

## Farm Family Stressors: Private Problems, Public Issue

by Bonnie Braun, Ph.D.

### ABSTRACT

Farm families live with change and stress because of the intertwined nature of their business and their family life. Stressors are any kind of trigger that causes stress. Even positive changes can cause stress. Stressors can be ordinary or extraordinary. Recent downturns in the agricultural economy as well as increasing weather uncertainties related to climate change are producing extraordinary distress, despair, diminished decision-making ability, opioid use, and suicide.

Public policy actions to support farm families can address access to care through health insurance; promote the availability of rural primary, behavioral, and mental health care; teach risk management and resiliency-building strategies to farmers and community partners; invest in research to prevent and mitigate stressors; and encourage stress reduction and management from the perspectives of family and farm economics, health, and well-being.

### Ordinary Stressors

Ordinary stressors include the constant responsibilities required of any family, specifically those associated with the farm being both a place of living and a place for earning income. Farm families struggle with building and maintaining a farming legacy. To do so, most have off-farm employment to support the farm and family and to get insurance for their health care. Even with insurance, most are afraid they will have to sell the land and business to pay for health care. Additionally, the challenge of managing tensions between generations is not

just the generational differences most families have. Among farm families, the tension of how multi-generations work and run the business becomes a stressor.<sup>5</sup>

### Extraordinary Stressors

Studies show extraordinary stressors—those that are beyond the control of farming families, farm and family resource management decisions, and challenging family dynamics.<sup>11</sup> These include weather events such as drought, flooding, fires, hail, and high winds; decreases in market prices for farm products; new federal tariffs; and rising interest rates.

### Impacts of Stressors

Stress and health research suggest that stressors not only damage health but are experienced differently according to socioeconomic factors and status, and occur over the life course and across generations.<sup>17</sup> Farmers and their families experience impacts not only on their physical and mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, injury, loneliness, opioid misuse, suicide) but also on their family farm business, which in turn affects the prosperity of the agricultural economy in the United States and other countries.

### TALKING POINTS

- Studies show that the presence of ordinary and extraordinary stressors have an impact on the health and well-being of the farming population.
- Stressors that are outside of an individual's control lead to the most distress. Weather was the leading reported stressor, followed by market prices, taxes, and health-care costs.
- Many farmers and their families feel called to farm and hold onto their land at all costs, including their health and family relations.
- Family Scientists, and other social scientists, need to collaborate with agriculture, environment, finance and health professionals, community members, and policymakers to prevent or mitigate impacts of stressors on the farming population.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

A farm family public policy needs to embrace a healthy farming population as an asset and as a component of agricultural policies and practices with a way of life and business that differ from the general population. Policy actions include:

- **Availability of care:** Enhance availability of rural primary, mental, and behavioral health care for preventive, acute emergency needs through USDA rural development and other funding as well as local strategies such as mobile mental health units.
- **Community support:** Join with farmer-focused organizations and talk with the farming population, associated professionals, policymakers, and community members about stressors and detrimental consequences, including opioid use, to ensure that policies, procedures, rules and regulations, and ways of interacting with the farming population are integrated across multiple sectors.
- **Diversity:** Ensure that public policies honor diversity in types of farming, family structures (often multigenerational), demographics (gender, age, race/ethnicity, veteran status), and other factors.
- **Education:** Expand the number of medical, mental, and behavioral health and safety agriculture and family professionals who understand the historical and current context of agriculture, as well as threats from stressors and challenges facing the prosperity of the farming population, by investing in undergraduate and graduate students and professionals' continuing education.
- **Extension funding:** Provide funding for Cooperative Extension and public health to implement human health and well-being programming for the farming population. Extension can also provide programming that informs policymakers' decisions impacting the natural, social, and economic environments in which farmers and farm families must function.
- **Health insurance:** Place health insurance on equal footing with crop insurance in farm risk management and financial planning, especially within the USDA Risk Management Agency and by farm management advisers.
- **Research:** Invest in research studies to determine policy actions focused on (a) preventing and mitigating stressors that have an impact on the health and safety of farm families and individual family members, and (b) evaluating intervention programs, including the effectiveness of the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network. Studies should be completed to inform the 2023 Farm Bill.

## Farming Communities

Farming communities depend, in part, on the ability of farms to produce products and services for people in the community and beyond and provide workers and volunteers. If farms are not healthy and successful, then farm families may choose, or be forced, to leave farming as a business and a way of life. What begins as an individual and family problem of dealing with ordinary and extraordinary stressors becomes an issue that requires community solutions, including public policy.

*Please see the full brief for a complete list of references. References also are available upon request.*

## Author Bio

**Bonnie Braun, Ph.D.**, is Professor Emerita, Department of Family Science, University of Maryland School of Public Health and University of Maryland Extension. Her research and extension teaching focuses on issues, including health and financial well-being, affecting the quality of life of rural residents. She is a member of a USDA National Institute for Food and Agriculture grant team focused on health insurance as well as rural economic development and agriculture, and she is known for her work in public policy. She and her husband own and operate a grass-fed cattle farm in Pennsylvania.



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