

Health and Well-Being



SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY ON THE FARM INFO BRIEF

For Extension Educators, Agriculture Service Providers And Others Who Support Farm Families

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING DEFINED

Health and well-being is generally defined as, “the state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy.”¹ When referring to this topic, the literature typically refers to *objective* well-being—which includes access to and quality of food, housing, education, and personal security—and *subjective* well-being—which includes happiness and personal satisfaction, physical and mental health, stable relationships, and trust.^{2,3}

It may also be helpful to think about health and well-being in the context of Hettler’s model of wellness (Fig. 1) that includes the following six dimensions:⁴

- *Physical*—maintaining physical health;
- *Emotional*—awareness of one’s feelings and the ability to manage stress;
- *Spiritual*—beliefs that provide life meaning and purpose;
- *Intellectual*—quest for life-long learning through educational, cultural and/or community activities;
- *Occupational*—satisfaction through one’s work as well as the ability to balance work and leisure/family time;
- *Social*—ability to form trusting relationships, use effective communication, and contribute to one’s community.



Figure 1. Six Dimensions of Wellness Model. Credit: Bill Hettler, MD.

WHY IMPORTANT? WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Farming is inherently a physically dangerous profession; the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics⁵ says that the fatality rate for agricultural workers is seven times higher than that of all other workers in private industry. Transportation-related incidents (including tractor overturns) are the leading cause of death for farmers and farm workers on crop and livestock operations.⁶ Agriculture is unique in that it is also one of the few industries where families too are at risk for injuries, including children who live on farms and/or in rural areas. According to the National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety (2016), more than 30 children suffer injuries in agriculture-related incidents every day. The Center predicts that these injuries cost society an estimated \$1 billion per year; youth agricultural deaths cost society an estimated \$420 million per year.⁷



Non-fatal injuries are also high among farmers as compared to workers in other industries; research has shown that farmers experience musculoskeletal pain and disability at a higher rate than other professions.⁸ As a result, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health estimate that more than 60,000 farmworkers suffer lost-work-time injuries annually; 5% of these injuries result in permanent disability.⁹ Unfortunately, farm families tend to have less health insurance coverage than other families, particularly those on dairy farms; the USDA ERS indicated that 40% of dairy farmers are uninsured.¹⁰

In addition to physical health risks, farmers also encounter emotional and mental health challenges. Research shows that farmers are at very high risk for suicide, anxiety, and depression; suicide rates among farmers are the highest of any other occupation.^{11,12,13} Prolonged financial strains and increasing weather uncertainties put farmers at greater risk for mental health and other stress-related illnesses¹⁴ and research suggests that farmers carry their work stress into their personal and/or family time.¹⁵

HOW YOU CAN HELP: WORKING WITH FARM FAMILIES TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The following are some potential ways that you, as an agricultural service provider no matter your area of expertise, might work with farm families to help support their health and well-being.

✓ **Suggest the installation and use of safety equipment.**

Since tractor overturns are leading causes of farmer death and disability,¹⁶ several states offer rebate programs for the installation of tractor rollover protective structures (ROPS).¹⁷ The Centers of Disease Control and Prevention¹⁸ suggest that farmers are at high risks for work-related lung diseases (due to allergenic pollen and molds), noise-induced hearing loss, skin diseases and cancers (due to sun exposure), tick-borne diseases, and heat stress. Recent projections from state departments of health¹⁹ suggest that these risks will increase due to climate change. Therefore, it is becoming even more important to remind farmers to wear protective equipment, like ear plugs and respirators, as well as apply sunscreen and insect repellent.

✓ **Lend your open ear.**

As a trusted professional in the lives of farm families, you as an Extension educator or agricultural service provider, may find yourself in the role as confidante of individuals within the farm families you serve. Simply lending a sympathetic ear—without necessarily offering solutions—can be of great help to many farmers. Mental health and human development specialists make clear distinctions between the listening with empathy (preferred) versus sympathy²⁰ to build connection with clients. Through effective listening skills, providers can also watch for signs indicating that clients may need additional professional help (personal counseling or coaching, legal, etc.), provided through referrals.

✓ **Encourage farmers to take breaks.**

An important factor in working with farmers is acknowledging and supporting personal resilience to mitigate effects of stress. The satisfaction of farmers and farmworkers is critical to the long-term sustainability of agricultural operations. Tired and stressed farmers can lead to increased physical injuries, burn out, and may contribute to eventual failure of the farm business. Encouraging farmers to take breaks and supporting their efforts to find work-family balance are essential for not only the health and well-being of farm operators but to the overall family and business as well.

✓ **Know the warning signs.**

Common symptoms of excessive stress and anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts that you may observe in your farm clients include the following and likely necessitate help from a professional: excessive sadness or moodiness; difficulty concentrating or making decisions; decreased interest in participating in activities; expressing feelings of hopelessness and/or suicide ideation; appetite and sleep changes; irritability and restlessness; acting agitated; and memory problems.

✓ **Provide referrals to professionals.**

There are a number of professionals who work with farmers and rural community members on physical and mental health topics. These include clergy, personal coaches, mental health counselors, health insurance providers, guidance counselors, family therapists and psychologists, clinical social workers, and physical health practitioners. Becoming aware of local services available is a first step in providing referrals to farm clients. Learning the practitioners and services that specifically understand the needs of and regularly work with farming and rural communities will help you build strong and effective referral networks.

✓ **Attend to your own wellness.**

If not attending to their own wellness, professionals may become at risk for burnout—sometimes called, “compassion fatigue.” Extension work often comes with long and irregular hours, stressed farmers and other clients, and organizational pressures. To model positive wellness behaviors and effectively provide support to others over the long-term, it is important to remember to take care of oneself. Self-care²¹ may include setting boundaries, paying attention to work-family balance, practicing mindfulness, taking regular vacations, personal therapy, and recognizing the signs of stress.

HOW TO MEASURE: POTENTIAL INDICATORS

In looking at ways to measure health and well-being, the following indicators may help you, as an Extension educator or other agricultural service provider, evaluate dimensions of health and well-being of farmers with whom you work.

Condition/Context/Setting	Indicator/Evidence	Sample Questions for farm
Personal satisfaction. Sense of trust and belonging. Sense of meaning and purpose.	Manageable work and workload. Balance of work and family and/or leisure time.	Are you basically happy and content with who you are? Are you happy with your work, your home, and your relationships? Do you believe you have control over many things in your life? Do you believe you can change some things to make life better?
Effective stress management (personal resiliency).	Ability to rebound from adverse situations and adapt to change.	Do you have hope for the future? Do you have effective coping strategies? Do you have supportive social and professional relationships?
Maintenance of overall health.	Safe working environment. Satisfaction with physical and mental well-being.	How would you rate your general health?

SELECTED RESOURCES AND TOOLS ON HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

- **AgriAbility.** National and state-level programs that provide services and resources to agricultural workers with disabilities. <http://www.agrability.org>
- **Farm Aid.** A non-profit organization that provides support services to farm families in crisis. <https://www.farmaid.org>
- **HiredNag Project.** A team of research and Extension professionals that are providing research results and resources around how health insurance decisions impact farm families. <http://www.hirednag.net>
- **Vermont Agency of Health.** Provides state level health and wellness resources (similar programs exist in other states). <http://www.healthvermont.gov>
- **Vermont Farm First Program.** A free and confidential service that provides help to Vermont farmers on personal and work-related issues (similar programs exist in other states). <https://www.investeap.org/farmfirst>

¹ Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged, 12th Edition 2014. S.v. "wellbeing." Retrieved September 9 2016 from <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/wellbeing>.

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⁷ National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety. 2016. 2016 Fact sheet: Childhood agricultural injuries in the U.S. [online]. Available at: <http://www.marshfieldresearch.org/nccrahs> (verified 7 Jan 2017).

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⁹ National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. 2016. Agricultural Safety [online]. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/aginjury/> (verified 7 Jan 2017).

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- ¹⁶ Swanson, *ibid.*
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