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The Farmer Stress Production Meeting Model: Acceptability and Feasibility of an Intervention

Anna Scheyett

University of Georgia, amscheye@uga.edu

Andrea Scarrow

University of Georgia, ascarow@uga.edu

Jennifer Dunn

Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, Jennifer.Dunn@dbhdd.ga.gov

Stephanie Hollifield

University of Georgia, smh@uga.edu

Justin Shealey

Echols County Extension, University of Georgia, justin1@uga.edu

See next page for additional authors



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Cover Page Footnote

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Authors

Anna Scheyett, Andrea Scarrow, Jennifer Dunn, Stephanie Hollifield, Justin Shealey, and Brian Hayes

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ANNA SCHEYETT¹, ANDREA SCARROW¹, JENNIFER DUNN², STEPHANIE
HOLLIFIELD¹, JUSTIN SHEALEY³, AND BRIAN HAYES⁴

AUTHORS: ¹University of Georgia. ²Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities. ³Echols County Extension, University of Georgia. ⁴Mitchell County Extension, University of Georgia.

Abstract. Farmers experience high stress levels, but are often reluctant to participate in mental health-specific programming. We tested providing stress supports to farmers by embedding information and resources within existing Extension production meetings. During meetings, farmers were offered blood pressure screenings where providers would also discuss stress; were offered an information packet on stress and health, and listened to a brief talk from a therapist with local roots. Farmers accepted screenings and resources, and several later contacted the therapist. Extension agents, initially cautious about addressing the topic of farmer stress, expressed greater confidence in talking about the issue after these meetings.

INTRODUCTION

Existing research identifies the high levels of stress experienced by farmers and triggered by stressors such as uncertain weather, uncertain finances, unpredictable input costs and commodity prices, changing policies and tariffs, exhaustion, social isolation, high risk of injury (Brennan et al., 2021; Chengane et al., 2021), potential risks of family farm transitions (Leonard, et al., 2020), and more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (Lange, 2021; Lusk & Chandra, 2021; Morning Consult & American Farm Bureau Federation, 2020) and the war in Ukraine (Doan, 2022). Despite these high levels of stress—which can increase the risks of health problems, family conflict, and suicide (Polanco-Roman et al., 2016; Schneiderman et al., 2005)—supporting farmers’ stress management and general wellbeing can be challenging. Values such as stoicism, independence, and persistence—coupled with the stigma of seeking mental health services or support (often prevalent in rural communities)—make it difficult for farmers to admit when they are struggling with stress (Morning Consult and American Farm Bureau Federation, 2021; Laoire, 2005). Extension agents may have difficulty broaching this subject with farmers, yet another obstacle to providing farmers with the information they need to cope with their stress or seek more formal support.

Based on both research and conversations, Extension agents and other community members identified stress among farmers in Georgia as a significant concern, particularly in the southwest region of the state. In response to this level of concern, a leader from the Southwest District Extension office called together a group of local and regional leaders and experts to discuss the topic of farmer stress. The goal of the meeting was to share information and observations regarding farmer stress, identify and describe what was already being done in response, and generate ideas for what more could be done. The group consisted of the Southwest District Extension leader, local Extension agents, a community liaison, the chaplain from the regional hospital, a local clinical social worker, a regional leader from the state’s Department of Behavioral Health, and several partners from the land grant university (including leaders from the university’s Cooperative Extension office, a representative from Public Service and Outreach working in the local area, and a faculty member from the School of Social Work engaged in research on farmer stress and suicide).

The group met monthly and found that while many were concerned about farmer stress, few were engaged in or aware of formal activity addressing the issue. In our discussions, we agreed that culture, a lack of time, and a lack of knowledge regarding the dangers of stress meant that most farmers would not come to an event or class specific to mental health or stress reduction. Therefore, to be both acceptable and practical, information about stress and

mental health issues needed to be woven into existing events that farmers would already attend and provided by trusted members of the community—such as Extension agents and specialists. The local Extension agents in the group were somewhat dubious; they wanted to make it very clear that their role was not to become counselor or therapist. With these caveats, the group developed and agreed to pilot the Farmer Stress Production Meeting (FSPM) Model. Our goals were to: a) find an acceptable way to provide information about stress to farmers, b) begin a conversation about stress that farmers could continue after the event, and c) increase Extension agents' comfort level and confidence in addressing farmer stress.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The FSPM model is designed to embed information and resources about stress into existing production meetings held at local Extension offices. Disseminating this information during a typical gathering prevents stigma or embarrassment about stress while providing necessary resources and stress management techniques. The FSPM curriculum emphasizes messages such as:

- “You are the most important asset to your farm,”
- “A healthy farm requires a healthy farmer,”
- “You can replace any piece of equipment on your farm, but you cannot be replaced,” and
- “Taking care of your health includes managing stress.”

FSPM pilot sessions consisted of three elements integrated into a typical production meeting.

The first element was a resource packet with information about health topics (e.g. healthy eating, managing blood pressure, good sleep practices), stress management, and crisis/suicide resources. The farmers could take these packets home with them. The resources came from national mental health websites, university Extension websites, and the group's own stock of Extension and behavioral health resources.

The second element was a free blood pressure check during the meeting; this allowed our health provider partner to talk with each farmer about health, blood pressure, and their connection with stress.

The last element was a brief (~5 min) talk about stress and coping, given by the regional representative from the Department of Behavioral Health—a licensed family therapist who has farming family in the region. Depending on audience questions, the conversation sometimes included more detailed information about suicide prevention and services. The therapist provided information about a state-specific mental health hotline and his own contact information.

In early 2020 we held FSPMs in three southwest counties. Events in 2021 were canceled due to COVID-19, but they resumed in 2022 in the initial counties and an additional three counties.

Following the pilots, the researchers sent a Qualtrics survey to the Extension agents who had taken part to see if/how their opinions about and confidence in discussing farmer stress had changed as a result of the FSPMs. Responses to the survey were kept anonymous.

RESULTS

ACCEPTANCE OF INFORMATIONAL PACKETS AND BLOOD PRESSURE CHECKS

Table 1 summarizes attendance at the FSPM pilots, the number of resource packets taken by attendees, and the number of farmers who had their blood pressure checked.

The free blood pressure screenings were variably well-received by attendees; between 18–90% of attendees participated at each FSPM. Three FSPMs were unable to complete any checks because the health partner was called away and could not attend. One Extension agent observed that in the FSPM where 90% of attendees completed screenings, the checks were offered in a separate room; for other events, the screenings took place in the back of the large program room. Uptake of informational packets ranged from 11% to 100%. Extension agents noted that if attendees had to get up and go to the back of the room to pick up a packet, they were much less likely to do so. Having folders at tables by the doors that attendees could pick up on their way out resulted in a higher percentage of farmers leaving with these informational materials.

Farmer Stress Production Meetings

Table 1. Attendance, Accepted Resources, and Blood Pressure Screenings

Year	County	Attendees	Packets distributed	BP checks
2022	A	59	38 (64%)	11 (19%)
2022	B	34	19 (56%)	6 (18%)
2022	C	82	30 (37%)	15 (18%)
2022	D	90	10 (11%)	0 ^a
2022	E	59	40 (68%)	0 ^a
2022	F	51	45 (88%)	0 ^a
2020	C	120	72 (60%)	45 (38%)
2020	D	100	30 (30%)	18 (18%)
2020	E	71	71 (100%)	64 (90%)

^a No health partner was available for three of the 2022 events due to emergency demands from the COVID-19 pandemic.

STRESS AND MENTAL HEALTH TALK

The brief talk by the therapist was well-received by attendees; there were questions after each session. After each FSPM, usually within 24 hours, the therapist received two to four calls from attendees asking for more information and support. Topics callers asked about included suicide prevention, stress management, access to services, emotional support, alcohol and drug treatment and prevention services, and resources specific to their county.

EXTENSION AGENT SURVEY

All six Extension agents involved in FSPMs responded to the Qualtrics surveys. Each agent was part of one to three FSPMs.

Feedback from Farmers

When asked if they received any verbal feedback from farmers after the FSPM, half of the agents reported positive comments. One noted that responses afterwards were “generally positive,” and a second agent reported being told that “[stress] is a topic that needs to be addressed.” One agent reported that the feedback he heard conveyed that “they were grateful for the opportunity to do the blood pressure check along with the general feeling that someone cares about their mental and physical health.” Of the remaining three agents, two reported not receiving any comments. One specifically noted that he had heard “not really a whole lot. Growers do not want to discuss this subject.”

Impact on Agents

An interesting aspect of the FSPM was its impact on the participating Extension agents themselves. In the survey, they were asked to “describe how you felt about the issue of farmer stress *before* being involved in this project.” Two agents reported being aware of the issue, stating “I always felt like this was an issue” and “I knew that there are many stressors in the farming occupation, but it is seldom (if never) mentioned...” One agent said he had real concerns about farmer stress prior to the start of the FSPM, stating “Prior to the project I had been concerned about farmer stress/health, and have held several brainstorming meetings with another agent to discuss potential programs that could be implemented to help with this issue.” One agent acknowledged he had thought “it wasn’t a big problem.” Two agents expressed some hesitation in broaching the topic in their work. One stated “I knew it was real but I did not feel that Extension needed to be on the front lines because we had not been properly trained nor could we because mental health is a career’s worth of work and knowledge not a couple trainings...” A second was leery of talking about the topic, saying “I was unsure how presenting this information in a production meeting would go.”

Agents were next asked to “describe how you think about the issue of farmer stress *after* having been involved in the project.” Here, all agents expressed their belief in the importance of the issue of farmer stress. For example,

one agent said, “Farmer stress is something I care deeply about and I want to help in any way I can.” In three cases, agents acknowledged how hard it was to raise such a sensitive topic, saying “It is hard to open discussions about this subject with growers,” “...it can be addressed, if you do it correctly,” and “it is something that needs to be addressed, but not pushed on farmers, almost like it needs to be their idea.” Overall, the experience of being part of FSPM seems to have increased agents’ awareness of the importance of addressing farmer stress and increased their willingness to see it as part of their job. Agents also understood that the topic was difficult to broach but not impossible—it just required sensitivity.

A final set of questions asked agents about their level of confidence presenting information on farmer stress. The questions included: “How did you feel about presenting information to farmers related to stress *before* your involvement in this project?” and “How do you feel *now* about presenting information to farmers related to stress?” The survey asked agents to respond using a 5-point Likert scale, with 1= *Not at all Confident* and 5= *Very Confident*. Figure 1 summarizes the responses to these questions. Prior to participating in FSPM, agents were not at all to somewhat confident in their abilities; after the experience, they became somewhat confident or confident.

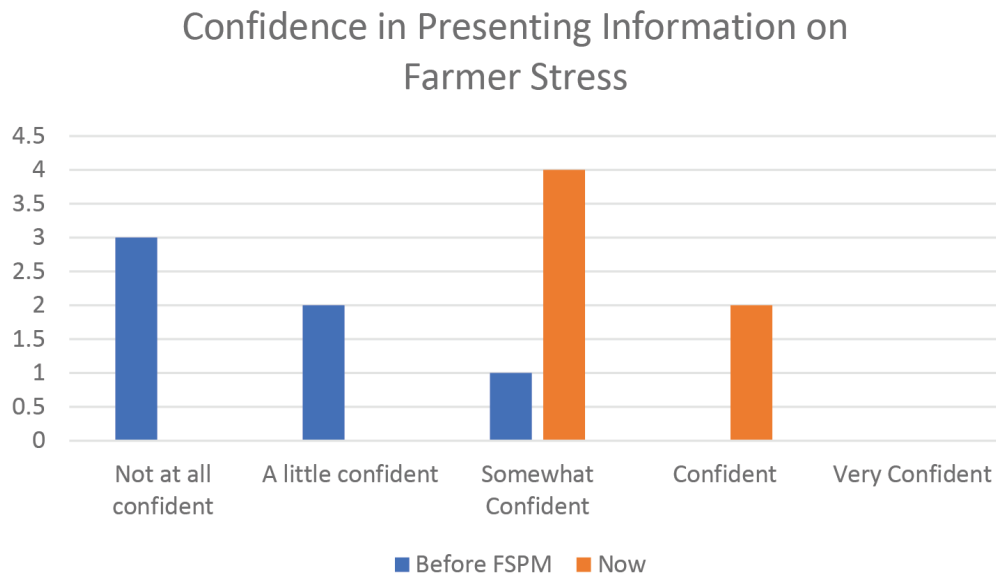


Figure 1. Extension agents’ confidence in presenting information on farmer stress.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of our pilot, adding content to existing production meetings can be an acceptable and practical way to disseminate information to farmers about stress, coping with stress, and mental health. Our observations suggest that organizing the FSPM in such a way that farmers can more discreetly have their blood pressure checked and take informational packets may maximize participation. Our findings also indicate that participation in FSPM can have a positive impact on the Extension agents involved, helping them better understand the importance of the topic and feel more confident in their ability to discuss the sensitive topic of farmer stress.

Given these promising results, we will continue using FSPM and evaluating the program’s impact. This evaluation may include soliciting feedback and suggestions from farmers who have participated in an FSPM and performing longitudinal follow up to see if participants used any of the new information. Finding farmers to be “champions” for FSPM by sharing their own stories with stress may also be helpful. While stress can be a challenging topic to bring up with farmers, we can provide information and have conversations about stress and stress management by integrating discussion into existing events led by people whom farmers trust—and potentially improve the lives of farmers and their families.

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