

MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS: KEEPING SAFE AND WELL ON THE FARM

Farming is a demanding occupation characterized by high levels of stress and physical labour. It's hard work – both physically and mentally. These factors contribute significantly to the mental health challenges faced by farmers, farm workers and farm families. The intricate connection between farm work and mental well-being has significant implications, not only for individuals but also for the safety and efficiency of farming operations.

HEALTH OUTCOMES AND FARMING HAZARDS

Farmers face many hazards in their day-to-day work that can cause long-term health problems like heart disease, breathing issues, and muscle and joint injuries. These health problems are often linked to mental health challenges, such as anxiety and depression. The constant exposure to these hazards and the demanding nature of farm work can create a stressful environment, making these mental health problems worse.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

- Get regular medical check-ups to catch and manage health issues early.
- Follow safety protocols and use protective gear to reduce exposure to hazards.
- Seek professional mental health support to help with managing stress and symptoms of distress.

FARMING, LIFE AND STRESS

Farmers' lives are deeply connected to their work, leaving little room for personal time or separation between work and personal life. This constant connection to work increases stress, which can add to symptoms of anxiety and depression. Long work hours, especially during busy seasons, add even more pressure, leaving little time for rest or relaxation. Time away from the farm, even for short periods, can help to provide a fresh perspective for problem-solving and a renewed sense of passion and purpose for the farm. A short time away from the farm also provides one's body with the opportunity to have a break from the stress.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

- Engage in activities or hobbies outside of farming to provide a much-needed physical and mental break and improve overall well-being.
- Strike a balance and prioritize personal or family time as much as the work time.
- Schedule regular breaks, even during peak seasons, and time off to help manage stress.



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SAFETY BEHAVIORS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Those feeling depressed or overwhelmed may neglect essential safety behaviours like using proper livestock handling facilities, reading instruction manuals, and maintaining equipment safety shields. Anxiety impairs decision-making and the ability to think flexibly, leading to unsafe practices and a higher risk of accidents.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

- Implement regular safety training and refresher courses to emphasize the importance of safety.
- Encourage open communication to create a supportive environment to help individuals ask questions, seek help and follow safety protocols.

SLEEP AND MENTAL SHARPNESS

Long work hours often mean less sleep and poor sleep quality, which worsens stress and challenges mental health. Lack of sleep affects the ability to multitask, pay attention, make decisions, and avoid risks. Chronic fatigue and decreased thinking ability increase the chances of accidents and unsafe practices on the farm.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

- Prioritize sleep by setting a consistent sleep schedule and creating a restful sleep environment.
- Take a nap on the days when a consistent sleep schedule may not be possible during high production seasons.
- Avoid caffeine and electronic devices before bedtime.
- Practice relaxation techniques like meditation or deep-breathing exercises to improve sleep quality.

DEHYDRATION AND ITS EFFECTS

Dehydration is a common issue among farmers due to long hours of physical labour, often in adverse weather conditions. Dehydration negatively impacts physical and mental performance, increasing errors, slowing response times, and heightening fatigue and anxiety. These impairments further compromise farm safety and productivity.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

- Ensure easy access to water throughout the workday and take regular hydration breaks.
- Educate workers about the signs of dehydration and the importance of staying hydrated, especially in hot weather.
- Use hydration monitoring tools or apps to keep track of water intake.

The demanding nature of farming, combined with chronic health problems and mental health challenges, creates a high-risk environment for farmers. Addressing the mental health needs of farmers is crucial for their well-being and farm safety. Providing mental health support, promoting a healthy work-life balance, addressing the link between mental health and safety, and ensuring adequate rest and hydration can significantly improve mental and physical health and safety in the agricultural sector.

With special thanks to Cynthia Beck, M.Sc

