



# **Managing Stress on the Dairy**

**A webinar sponsored by the Center for Dairy Excellence**

**Featuring Michael R. Rosmann, Ph.D.  
and two dairy farmers sharing  
personal stories**

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# There is Good and Bad News about Farming: the Bad News First

- Major parts of U.S. agriculture are in the 6<sup>th</sup> year of economic uncertainty, which includes dairying
- Uncertainties about the near and longer term future are rampant and include: changes in the U.S. government policies regarding agriculture, altered relations with foreign markets for U.S. farm products due to tariffs and other factors, COVID-19, changing consumer preferences, climate shifts, and more
- Farm bankruptcy filings rose 14% from July 2018 to June 2019 and another 8% to June 2020, and steepest in the Midwest

# Good News about Farming

- Despite the worst economic recession in agriculture since the 1980s, the rates of bankruptcy, suicide, and farm loss are not nearly as great as during the 1980s
- Farmer lender solution-seeking efforts have become more collegial rather than adversarial
- There are better resources today to assist farmers and farm families, such as helplines, the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network, ag safety & health programs, dispute mediation

# More Good News about Farming

- Behavioral health assistance that is suited to the culture of farmers is easier to obtain by distressed farm families than during the 1980s
- Farm people understand behavioral health better than ever before and view our behavior as something we can manage
- 82% of farm people said in an April 2019 Morning Consult poll that mental well-being is important to them and they would seek assistance if needed

# That Farmers Cling to Their Land is Understandable

- ▶ To farmers, ownership of a family farm/ranch is the triumphant result of the struggles of multiple generations. Losing the operation is the ultimate loss--bringing shame to the generation that let down its forebearers and dashing the hopes for successors. Farmers cling desperately to the land and other assets needed to produce food, because they see these and themselves as essential to life for all

# The Agrarian Imperative Theory Explains Why People Farm

Like many animal species, humans have a basic need to acquire sufficient territory and the necessary resources (e.g., capital, equipment, buildings, livestock) to produce the food and shelter required by their families and communities. Also called “the agrarian personality,” this genetically programmed instinct drives farmers to hang onto their land at all costs. The agrarian imperative instills farmers to work incredibly hard, to tolerate unusual pain and adversity, to trust their own judgment, and to take uncommon risks.

\*Rosmann, M.R. (2010). The Agrarian Imperative. Journal of Agromedicine, 15(2), 71-75.

# Genetic Predispositions Contribute to Farmers' Behaviors

- ▶ Successful farmers have a propensity to exhibit ADHD, to require less sleep and to be attentive
- ▶ ADHD also inclines these persons to sometimes take unwise risks, especially when under duress
- ▶ Successful farmers, regardless of their gender, have a genetic tendency to react strongly to threats to the extent that they may sacrifice their own well-being to achieve success
- ▶ Most farmers do not readily share their distress with others; this tendency is changing nowadays



# Farmers' Behavior Affects Animal Health, Crops, and Productivity

- ▶ Studies (e.g., Kolstrup & Hultgren, 2011) indicate that the behavioral well-being of dairy farm managers and workers influences the health and productivity of dairy cows, as indicated by the frequency of veterinary visits to the farm and the somatic cell count of milk
- ▶ Stressed farm animals, and plants signal when they are stressed; their production may decrease, but there are exceptions such as soybeans, fruits and nuts, which benefit from some stress
- ▶ One Welfare is becoming an important movement


# Signs of Stress in Ourselves and Others

- ▶ The most common “first sign” of stress in most farm families is an increase in arguing within the family, which may turn into physical and psychological abuse, threats of divorce and breakdown in family relationships
- ▶ Increases in alcohol and drug use occur among 40% of distressed farmers, usually in an attempt to relax, to avoid pain, or to not have to think about problems for a while
- ▶ These stress symptoms diminish when they are resolved and/or addressed in counseling etc.

# Signs of Stress in Ourselves and Others cont.

- ▶ If the stressors worsen (e.g., threatened loss of the farming operation, death of a child or key family member, divorce, illness, etc.), most people develop serious anxiety problems, which can lead to serious depression and even suicide if not addressed through forms of assistance (e.g., formation of an advisory team, stress management training, professional counseling, etc.)
- ▶ The worst stress occurs when the farm operation must cease, such as during a forced sale

# **Suicide by the Agricultural Population is Among the Highest of Any Occupational Group**

- ▶ The agricultural population includes farmers, ranchers, farm workers, migrant laborers, fishers, and foresters
  - ▶ Suicide in general has become a national crisis, and among farmers in particular
  - ▶ Suicide is almost always accompanied by severe depression
  - ▶ We must remember that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem
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# Farmer Suicide: More Yet to Learn

- ▶ According to the CDC, farmers have one of the highest rates of suicide of any occupation (45 per 100,000 yearly, physicians have one the highest rates of any profession (around 28-40 per 100,000 annually, and veterinarians, dentists, and pastors also are high), construction workers and miners may be higher (around 52 per 100,000) and military veterans have a high rate (around 35 per 100,000)
- ▶ What do these occupations have in common?
- ▶ Educators, librarians are lowest (7.5 per 100,000)

# Danger Signals of Excessive Stress, Depression, and Suicide

- ▶ Verbalizations about hopelessness (e.g., “It’s no use, nothing I do works; I can’t do this anymore”)
- ▶ Verbalizations about loss of interest and pleasure in everything (e.g., “Nothing fun anymore; I haven’t laughed for weeks”)
- ▶ Dramatic threats (e.g., “I’ll shoot all my livestock before I let the court have them”)
- ▶ Lump in the throat phenomenon, in which the person wants to cry but can’t

# Danger Signals cont.

- ▶ Avoiding public events such as church or kids' school activities and meetings that he/she usually attends
  - ▶ Flat affect, retreating behaviors and isolation
  - ▶ Deterioration in personal appearance, the farmstead, livestock health
  - ▶ Inability to sleep or very limited sleep despite feeling tired for 2 or more nights
  - ▶ During tax and loan repayment seasons, planting and harvest of farm crops
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# Factors That Increase the Risk of Suicide by Farmers

- ▶ Three or more severe simultaneous stressors, with threatened loss of the land or other essential resources to farm as the most serious, the death of a child in a farming event or essential person in the farm operation second, serious personal health compromise third, followed by divorce, living alone, perceived loss of esteem within the community, substance misuse, etc.
- ▶ Exposure to toxic pesticides (especially organophosphates, but others also) increase the risks for depression and suicide (Stallones, 2006)




# Farmers' Behavioral Health Is Partially Understood

- ▶ Suicide in the agricultural workplace occurs at a higher rate than in any other workplace (Ringgenberg et. al., 2017)
- ▶ Suicide in rural areas occurs at higher rates than in non-rural areas (Tarlow et. al., 2018; Singh & Siahpush, 2002)
- ▶ Economic factors such as unemployment, loss of a farm increase the risk of suicide (Carriere et. al., 2018)
- ▶ Longitudinal studies by Rosmann et. al. in the 1980s and from 1999 to today became the foundation of the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network (FRSAN) in the current Farm Bill

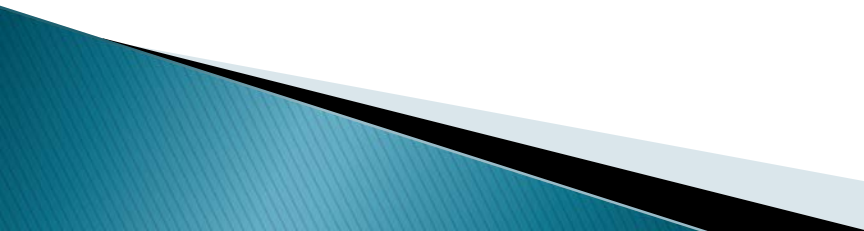
# Managing Our Behavior

- ▶ For the most part, we can control our behavior
- ▶ Behavior, like a feed ration, has ingredients that can be varied to maximize our well-being
- ▶ Just as animals need an ideal ration to grow the fastest and to produce the most milk, we humans can manage our behavioral well-being: Our daily and weekly behavior rations include how much and how hard we work, sleep, recreate, pray, laugh, talk and engage in stress management
- ▶ We humans need social supports, just as animals need herd mates

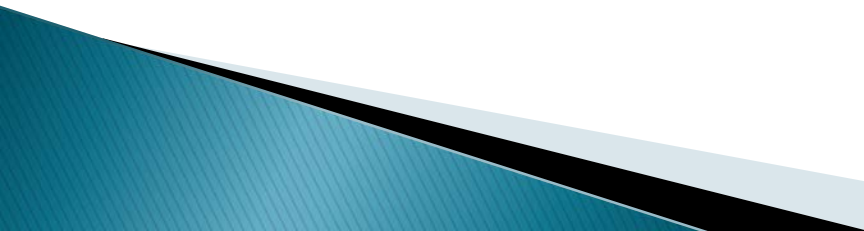
# Specific Behaviors that Help Us Deal with Stress

- ▶ Talking with people who understand our/their dilemma, and to form a support network
  - ▶ Physical intimacy and comforting touches, such as stroking arms and hands
  - ▶ Recreation and breaks away from the stressful environment such as sporting events & vacations
  - ▶ Prayer and meditation alone or with loved ones
  - ▶ Enjoying the outdoors or any other comforting environment with sunshine
  - ▶ Interacting with pets and beloved animals
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# What We Can Do to Help Ourselves and Distressed Farmers

- ▶ Form an advisory team and visit with them and others who are wise and maintain confidentiality
  - ▶ Don't remain alone, and if others appear suicidal, contact family members and available supports, such as family physicians, clergy, etc,
  - ▶ Provide options for addressing their/our concerns, such as consultants (e.g., farm business experts), attending community meetings and educational programs, and seeking behavioral healthcare from the best counselors who understand agriculture
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# What We Can Do to Help Distressed Farmers cont.

- ▶ Contact state and local resources, such as NYFarmNet, Wisconsin Farm Center, Dairy Girls Network, County and State Extension Officials
  - ▶ Contact professional organizations in your home state, such as the State Psychological Assoc., etc. to seek services from professionals who understand agriculture
  - ▶ Farm-Aid can offer help: 1-800-327-6243
  - ▶ National Suicide Prevention Hotline: available 24/7 at 1-800-273-8225
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# Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network (FRSAN)

- ▶ The 2018 Farm Bill established 4 regional centers to help local and state FRSAN programs
- ▶ A joint program of USDA and DHHS, \$10M yearly
- ▶ The FRSAN offers competitive grants to set up farm crisis hotlines, free counseling like an EAP for farmers and farm families, community workshops and other best practices
- ▶ The 4 regional centers provide technical assistance, train professionals in agricultural behavioral health, evaluate the local services and conduct additional research

# Thank You

- ▶ To the dairy farmers who participated today
  - ▶ To the Center for Dairy Excellence
  - ▶ For asking me to participate
  - ▶ For being concerned about farm family stress during a difficult era
  - ▶ For assisting the producers of food when troubles and conflicts threaten their viability, for respecting our environment, and for bringing hope to people locally and beyond
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