

UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH IS IMPORTANT TO FARMERS, SURVEY REPORTS

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Findings from a “Morning Consult” nation-wide poll of 2,004 adult rural and farming persons that was authorized by the American Farm Bureau Federation about mental health issues deserves more attention than it received earlier this year. The poll was conducted from April 4-10, 2019; it includes 81 farmers/farmworkers.

The poll results suggest that rural residents and persons involved in farming view mental health issues as important to understand; however, negative stigma and access to necessary services continue as impediments to obtaining necessary help. Rural and farm people manage their behavioral health with more knowledge than in the 1980s and '90s.

Major specific findings (with a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percentage points) include these:

- Most rural respondents (91%) and farmers/farmworkers (82%) say mental health is important to them and/or their family
- Rural residents are somewhat more likely to say mental health is a major problem (38%) than farmers/farm workers (30%)
- Rural respondents (58%) and farmers/farmworkers (53%) say that media attach at least a fair amount of stigma to mental health
- A majority of farmers/farmworkers (66%) and rural respondents (75%) feel it is important to reduce stigma about mental health
- About two of every three farmers/farmworkers (66%) and rural adults (65%) know where to find mental health resources in their community
- More farmers/farmworkers (46%) say it is difficult to access necessary therapy or substance abuse counseling in their community than rural adults (28%)
- A significant majority of rural adults (73%) are confident they could spot the warning signs of a mental health condition in an immediate family member or close friend, but fewer farmers/farmworkers (55%) said they could spot the warning signs of a mental health condition
- A majority of rural respondents say that cost (70%), embarrassment (65%), and stigma (63%) are obstacles to seeking mental health assistance; even more farmers/farmworkers say cost (87%), embarrassment (70%) and stigma (65%) are obstacles to seeking mental health assistance
- Primary care doctors are trusted sources for information about mental health by both rural residents ((78%) and farmers/farmworkers (81%), followed by family members (67% and 60%), close friends (55% and 65%), and faith-based counselors (55% and 60%)
- A majority of rural respondents and farmers/farmworkers (72% for both samples) would be comfortable talking with a therapist
- Most rural respondents (81%) think financial issues and fear of losing the farm impact the mental health of farmers; even more farmers/farmworkers think financial issues (91%), fear of losing the farm (87%) and farm business problems (89%) impact their mental health

- Most survey participants (78% of rural respondents and 77% of farmers/farmworkers) think mental health training for doctors and mental health caregivers would be effective in addressing stress and mental health in their local communities
- Farmers/farmworkers (73%) and rural respondents (83%) agree that their mental health caregivers should have mental health training and that their primary care physicians should have specialized training about mental health
- Stress and mental health have become more problematic in rural areas over the past 5 years, according to the survey; nearly half (48%) of rural residents are personally experiencing more mental health challenges than a year ago; younger respondents indicated higher likelihoods of mental health challenges than older rural adults
- Only 31% of rural respondents have sought assistance, despite a growing incidence of mental health problems and even fewer farmers/farmworkers (21%) have sought assistance

The survey results show that rural residents, and farmers and farmworkers in particular, are more informed than in any survey I have seen previously; they view mental health as important and necessary. This finding suggests that knowledge of behavioral health has penetrated these populations.

Although the survey used the term, mental health, I prefer the term, behavioral health, which is broader in its scope of personal problems and solutions and less stigmatizing. This doesn't change the results of the poll.

Rural town residents differ somewhat from their neighbors who live on farms and ranches: the people involved in agriculture appear to cling more closely to the land and resources they need than rural people in general. I wonder if, and perhaps how, urban residents differ from rural residents and agricultural producers on the matters.

Farmers are emotionally tied to their land to produce food and other essentials for life such as their farmland, livestock and other resources necessary to achieve their life objectives. The survey results suggest the respondents dignify farming as an essential and noble occupation.

In general, people seem better informed than ever before in the U.S. about managing their behavioral health, and that includes farmer and rural residents. I remember past eras when rural and farm people sought mental health assistance only as a last resort.

However, the agricultural population needs more culturally astute professionals to better serve them. The creation of four regional centers to improve agricultural behavioral health authorized by the Farm Bill will help to partially address this deficiency.

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