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Modern day farming challenges the mental health of farmers

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Abstract

Modern day farming brings lot of challenges to the mental health of farmers. Due to isolation, long working hours, financial pressure, drought, and disease and insect pest outbreaks, farmers become more stressed. The farmers should sense stress early and take remedial measures as it becomes chronic if not handled in time. Removal of the social stigma attached to farm stress is very important. Farmers should be encouraged to talk freely, do active physical exercises, know proper time management, set realistic goals, and practice relaxation techniques. Improving the work-life balance is very important for coping with stress.

Keywords: Mental health, isolation, social stigma, time management, work-life balance

1. Introduction

Farm families experience the pressure of an inconsistent and unreliable economy, finances, legal issues, and physical and mental well being. Farmers are forced to sell their land, file for bankruptcy, deny their children inheritance rights, and to take up secondary jobs outside the farm to provide health insurance and supplemental income to manage their daily needs. These stressors can give rise to mental and emotional distress, substance abuse, anxiety, depression and even suicide (University of Maryland Extension, 2020) ^[1]. The University of Minnesota studied and reviewed the stress and mental health issues of farmers (University of Minnesota, 2019) ^[2]. A study by American Farm Bureau Federation found that financial issues impacted the mental health of more than 90% of American farmers and farm workers. Business concerns, fear of losing a farm, extreme weather, and rural isolation cause stress. Some of the common stressors encountered in US are financial pressure, debt load, unpredictable weather, volatile markets, extreme outdoor work conditions, fatigue, lack of personal time, little time to talk through difficult problems, intergenerational differences, excessive workloads, and health (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2019) ^[3]. Long hours of hard work take their toll on British farmers and their families, who look to improve the work-life balance, a major Farmers Weekly survey reveals (Tasker, 2018) ^[4].

2. Mental health challenges

Among the main occupational groups that work and live exclusively in rural areas, farmers and agricultural workers are unique. Regarding health and health care, it is important to understand the nature of rural areas (Gregoire, 2002) ^[5]. NCRB data showed that in 2014 of 1,31,666 people who committed suicide, 12,360 were farmers. It is an indication that there are some factors in the general farming environment which pose selective pressure. These factors vary from economic such as continuous crop failure and debt, to the demographic and to the psychological like mental health (Cavanagh, 2003) ^[6].

In rural areas, mainly in farming communities, mental health and services are neglected. Among all health-related disorders, mental healthiness constitutes nearly one sixth (Das, 2011) ^[7].

The compounding factors of mental health problems among farmers in India are changing life style, frequent disruptions in income, crop failure, natural calamities, economic crisis, unemployment, lack of social support, and increasing insecurity (Chatterjee, 2009) ^[8].

Globalization and entry of multinational companies into farming have created more competition and new problems for the small-scale farmers, such as obtaining good quality of seeds and lack of support from banks (Patel, 2005) ^[9]. A study found that 21% of the farmers

had personal health problems and 26% had mental health problems. Poor economic conditions made the illnesses more aggravated as the farmers did not get timely help (Mishra, 2006)^[10].

The impact of financial insecurity on mental health was one of the causes for farmer suicides in different parts of India (Sundar, 1999; Mohanty, 2005; McCurdy, 2000)^[11, 12, 13].

Stress leads to increased prevalence of mental disorders such as depression and anxiety. Work related stress is a researched psychological construct and it is a conflict when the demand of work is high and the worker cannot manage, control or cope with the stress (Kolstrup *et al*, 2013)^[14].

Due to future climate change, the farmer's job will become stressful (Kearney *et al*, 2014)^[15]. Chronic stress among farmers may lead to physical problems such as headaches, sleeplessness, mental problems such as anxiety, anger, and depression, and cognitive issues such as memory loss and inability to take decisions (Williams, 2001)^[16]. More among farmers thought that life was not worth living than non-farmers (Fraser *et al*, 2005)^[17].

Farmers are at higher risk for mental health challenges. Farmers face isolation, stigma, and volatile environments. There are some other unique challenges such as economic uncertainties of tariffs, falling commodity prices, and a wet spring. The Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health set up by University of Iowa tried to connect agriculture groups looking for services and mental health providers trying to help farmers. Brandi Jansen, Director of the Iowa Center for Agriculture Safety and Health said that farmers have to overcome a culture of avoiding uncomfortable conversations and overcome the stigma of asking for help when under mental stress. Between 1992 and 2010, farmers had a suicide rate of 3.5 times the average. Jansen (WHO 13 Des Moines, 2019)^[18] stated that community level approach is key for improving mental health issues and preventing community level challenges. Those who face some stress should be helped by the community through a hot line number (Staff Writer, WHO 13 Des Moines, 2019)^[18].

3. Conclusion

Many things are beyond farmers' control like market prices, government regulations, and drought and disease outbreaks. Farmers can experience high levels of stress due to long working hours and financial pressures. Stress can affect all aspects of a farmer's life. It is important to know when one is feeling stressed before the stress becomes chronic (Bjornestad, 2020)^[19].

Stress can be managed in a healthy way by effective stress management techniques like practicing good time management, having realistic expectations, practicing relaxation techniques, and becoming more physically active. By being physically active cortisol in the body can be lessened and this process protects against some of the negative impacts of stress. Physical activity can help ease mental and physical tensions (Prosch *et al.*, 2020)^[20].

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