employed as farmers were also asked what they farm.

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## PROCEDURE

### Data Collection

One researcher invited participants to complete a survey as they walked past the display booth at the agricultural exposition. She informed the willing individuals that the survey was totally voluntary and confidential and asked them to give verbal consent to participate. If they consented, the researcher gave them the paper-and-pencil survey. The researcher collected the surveys at the booth and quickly reviewed for completeness. If she noticed any missing responses, she invited the participant to complete the missing question. Upon completion, she gave them a small University souvenir, such as a keychain, as a thank you gift.

### Data Entry and Analysis

One of the researchers on our team entered all survey data into the computer, and a second researcher reviewed for accuracy. We analyzed the data using SPSS Statistics 27. To answer our first three exploratory research questions, we completed descriptive analyses for all variables. To assess our hypothesis that non-farmers and farmers differ in their views on who notices farmer stress, who farmers trust to talk with about stress, and what methods are best to relay messages about stress to farmers, we compared responses using chi-square analyses (or Fisher's exact test when cells contained fewer than five cases). To assess our final hypothesis—that farmers and non-farmers differ in how they perceive farmers' breadth of support network—we calculated the total number of options selected for each participant for questions 1 and 2. We then calculated means and standard deviations for farmers and non-farmers and completed two-tailed independent t tests to compare responses between the two groups.

## RESULTS

When asked who would notice when a farmer is experiencing extreme stress, participants most frequently responded with wife/husband (90.9%); also frequently noted were friends (33.2%), other farmers (32.7%) and child (32.3%). When comparing responses between farmers and non-farmers, we identified several differences in response frequency. Farmers were significantly less likely to say that other farmers would notice their stress or that a friend or a child would notice their stress. These results are summarized in Table 1.

We saw a similar pattern of responses when participants were asked who a farmer would talk with and trust when experiencing extreme stress (Table 2). The most frequent responses were wife/husband (72.3%), friend (41.8%), and other farmers (39.1%). Interestingly, while participants frequently said that a child would notice a farmer's stress, they were less likely to say a farmer would talk with and trust a child (32.3% vs 7.3%). Instead, pastor/faith leader and doctor were more frequent answers (36.4% and 25.0%). Response frequencies differed between farmers and non-farmers for several response categories. Farmers were significantly less likely to identify friends or other farmers as people a farmer would talk with and trust when experiencing stress but were significantly *more* likely than non-farmers to identify a child as someone to talk with and trust.

As shown in Table 3, participants identified the best methods by which to get information about stress to farmers were other farmers (50.9%), agricultural publications/newsletters (47.7%), social media (39.5%), and churches/sites of worship (38.2%). Extension (30.0%) and radio/TV (29.1%) were also common responses. When we compared

**Table 1.** Who Will Notice When a Farmer is Experiencing Extreme Stress?

	Total		Farmer		Non-Farmer		p
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Wife/Husband	200	90.9	88	94.6	112	88.2	ns
Friend	73	33.2	20	21.5	53	41.7	.019
Other Farmers	72	32.7	19	20.4	53	41.7	.001
Child	71	32.3	22	23.7	49	38.6	.019
Doctor	39	17.1	11	11.8	28	22.0	.05
Pastor/Faith Leader	32	14.5	13	14.0	19	15.0	ns
Banker/Financial Advisor	30	13.6	8	8.6	22	17.3	ns
Local Shop/Restaurant Worker	10	4.5	2	2.2	7	5.5	ns
Extension Agent	1	0.5	0	0	1	0.8	ns
Other	8	3.6	2	2.2	6	4.7	ns

Note. ns = not significant.

**Table 2.** Who Will a Farmer Talk With and Trust When Experiencing Extreme Stress?

	Total		Farmer		Non-Farmer		p
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Wife/Husband	159	72.3	68	73.1	91	71.7	ns
Friend	92	41.8	30	32.3	62	48.8	.014
Other Farmers	86	39.1	29	31.2	57	44.9	.040
Child	16	7.3	12	12.9	3	3.1	.006
Doctor	55	25.0	22	23.7	33	26.0	ns
Pastor/Faith Leader	80	36.4	28	30.1	52	40.9	ns
Banker/Financial Advisor	20	9.1	5	5.4	15	11.8	ns
Local Shop/Restaurant Worker	6	2.7	2	2.2	3	2.4	ns
Extension Agent	1	0.5	0	0	1	0.8	ns
Other	4	1.8	2	2.2	2	1.6	ns

Note. ns = not significant.

**Table 3.** What Are the Best Methods to get Information to Farmers about Stress?

	Total		Farmer		Non-Farmer		p
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Other Farmers	112	50.9	43	46.2	69	54.3	ns
Agricultural Publication/Newsletter	105	47.7	40	43.0	62	48.8	ns
Social Media	87	39.5	28	30.1	59	46.5	.014
Churches/Sites of Worship	84	38.2	33	35.5	51	40.2	ns
Extension Classes/Agents	66	30.0	24	25.8	42	33.1	ns
Radio and TV Spots	64	29.1	24	25.8	40	31.5	ns
Websites	49	22.3	17	18.3	32	25.2	ns
Informal Conversations w/ Friends	46	20.9	10	10.8	36	28.3	.002
Local Community Leaders	36	16.4	7	7.5	29	22.8	.002
Other	6	2.7	3	3.2	3	2.4	ns

Note. ns = not significant.

the responses between farmers and non-farmers, farmers were significantly less likely to select social media as a good method to get information to farmers and were less likely to see informal conversations with friends and messages from local community leaders as good methods for communicating information about stress.

By totaling the number of categories selected by each participant for questions one and two, we were able to capture a picture of the breadth of support network that participants thought farmers had. So, for example, if a participant selected the three categories Wife/Husband, Other Farmers, and Doctor as the categories of people a farmer would trust and talk with when experiencing extreme stress, their score would equal 3. On average, participants identified 2.44 categories of people who would notice when a farmer was in stress and 2.36 categories of people a farmer would trust and talk with about stress. Farmers identified a significantly smaller support network, both for noticing when a farmer

is stressed (1.99 vs. 2.76) and for being a trusted person a farmer could talk with about stress (2.13 vs. 2.53) (see Table 4).

## DISCUSSION

The findings from this study can provide guidance to Extension agents who are developing programming to address stress and suicide risk among farmers. We acknowledge that there are limitations to the research which must be noted when considering the findings. The sample is a convenience sample and thus not representative, and generalizations from the data should be made with caution. In addition, the survey did not present choices randomly, therefore there is potential bias introduced by having family members at the top of the response options. Despite these limitations, we believe that our findings can be useful to Extension agents hoping to address farmer stress and suicide.

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**Table 4.** Breadth of Farmer Support Network

	Total		Farmer		Non-Farmer		t	df	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Who will notice when a farmer is experiencing extreme stress?	2.44	1.64	1.99	1.32	2.76	1.78	3.541	218	<.001
Who will a farmer talk with and trust when experiencing extreme stress?	2.36	1.36	2.13	1.20	2.53	1.44	2.017	218	.030

In our results, spouses were overwhelmingly identified as the people close enough to farmers to notice when they experienced extreme stress and as people who farmers would trust and talk with about stress. Given this, programming for farmers' spouses that helps them identify signs and symptoms of extreme stress or suicidality and provides information and tools on what to do to support farmers, could be particularly valuable.

The literature identifies peer support as a promising intervention to address farmer stress and suicide (Younkers & Radunivich, 2021); our findings support this idea. Participants identified both friends and other farmers as people who would notice farmer stress and who farmers would trust and talk with. Designing programs to help farmers and their friends support other farmers—through educational groups, ongoing informal activities, and social events—could be effective intervention strategies. Engaging in this programming in partnership with faith leaders may be particularly effective, since pastors and faith leaders were also identified as individuals whom farmers trust. We were surprised to see that Extension agents were rarely identified as people who would notice farmer stress or whom farmers would trust. This may be because the relationship between a farmer and Extension agent is formed in a professional context, making it less likely that a farmer would be willing to be vulnerable. It may also be that the other professionals identified as those farmers would trust—pastors and doctors—have mandates of confidentiality. Given the stigma surrounding asking for emotional help, farmers might be reluctant to confide in someone where confidentiality is not assured. This issue warrants additional research.

Our study identified several effective methods that Extension agents can use to disseminate information about stress, stress management, self-care, and suicide prevention, and again indicates the importance of informal relationships with other farmers. Providing information to farmers that they can share with other farmers, helping farmers build stronger supportive social networks for stress resilience, and emphasizing the importance of “taking care of our own” can be important messaging from Extension agents.

Our findings indicate that media was also an important way to get information to farmers about stress, primarily

through newsletters, social media, radio, and tv. Partnerships with local media and with farmer-supporting organizations such as Farm Bureau, commodity commissions, and other groups who have newsletters and publications that farmers read can be a valuable way to disseminate messages about stress and suicide prevention. Interestingly, while participants identified social media as an effective way to get messages about stress to farmers, the data revealed that farmers were much less enthusiastic about social media as a communication method than were non-farmers. While participants' ages were not captured for this study, farmers tend to be older than the general population. Therefore, this finding may reflect an age and digital comfort divide between farmers and non-farmers. It may also reflect the lack of reliable internet access in farming communities. When creating and offering programs, Extension agents need to remember that social media may not be the most effective way to reach their target audience: farmers.

If Extension agents want to develop programming to address farmer stress and suicide risk, they will need support and training in several areas. First, they will require training in what is known about farmer stress and suicide risk (and stress in general). They will also need to learn ways to help a farmer who is experiencing high levels of stress or suicidality and what to do if a farmer is in crisis and needs formal treatment. In addition, our study showed that farmers are much less likely to talk with Extension agents about their stress than they are with a spouse, their social network of friends and other farmers, or within their confidential relationships with pastors or doctors. Because of that, Extension agents will also need training in how to teach these trusted individuals about farmer stress and suicide risk, the signs of high stress and risk, how to provide informal support, and what formal resources are available to help farmers. Extension programming should primarily target these supporters rather than developing programs directly for farmers; Extension agents should serve as facilitators of support systems rather than direct providers of support.

Our study highlights a final important point: it is important to include farmers' voices in any programs developed for farmers, particularly those regarding stress and suicide prevention. Farmer participants in this study had significantly

different views than non-farmers regarding who notices their stress, who they trust, and what they see as effective messaging methods. In addition, farmer participants conceptualized farmer support networks as being significantly smaller than did non-farmers. These findings are of particular interest given where the data collection took place. Though not farmers themselves, the non-farmer group is based in or related to agricultural, and many of these participants work closely with farmers. Even those working closely with farmers may thus overestimate the robustness of support networks that farmers perceive themselves as having, and farmers may have a greater need for support than others are aware of.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this study provide useful guidance to Extension agents who develop programming and outreach to address farmer stress and suicide risk. While we are not recommending that Extension agents become mental health counselors, our study does highlight the important role Extension agents can play as partners and conduits of information to promote farmer wellbeing. We identify promising partners—those individuals who farmers may “hear” and confide in more readily than they would others. With training, Extension agents can provide these partners with education on rates, risks, and causes of stress, how to help a farmer manage stress in healthy ways, and how to seek formal help during times of high risk for self-harm. The study also identifies effective ways to disseminate information on stress management to farmers and highlights the importance of social support systems for farmer wellbeing. Most importantly, the study reveals that those who are not farmers may think that farmers have a broader support network of individuals who will notice when they are experiencing extreme stress—and have a broader network of people to trust and talk with about stress—than these farmers actually have. Farmers themselves see their support networks as significantly more limited. Extension agents can use this information about partners, communication modalities, and farmers’ self-identified support networks to design effective programming and outreach methods to promote farmer stress management and holistic wellbeing.

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