

Iowa Farmer Today

Resources available for COVID-19 stress management

By Brandi Janssen

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You Are Not Alone – Stay Connected



There are several crisis hotlines and chat services available to help, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week:

- CommUnity Crisis Services
855-325-4296
- Iowa Concern
1-800-447-1985
- IowaCrisisChat.org
- Your Life Iowa
855-581-8111 (call)
855-895-8398 (text)

Courtesy Brandi Janssen

Back in March, USA Today published a long and well-researched article focusing on farm stress and farmer suicide titled “Seeds of Despair.” The article received quite a bit of attention, even inspiring a segment on National Public Radio’s Science Friday program. The Science Friday episode ran on March 13, just as the COVID-19 pandemic was capturing our collective attention, and by the following week, the pandemic was the one and only news story nationwide. Of course, the shifting focus didn’t mean that any of the farm stressors described in the media had resolved. Instead, COVID-19 disrupted everyone’s lives on farms and in cities alike.

There is always a lot of uncertainty in agriculture, but the pandemic has added yet another potential concern for farmers. Ed Kordick is the farmer education program manager for the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, and he agrees that “farmers have been dealing with stressful times before COVID-19.” In particular, “the trade disruptions and large crops for years in a row with huge supplies of corn and soybeans leading to low prices have seriously damaged the financial conditions of their businesses leading into this time. This was stressful going into COVID.”

But the pandemic added new concerns, Kordick points out.

“The disruption of packing plants being unable to take livestock has been especially difficult for Iowa livestock producers,” he said. “For those livestock producers it isn’t just one more thing, it was unprecedented.

Also unprecedented was the destruction of ethanol demand, because of lack of vehicle travel that had a very quick and stark downward effect on corn prices.”

Even though individual farmers may be able to more easily social distance in their rural communities, the COVID-19 outbreak has shown how agriculture is connected to global markets and the energy

sector. It also exposed how sensitive the food system is to disruptions, especially in the livestock sector.

Looking ahead to harvest season, COVID-19 could cause additional challenges.

Kordick notes that “farmers are used to uncertainty, but COVID has taken that uncertainty to a whole new level.”

The pandemic has further damaged crop prices, so we may not see improvement over the course of this winter. This challenge is compounded from past years, Kordick says, because “farmers have been using up much of their working capital, so lender relations are going to be very important.” The global picture is important as well, as “International trade will be very important and a threat may be that countries pull back from one another making trade difficult.”

Because we know that there are many occupational stressors in agriculture, there are also a number of resources for farmers and rural community members. The Iowa Farm Bureau has an ongoing series of webinars and online offerings, several in Spanish, related to mental health and farming.

These are available on their website, along with resources from state agencies, agribusinesses, and farm nonprofits, such as FarmHer. Farm Bureau has also offered additional suicide prevention and stress management training to staff who regularly interact with their farmer members. <https://www.iowafarmbureau.com/Stress-Mental-Health-Resources>.

Iowa State University Extension also has an ongoing online series of Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) trainings. QPR helps bystanders learn how to intervene and prevent suicide. Online programming is available every Tuesday from 12-1 through October 27 at <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/QPR>.

Iowa State University also hosts the Iowa Concern Hotline, which is available 24/7 for confidential assistance and referral for stress, legal questions, and financial concerns.

In addition to resources related to occupational stress during the pandemic, and in agriculture in general, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention has guidance for agricultural businesses about best practices for keeping yourself and your employees safe. There are checklists and templates for developing a COVID-19 assessment and control plan, guidance for physical distancing for workers, and information about screening and health monitoring.

In addition, there are detailed best practices for cleaning, sanitation, and disinfection. These tools can be found at <https://bit.ly/30mSp58> and will help provide peace of mind that you are taking the necessary steps to keep your family and employees safe during the rest of the growing season and harvest.

Despite all of these challenges, Kordick sees some silver linings in the midst of the pandemic.

“Consumers may understand where their food, fiber and fuel come from in a better way due to the disruptions caused by COVID,” he says. “The lack of certain cuts of meat, the publicity on the supply chain, and bare shelves at times may have been an opportunity for consumers to understand the chain ‘behind the grocery store’”.

I have consistently heard farmers lament the lack of knowledge about farming and food systems among consumers; the pandemic has certainly raised awareness about the complexity of the food chain and has helped customers appreciate the work farmers do.

Another silver lining is the recent emphasis on making extra effort to reach out to friends and family, by phone or virtually, to check in and stay connected. The pandemic has made many of us realize the

importance and value of these relationships. For farmers, whose essential work has to go on in the pandemic, there are lots of ways to stay connected, find resources to help reduce the stresses that go along with agricultural work, and use evidence-based tools to implement COVID-19 protocols on the farm. Even as we are physically distanced from each other, farmers can use these resources to stay safe and healthy during the pandemic.

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