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Engaging Farmers in Educational Programs to Improve Health and Emotional Outcomes: The Farm Family Health and Wellness Program

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Abstract. Farmers face unique occupational and interpersonal stressors that increase risk for poor physical and mental health outcomes. To educate farmers and their families about these risks, one state's Family and Consumer Sciences faculty partnered with Agriculture and Natural Resources faculty with input from county agents to develop a series of online educational programs that were delivered as part of the state Agricultural Enhancement Program. Twenty-eight participants completed the pilot project and feedback surveys. Lessons learned include the need to have speakers from farming backgrounds, incorporate health topics that emphasize the connection with farming, and to include engaging visuals.

INTRODUCTION

Farmers face occupational and interpersonal stressors that tend to be unique to this profession. The uncertainty of market fluctuations, supply chain issues, workforce shortages, weather disasters, and extreme work conditions contribute to occupational stressors that impact farmers and their families (American Farm Bureau Federation, 2021; Sprung, 2021; Ullah et al., 2016). In turn, these stressors contribute to poorer physical and mental health outcomes (Yazd et al., 2019). Such outcomes include increased risk of suicide, increased risk of cancer due to exposure to pesticides, and risk of serious injury and death related to working with large machinery (Klingelschmidt et al., 2018; Yazd et al., 2019). In addition, many farmers work other full-time jobs and juggle farming duties. For these reasons, it is critical that Cooperative Extension programs design and implement educational outreach initiatives that engage farmers and their families on topics related to health and well-being.

In this article, we describe a unique educational program developed by faculty and specialists from the University of Tennessee Extension Department of Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) in conjunction with Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR) specialists and county-based FCS and ANR agents. The series is entitled Farm Family Health and Wellness and is part of an educational credit program in which farmers receive financial incentives through the state department of agriculture as part of its Agricultural Enhancement Program (AEP). AEPs are offered in some states to distribute federal and other funds to farmers and agricultural producers. For the AEP in this state, farmers must meet specific requirements, such as ones related to income from farming and the size of a farm, to qualify for the program. Once they complete the application and pay a fee, they are expected to complete a required educational program like Farm Family Health and Wellness. By completing the educational series, a farmer is eligible to apply for cost sharing benefits from the state that can help the farmer achieve objectives such as crop diversification, conservation efforts, and/or operation expansion. The purpose of the Farm Family Health and Wellness program is to address the unique health challenges faced by farmers and their families by promoting well-being and positive health outcomes.

TRAINING IMPLEMENTATION

The training series consisted of eight educational sessions that were delivered once a week for 8 consecutive weeks (Table 1). All sessions were delivered online using Zoom and were delivered synchronously, with attendees given

the option of participating live or watching the recording. Each session included two speakers who were professionals with expertise in the topic. The overall goal of the program was to help farmers and farm families make long-term investments in their health and well-being.

Table 1. Master Farm Family Health and Wellness Program Lessons and Topics

Session Title	Description
Safety Around the Farm	The focus was on safety issues, and especially on common problem areas, ranging from using equipment properly to practicing well-rounded mental health upkeep.
Health Issues Affecting Farm Families	The focus was on preparing for and preventing respiratory illnesses and cancers facing the agriculture community.
Family Relationships on the Farm	The focus was on family relationship issues such as roles and identities, typical problems and solutions, generational differences, and succession planning.
Prevent & Preserve: Being Proactive to Protect Your Health	The focus was on physical health and mental health issues that included skin protection and coping with mental health stressors as well as how to keep farm families healthier overall.
Managing Stress on the Farm	The focus was on mental health issues, including the causes and effects of compounded stress, and on discussing American Farm Bureau statistics related to mental health issues.
You Are Not Alone: Taking Care of Your Mental Health	The focus was on mental health issues. The session included examples and statistics from reliable research to emphasize the need to practice proper mental health upkeep, especially with children in the picture.
Taking Control of Family Finances	The focus was on financial issues, including factors that influence financial literacy and the psychology of spending habits.
Maximizing Your Body’s Endurance and Potential	The focus was on health issues related to healthy lifestyle choices, such as the importance of sleep and nutrition.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Sixty-five potential participants completed initial interest surveys before the program was implemented. Survey questions focused on suggestions for topics of interest. Out of the 65 respondents, 44 indicated that they were farmers (18 farmed full time and 26 farmed part time). Most farmers (39 of 44) were interested in taking the program because of the AEP. Most respondents (43 of 65) heard about the program from their county Extension office. When asked what topics they would be interested in learning more about, 21 topics out of 40 related to health and safety information (Table 2).

Out of 49 participants who enrolled, 28 completed at least seven out of eight modules to graduate from the program. Session attendance ranged from a low of 27 to a high of 37. Participants completed online surveys after each session. Surveys included three open-ended questions:

1. What actions do you plan to make based on what you learned?
2. What did you like about this session?
3. What could be improved?

One of the researchers coded the responses for each session using an open coding approach to identify themes. These themes were shared with the team after each session to help with program implementation and improvement. After all sessions were completed, the researcher identified themes across the sessions.

Farm Family Health Program

Table 2. Topics of Interest

Topic	# of responses
Health	12
Farm management	6
Safety	5
Stress management	2
Tips	2
Mental health	2
Family relationships	1
Dual careers	1
Programs available	1

Overall, most participants identified specific actions that they were planning to take based on the information from each session. The percentage of respondents who identified actions to take ranged from 75.9% (22 out of 29) to 100% (37 out of 37). Planned actions included practical behaviors like buying a fire extinguisher and wearing more sunscreen as well as more internally focused behaviors such as using “I” statements and empathizing with other points of view.

Participants wanted information that specifically addressed issues they faced in farming delivered by speakers who shared farming perspectives and experiences. For example, in a session that talked about family relationships, one participant stated, “Both speakers could relate to how sensitive conversations about the family farm can be.” In response to a session about farm safety, another participant stated, “I liked that [the speaker] . . . was an experienced medical professional who had been the first responder in farming accidents and could speak to the reality and relevance of the topic.” In contrast, participants had more critical comments for sessions that presented general information that could fit any audience. For example, in a presentation about healthy eating, one participant stated, “It was packed with information about nutrition and exercise . . . but I am not sure how relevant this is [for farmers].” Participants suggested adding case studies and examples to sessions that were more general. For example, one stated, “Maybe relate [Family Finance session] a little more to farm family financial issues with some ‘real life’ scenarios.”

Participants also identified specific elements of presentations that they found engaging, such as compelling visuals, interesting and relevant examples, and practical information and tips. For example, several participants commented about the effectiveness of photographs that illustrated sun damage and a noise graph that illustrated potential hearing damage. Several comments were made about the use of examples. One participant stated, “I liked that the subject was clearly explained, and real-life examples were given.” Furthermore, they appreciated practical information that they could use rather than information that they found academic. They were looking for programs that were engaging and educational, but not a college lecture series.

LESSONS LEARNED

The training described here serves as a model for how FCS can partner with ANR to engage farmers and their families in educational programs designed to improve physical and mental health outcomes. The online training allowed participants from across the state to participate and the endorsement from the state department of agriculture incentivized participation. Specific lessons learned include:

- Identify hot-button topics. Participants want to learn about areas that are relevant to their farm and family.
- Incorporate real-life case studies. Participants are drawn to stories that both illustrate points and link to their own similar experiences.

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- Tailor topics to engage the audience. Health topics are relevant for everyone, but farmers responded to topics that specifically addressed issues they faced, such as safety around farm equipment and family communication about farming issues like succession planning.
- Include speakers who have experience working with farmers. Make sure speakers understand the audience they will be addressing and encourage them to include case studies and scenarios related specifically to farming issues.
- Provide engaging visuals. Participants made several comments about visuals that they found compelling and interesting. For online programs, visuals that grab attention and inform are critical. Several visuals and graphics related to the importance of sun protection were noted as examples.
- Provide practical tips and information that can be acted upon. Participants appreciated practical information that they could use. They did not relate to speakers who were more academic. They were looking for programs that were not a college lecture series.
- Be flexible. Participants appreciated having options so they could incorporate the training sessions into their busy schedules. For example, participants could join the sessions in real time or could watch the videos later. Also, one participant had internet connectivity issues, so he joined the sessions at the Extension office.
- Provide technical support to help with technology issues. The flexibility that technology provides made it a valuable tool. However, technology was a challenge for some participants. Having a professional who will provide support to individuals with technological challenges is paramount to participation and engagement. For instructors, presentations should be designed with the challenges of limited bandwidth in mind.
- Collect feedback throughout the process for continuous improvement. Identify potential approaches or topics that need adjustments and make changes as you go.

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