



ORGANIC FARMERS
ASSOCIATION

Building Resilience on the Farm: Strategies for Managing Farmer Stress

By Keisha McClish Coutts

The life of a farmer carries a lot of stress, as the risks included in this occupation are so often out of the farmers' control. The faces of farming include beginning farmers, generational farmers, rural and urban farmers—all working hard to produce a harvest. The demand for food for both large and small communities is on the rise. The increase in the demand for local food from local farmers has put a higher demand on farmers and their families. I have heard from local farmers that the weightiness of stress and responsibility to produce for local families and communities can be heavy.

Stress can be a determining factor for a farmer. I am a 5th-generation farmer and a mental health specialist, and I have seen my grandfather, uncles, and farm friends have a concern about a seed that has been put in the ground and have no idea what the harvest will yield. Farmers often face unique stressors, such as unpredictable weather, financial instability, isolation, long working hours, the challenges of running a business, and raising families, all of which can lead to mental health issues. However, many farmers are demonstrating resilience and finding ways to manage stress and maintain mental well-being.

Stress can be both positive and negative. Stress is any change that causes physical, emotional, or psychological strain.

Stress is feeling overwhelmed or unable to cope with mental or emotional pressure. Stress is a feeling of emotional or physical tension. Two different types of stress can positively or negatively affect a person.

Positive Stress

- Good stress, or eustress, is stress you feel when you're excited.

Negative Stress

- Negative stress or distress is a type of stress that can have negative physical and mental health effects. It's caused by chronic, overwhelming pressures and strains that make it hard to relax and de-stress. Negative stress often leads to mood swings, anxiety, and even depression.

WARNING SIGNS

Stephanie Weatherly, chief clinical officer for Psychiatric Medical Care says the rate of suicide is higher in rural communities. "I think some of the biggest misconceptions are that people think when other people stop working or if someone is thinking of harming themselves, those are the only signs to watch for. And we know that's not true. A lot of times the community around this person is surprised when the person's life has ended. So, we have to be looking at subtle clues."

Warning signs of negative stress can include a change in demeanor, words, and behavior in the context of what is normal for a given person.

- Changes in emotions: Show little enthusiasm or energy for the future, anxiety, loss of spirit, depression, loss of humor.
- Changes in attitudes and cognitive skills: Become more frequently critical or agitated over small things, lack concentration, and have trouble making decisions.
- Changes in behavior: Become quieter than usual, have trouble sleeping, do not join friends for coffee or other gatherings, miss meetings with farm staff, suppliers, or the banker.
- Changes on the farm or ranch: Reduced care given to farm animals, machinery or fields, or themselves, increase accidents.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Struggling with mental health challenges can be isolating. You might feel like you are the only one experiencing symptoms, but the data says otherwise. Researchers noted in *Farming And Mental Health Problems And Mental Illness*.

"The rate of suicide among farmers is 3.5 times higher than the general population. It's a startling statistic and a sign of the daily stress of farming. It is estimated that 1-in-4 people worldwide experience issues with their mental health annually.

Globally, there are more than 570 million farms, of which approximately 550 million are family-run. With a conservative estimate of two-member families, this would mean that every year, roughly 225 million farmers worldwide may struggle with their mental health. This number is likely an underestimate when considering the evidence that farmers experience mental illness at a higher rate than the general population."¹

But despite these staggering statistics of farmers experiencing mental health challenges, farmers do what they always do: continue to build resilience in the face of these challenges.

1 - Fraser C. E., Smith K. B., Judd F., Humphreys J. S., Fragar L. J. and Henderson A., "Farming and mental health problems and mental illness," *Int. J. Soc. Psychiatry*, vol. 51, no. 4, pp. 340-349, 2005.

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Transition to Organic Partnership Program



Building Resilience

Here's how farmers are building resilience, along with some potential solutions to help manage stress:

1. Acknowledging Mental Health Challenges

- Recognizing the importance of mental health and breaking the silence is an important first step toward healing.

2. Peer Support and Community Building

- A sense of community and shared understanding helps reduce feelings of isolation and offers emotional relief.

3. Farmer Support Networks and Helplines

- Having easy access to professional mental health resources helps farmers manage stress in moments of crisis.

4. Engagement in Wellness and Self-Care Practices

- Incorporating wellness practices into daily life allows farmers to manage stress proactively.
- Prioritizing self-care can help prevent burnout and improve mental well-being.

5. Diversification and Risk Management

- Diversification and smart financial planning help reduce economic pressure, which is often one of the biggest sources of stress.

6. Technology and Innovation

- Technological innovation helps mitigate the unpredictable nature of farming, thus reducing stress levels.

8. Faith and Spirituality

- A strong sense of faith or spirituality can provide farmers with emotional support and a broader perspective on their challenges.

In agriculture, many of us share a belief that if we just work harder, things will get better, but some challenges we face require someone with a different skillset to help us get over the hump. The question that I ask and what farmers are asking is where we go from here and what tools are given to the farmer and their family to live and prosper.

The stress and pressure of feeding people will not diminish; however, our government and mental health specialists must provide the tools necessary to combat the stressors that farmers and communities are feeling. 🌱



Keisha McClish Coutts resides in Park City, KS close to the land where Keisha's grandfather started the first urban farm in Wichita, KS. Mrs. Coutts offers most of her time as a Mental Health Specialist and Mental Health First Aid Responder to farmers in rural and urban areas.