



Recognizing Signs of Farm Stress, Actions you can take, and Resources to offer

Every day, farmers and farm families face financial challenges, demands of the job, and changes outside of their control that impact their lives and livelihoods. Market volatility for inputs and outputs, access to labor, challenging weather conditions, and the pressure to grow and modernize are underlying drivers of this occupational stress. The associated chronic stress is also impacting mental and physical well-being, relationships, and decision-making.

Recognizing the signs of stress, taking action, and having resources to share can help you support your farming friends, neighbors, and family.

What to watch for:

What's happening on the farm:

- Decline in care of crops, animals and farmstead
- Increase in farm accidents
- Change in their daily/weekly routines
- Missing/frequently rescheduling appointments
- Signs of stress in spouse or children

What's happening with the person:

- Increase in physical complaints, headaches, backaches
- Deterioration in personal appearance/hygiene
- Change in mood: sadness, irritability, loss of humor
- Withdrawing from family, friends, social events
- Increase in substance use (alcohol or drugs)
- Unable to remember/concentrate/ make decisions

Actions taken or statements made:

- Increasing life insurance
- Giving away possessions
- Calling or saying goodbye or indicating closure
- "I'm worth more dead than alive"
- "I'm a failure"; "I blew it"; "I messed up and it can't be fixed"
- "I have nothing to live for"; "I can't go on like this anymore"
- "Maybe my family would be better off without me"

What can you do?

If you notice things ***happening on the farm or with the person***, don't ignore them! Give them your time and undivided attention.

- Ask about changes you notice
- Listen without reacting or interrupting
- Recognize it can get emotional and tolerate that discomfort
- Respond with clarity and compassion
- Be comfortable with silence so they can gather their thoughts

If you notice ***actions taken or statements made***:

- Ask the direct question: "Are you thinking of killing yourself?"
- Call 911 if you think you or they are in immediate danger
- If not an immediate crisis, refer them to resources (on back)

Resources for Farmers

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: 24/7 phone or text access to trained crisis counselors who can help people in crisis and their loved ones with mental health-related distress.

Wisconsin Department of Ag, Trade & Consumer Protection's Farmer Wellness Program has:

- 24/7 WI Farmer Wellness Helpline: Around-the-clock support for farmers struggling with suicidal thoughts, depression, or anxiety. **1-888-901-2558**
- Tele-Counseling: free, confidential counseling sessions by licensed mental health professionals. Available by phone or video. **1-888-901-2558**
- Counseling Vouchers: for in-person counseling services from a participating mental health provider in their area at no cost. **1-800-942-2474**
- Wisconsin Farm Center has financial consulting, transition planning, mediation & arbitration, veteran farmer assistance & outreach, and herd-based diagnostics programs. **1-800-942-2474**

Harvest of Hope. Farm families can apply for financial assistance to pay for utilities that are being shut off and other bills. Call **608-836-1455**

Covering Wisconsin connects Wisconsin residents with health insurance coverage and other programs for health. <https://coveringwi.org/>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is a free, confidential, 24/7 treatment referral and information service for people and families facing mental and/or substance use disorder. **1-800-662-4357**

Educational Programs

UW Extension Farm Management Resources. <https://farms.extension.wisc.edu/>

COMET™ is a two-hour program offered by UW–Madison Division of Extension for the agricultural and rural communities in Wisconsin. The program is a gentle introduction to supporting friends and neighbors in a vulnerable space to help shift their mental health trajectory back toward wellness and away from a mental health crisis. Contact joy.kirkpatrick@wisc.edu

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is an international program that teaches participants how to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illness and substance use disorders. This is an 8-hour training and can be done in-person, virtually or blended. Contact jenniferpark@wisc.edu or joy.kirkpatrick@wisc.edu

Online Farm Culture Training for Agricultural Service Providers is a free virtual course to help agricultural service providers understand the unique stresses and challenges of farming, handle difficult conversations, and recognize signs and symptoms of stress. Register here: <https://bit.ly/3Jo2lyg>

Sources

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- Kohlman, T. and S. Plaster. **Making the Connection: Communicating Under Stress.** Fact Sheet. UW–Madison Division of Extension. 2020.
- Murphree, J. and L. Foster. **Tell-Tale Signs of a Mental Health Crisis for Farmers and Ranchers.** American Farm Bureau Federation. 05/2019. <https://www.fb.org/viewpoints/tell-tale-signs-of-a-mental-health-crisis-for-farmers-and-ranchers>