



Nutrition and Health

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Reaching Out to Farmers in Crisis Through Mental Health Initiatives

With stressors including long working hours, financial uncertainty, isolation in rural areas and seasonality, farming has been identified as one of the most stressful occupations — and farmers are at a risk of physical and mental health issues as a result of this occupational stress, including an increased risk of suicide. Land-grant universities across the country are on the forefront of addressing mental health needs of farmers through a variety of educational and outreach programs.

Here are a few examples of that work:

- In **Illinois**, 1,000 agricultural producers were surveyed to identify major stressors and estimate the prevalence of anxiety, depression and substance use among farmers. The results from the study will guide the development of mental health and stress resources and inform Extension programs and priorities.
- **Kansas** ranks last in the handling of mental health needs by states, and has seen a growing suicide rate, especially among males in farming, forestry and fisheries. This public health emergency has significantly increased the demand for mental health/stress resources to support this population. To meet this demand, Extension Stress and Resiliency Team members are becoming certified Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) Suicide Prevention Instructors and are beginning to facilitate sessions across the state to educate people from all walks of life on how to recognize the warning signs of suicide.
- The University of **Delaware** Cooperative Extension has organized the Northeast Regional Farmers and Ranchers Stress Assistance Network (FRSAN-NE) to reduce stress and promote the mental health and well-being using practical actions and programs. All land-grant universities in the region participate in this evidence-based action network. The cohort has, in particular, raised awareness of

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using humor and improvisation as viable communication strategies in agriculture stress and mental health-related issues.

In **Kentucky**, nearly 45% of adults reported symptoms of anxiety or depression, while 3.2 million Kentuckians are without adequate mental health access. To help address this access issue, University of Kentucky Extension collaborated with the UK College of Nursing and the Kentucky Nurses Association to provide continuing education on rural mental health challenges and unique farm stressors specifically to nurses, who are on the forefront of individual healthcare. More than 8,700 nurses have taken the course since August 2022. On the youth side, UK Cooperative Extension created BARN (Bringing Awareness Right Now) to Mental Health and Wellbeing, to normalize talking about mental health challenges and suicide, as well as improving recognition of, and providing skills to handle mental health challenges. The first portion of the program involves a three-day youth camp culminating in a dinner theater production to improve community members' ability to recognize mental health and wellbeing, examine stigmas related to mental health in the community and identify resources to support mental health and wellbeing in the community. Among a bevy of positive outcomes, participants intention to seek resources to help prevent suicide in their communities increased by 40% and their intention to talk with their families and friends about their stress level increased by 38%.