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## Expanding Effective Behavioral Health Literacy Programs to Address Farm Stress

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**Abstract.** Attention to stress and mental health among agricultural producers has increased over recent years, and Cooperative Extension has been active in offering educational workshops and resources to agricultural audiences. This article describes the process and effectiveness of expanding two Michigan State University Extension farm stress management programs to Cooperative Extension in other states through a national Farm Stress Management Summit. The two-day training Summit provided deeper knowledge about farm stress issues and prepared Extension professionals to offer behavioral health programs in their own communities and respective states. Evaluation findings highlight effective aspects of the Summit and next steps.

### INTRODUCTION

Cooperative Extension has a history of providing research-based information to communities to enhance their wellbeing and a mission to provide resources and education to meet community needs. In that spirit, Cooperative Extension has been responsive to concerns about mental health among agricultural producers (Cuthbertson et al., 2020; Inwood et al., 2019; McMoran et al., 2019; Rudolphi & Barnes, 2019), who often face greater rates of stress, depression, and suicide than the general population (Hagan et al., 2019). The purpose of this implementation project was to train Cooperative Extension professionals in two behavioral health literacy programs that address farm stress to enable them to offer the programs in communities in their respective states. Behavioral health literacy programs focus on improving knowledge about signs and symptoms of mental health and substance use, strategies for communicating with someone who is struggling, and skills to encourage help-seeking (Jorm, 2012).

### BACKGROUND ON FARM STRESS MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS

In response to increasing concern from agricultural community members and industry leaders, Michigan State University (MSU) Extension created two educational programs about farm stress to share research-based information about farmers' mental health. *Communicating with Farmers under Stress* (CFS) was created for people who work with and/or support farmers and can be delivered in two to four hours. *Weathering the Storm: How to Cultivate a Productive Mindset* (WTS) was designed for farmers and their families and can be delivered in 60 to 90 minutes. Both programs include topics such as unique stressors in agriculture, how to communicate with distressed producers, active listening and communication skills, tips on referring people to applicable resources, how to handle situations when producers might be considering suicide, background about agricultural economic trends, the impacts and signs of stress, and signs of suicide. The WTS program also includes stress identification and management techniques. From 2016 to 2019, the two farm stress programs were offered to 1,250 people with evaluations indicating programs were effective (Cuthbertson et al., 2021).

### EXPANDING IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS FARM STRESS

The Farm Stress Management Summit, a two-day training, was held by MSU Extension in January 2019 for Cooperative Extension professionals from other states to be trained in the MSU Extension farm stress programs. Two main objectives were to:

1. Provide in-depth context about farm stress
2. Prepare participants to implement the farm stress programs in their communities.

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training was a prerequisite. MHFA is an evidence-based training from the National Council for Mental Wellbeing that teaches participants how to recognize the signs and symptoms of a mental health crisis and how to help someone who may be experiencing one (Hadlaczky et al., 2014; Kitchener & Jorm, 2002).

The Summit lasted two full days. The first day included professional development on topics related to farm stress. See Table 1 for the training agenda. The shared professional development provided current, in-depth information for Summit attendees and generated a cross-state conversation on agricultural markets and farm stressors. On the second day, participants received both farm stress programs, facilitated by MSU Extension professionals; participants then practiced presenting part of one program in small groups with feedback from MSU Extension educators.

After completing training, participants were eligible to offer the programs in their states. Facilitators received access to full training materials, including scripted PowerPoint presentations, instructor guides for facilitation and implementation, and 12 handouts. Materials were designed to be co-branded with universities of new facilitators. MSU Extension included a standardized program evaluation tool and collects data from participating states to assess outcomes from trainings.

Participants included 99 people from 23 states (see Table 2). Nearly one-third (29%) had worked with farm families for over 20 years, and 43% had worked for Cooperative Extension for over 10 years. Half of participants were either current farmers or had farmed in the past.

## EFFECTIVENESS

Summit participants completed evaluations about the effectiveness of the training, improvements in their knowledge, and plans for future action. Evaluations were collected at the Summit for day 1 (n=74) and day 2 (n=62). Table 3 shows evaluation findings from both surveys by outcome.

In addition to quantitative data, researchers collected comments on what participants saw as the most valuable parts of the training. Comments reflected that participants learned a great deal from the Summit, and included statements such as:

- “I learned from the conference and talking to other Extensions, ways to deal with the farmers in distress.”
- “The [Congressman’s] account taught me a lot of lessons about the agrarian imperative.... Knowing the psychological underpinnings for why so many farmers make a seemingly irrational decision will be helpful in the process of connecting with them.”
- “A deeper understanding of the background issues affecting farmers will provide great context on delivering farm stress programming.”
- “The financial information will be helpful when reaching audiences that respond better to empirical reasoning.”
- “I think the discussion of how to have conversations is especially helpful.”

**Table 1.** Agenda for Two-Day Farm Stress Management Training Summit

Type of Presenters	Session Topics
Extension Professionals (e.g., Specialists, Educators, Administrative Leadership)	Agricultural economics, farm family dynamics, mental health and how to help distressed farmers, a role-playing activity with farm situations for discussions.
Elected Officials/Farmer	A state legislator’s personal account of farm stress and agribusiness story.
Practitioner/Farmer	Dr. Michael Rosmann, an Iowa farmer and trained Psychologist, presented on the agrarian imperative and its importance to farmer identity.
University Professors	Overview of agricultural market data and economic trends for different commodities; decision-making tools for financial planning.

# Using the Policy, Systems, and Environmental Framework to Guide Community Development

**Table 2.** Participating States and Universities at MSU Extension Farm Stress Management Training Summit

Cooperative Extension Region	States	Represented Universities and Colleges
Northeast	DE, MD, NY, PA	University of Delaware, University of Maryland, Cornell University & NY Farm Net, Pennsylvania State University
North Central	IA, IL, KS, MI, MN, NE, OH, SD, WI	University of Iowa, University of Illinois, Kansas State University, Michigan State University, Central Lakes College, University of Nebraska, The Ohio State University, South Dakota State University, University of Wisconsin
Southern	MS, NC, VA	Mississippi State University, East Carolina University, North Carolina State University, Virginia Polytechnic and State University
Western	ID, HI, MT, OK, OR, WA	University of Idaho, University of Hawaii, Montana State University, Oklahoma State University, Oregon State University, Washington State University
1890	GA	Fort Valley State University

*Note.* Although the programs were developed for delivery through Cooperative Extension, two Summit participants were not from land-grant institutions.

**Table 3.** Evaluation Findings for the MSU Extension Farm Stress Management Training Summit

Outcome	Indicators
Increased confidence to offer farm stress programs based on Summit training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 96% reported the Mental Health First Aid training prerequisite of the Summit training raised their confidence to offer the farm stress management programs</li> <li>• 97% reported the workshop demonstration portion raised their confidence to offer the farm stress management programs</li> <li>• 86% reported the teaching practice experience portion raised their confidence to offer the farm stress management programs</li> </ul>
Likelihood of implementing programs in home state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 95% reported they were likely to implement the “Communicating with Farmers Under Stress” program</li> <li>• 97% reported they were likely to implement the “Weathering the Storm: How to Cultivate a Productive Mindset” program</li> </ul>
Improved knowledge about various aspects of farm stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 99% improved their knowledge of agriculture markets and economic trends</li> <li>• 95% improved their knowledge of the agrarian imperative and the importance of farmer identity</li> <li>• 88% of attendees gained knowledge on unique challenges farmers face; others reported they knew this information already</li> <li>• 95% improved their knowledge of how to help farmers in distress with farm business tools</li> </ul>
Improved knowledge of strategies to work with farm-related audiences, and plans for action after training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 83% learned new strategies to work with agribusiness in their local communities</li> <li>• 77% anticipated multi-state collaborations or working together with people from other states that they met at the Summit</li> <li>• 95% reported that the summit provided an opportunity to build a support network for farmers and their families</li> </ul>

## NEXT STEPS

For accessibility and sustainability, and due to increased demand following the Summit, MSU Extension created an online train-the-trainer program for additional states and educators to be able to offer CFS and WTS. This online train-the-trainer program is offered through the learning management system Desire2Learn (D2L), and the course is asynchronous, allowing participants to complete it during the times that work best for them. This online train-the-trainer program is a combination of recorded presentation slides, interactive activities, and online

discussion boards. Completion grants the new facilitator access to an online learning community for individuals trained in the farm stress programs to collaborate and access materials. Upon completion of the course, newly trained facilitators receive a certificate and access to the training materials so they can offer both behavioral health literacy programs in their communities. The online platform is beneficial, because it allows immediate access to updated materials, such as the 20-minute version of WTS, called *Mending the Stress Fence*. Using online training platforms helps keep Extension professionals connected across state lines, enabling collaborative program efforts, sharing of best practices, and constructive problem-solving. As of 2022, MSU Extension farm stress programs are implemented in-person or online in 23 states, indicating that the implementation of train-the-trainer summit was successful. Additionally, evaluation data from the implementation of farm stress programs has provided evidence for effectiveness with audiences (Cuthbertson et al., 2021).

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