

Multidimensional Approach to Tackle Florida's Agricultural Mental Health Stressors

Research Brief

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Farm Stress
Brief Series



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Synopsis: This brief describes the findings of researchers who sought both to understand mental health stressors affecting Florida producers and to increase the capacity of Extension to address those stressors.

Introduction

Florida has food or agriculture production in all 67 counties where 47,500 farm operations create two million jobs annually (University of Florida Institute of Food and Agriculture Sciences, 2022). While these operations provide major contributions to the state's economy, chronic stress and mental health issues impact businesses and workers in farming, ranching, forestry, seafood, and other agricultural activities (Yunker & Radunovich, 2022). With funding from our regional partner, Southern Ag Exchange (SAGE) Network, the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF | IFAS) Extension addressed mental health issues and agriculture stressors statewide. Our multidimensional approach broadly defined agriculture to maximize inclusion of all of Florida's commodities.

Objectives

We targeted agricultural stakeholders and Extension and had two aims:

- (1) To understand the specific mental health needs of Florida agricultural

- communities, including farming and ranching families, and
- (2) To increase Extension's capacity to respond to a mental health crisis in such communities.

Strategy

Aim 1

To understand Florida's agriculture mental health needs, we performed a needs assessment between December 2022 and February 2023 and recruited various stakeholders through convenience sampling. Our Extension faculty and affiliated partners referred most of the participants who joined one of the virtual, 90-minute focus groups. The attendees provided information on farm-related stressors and their community's perception of mental health challenges. The other topics discussed were (1) coping mechanisms, (2) best delivery methods for mental health resources, and (3) barriers to accessing such resources and how to overcome them. Lastly, we employed the constant comparison method as the data analysis tool for themes development.

Findings

Twenty-three (23) stakeholders represented by different commodities groups, farm-facing professionals, and farmers participated across six focus groups. They offered 20 stressors characterized in three major categories: Environmental and Production, Financial, and Health and Policy. *Table 1* identifies the group’s demographics and the commodity types, and *Figure 1* displays the list of stressors associated with the above categories. There were several themes that emerged from the discussions, depicted in *Table 2*. The broad themes included controllable stressors, coping mechanisms, access barriers in mental health resources delivery, and agricultural training for support professionals. The themes also laid the groundwork for the groups’ recommendations. *Figure 2* illustrates the stakeholders’ suggestions in five areas where Extension efforts should be placed. These important findings played a crucial role in our strategic plan to improve Florida’s agriculture competency to manage stressors affecting its overall health.

Figure 1: Stressors Identified

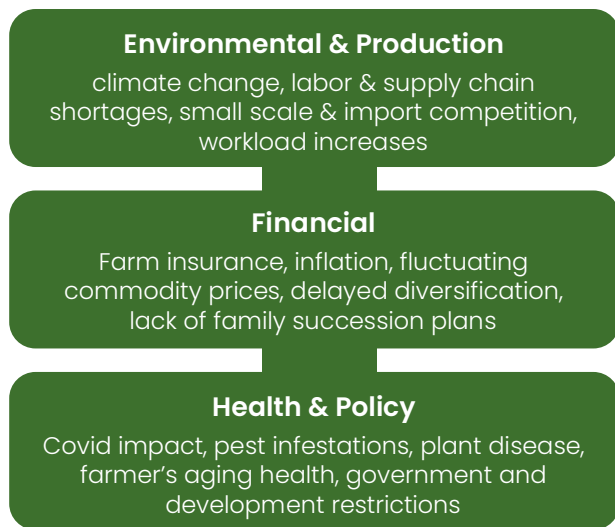


Table 1: Focus Group Composition

Gender (n=23)	Farmers# (n=7)
Female (19)	Full-time (3)
Male (4)	Part-time (4)
Organizations Represented	
Florida Department of Agriculture	
Florida Farm Bureau	
UF IFAS Extension	
Syngenta	
Bayer Crop Science	
Seafood Association	
Aquaculture Association	
Fruit and Vegetables Association	

n, number; #, family-owned

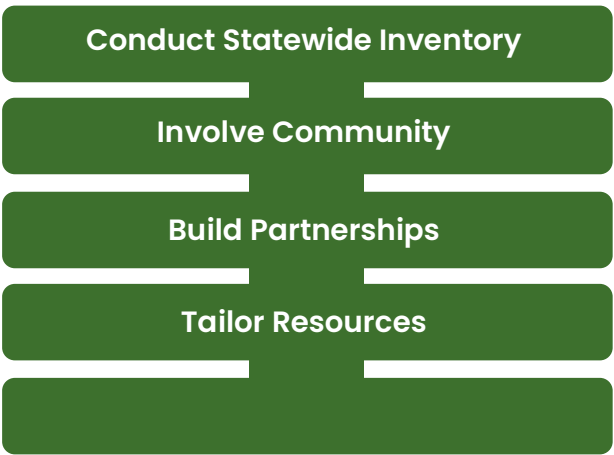
Table 2: Selected Themes from Focus Group Discussion

Controllable Stressors
<i>"The only thing I feel like you can control or have some impact is the communication between the family side. I think that is really important and a huge topic, [because] so many in these ranches and farms are families, still run by family, and everyone that works there are family members that the communication of expectations and just being willing to talk about it...sometimes I think it's avoided, the elephant is avoided in a lot parts of life."</i>
Healthy Coping
<i>"I just saw the comment about grower forum, [and] I think even some of those informal opportunities for growers to get together and talk to each other because sometimes, there's solutions that come out to problems they didn't even know everybody else was having, so I think that's valuable."</i>
Unhealthy Coping
<i>"I'm sure there probably is, but I think that's one aspect of the agricultural community, sometimes we don't talk about our problems as much as we should. We bury them and hide them. I don't think that would be something that a lot of people would admit to, especially in our farming industry, the ag industry. If there are a lot of people doing it, they may be walking around normal, because they're used to doing it, and you would never know."</i>
Delivery Methods for Mental Health Resources
<i>"Contact [farmers] one-on-one, face-to-face, and actually sit down and talk to them, and find out what's going on and what they need and work that way. I know that's probably time-consuming and probably costs money, but it seems that</i>

farmers I know – some of them don't even have internet access or they're my age and still do things the old-fashioned way on the books and paper and pencil and don't have access. Then, like me – I have access, but it's not the best. It comes and goes."
Mental Health Education
"In order for this to work, you would have to have counselors trained to specifically know the triggers of farming, to know the language of farmers, and to be able to relate to them. I would just say that in order for a hotline or something like that to work, it would have to be very specific."
Agriculture Training for Mental Health
"They have a hotline number that farmers or someone involved in agriculture can call and be connected to a psychiatrist or counselor that has training on how to talk to farmers directly, is versed in their struggles, is not a generic-type thing. That is something that I would like to see implemented here in Florida. It's something that I see as good things happening around the country too."
Visibility of Resources
"I would say, in agriculture specifically, I think it's very difficult to find what those outlets or what those resources are outside of just hotlines or some sort of a call-in type resource."
Overcoming Barriers
"I'd say education, not just for farmers, but for their support systems and their families that there's not a negative connotation with trying to have better mental health. That if you need something, to ask for help. I think as a society, we really need to move in that direction, that we're supportive."

themes participants' responses

Figure 2: Stakeholders' Recommendations



Aim 2

UF | IFAS Extension’s capacity to respond to a mental health crisis required two subgoals. First, we increased the number of certified mental health instructors within Extension and then evaluated the effectiveness of the mental health trainings. To accomplish goal one, we invited Extension faculty to train as instructors for our mental health programs, which were: (1) Mental Health First Aid for Adults (MHFA), (2) Mental Health First Aid for Adults working with Youth (YMHFA), and (3) Question Persuade Refer (QPR) Suicide Prevention. Those who received their certifications held face-to-face and online workshops throughout the state for: (1) UF faculty and staff including Extension, (2) farm-facing professionals, and (3) rural and farming communities. The trainings’ effectiveness was determined by completion of an adapted follow-up survey from Meadowcroft et al. (2023), which was emailed within three to six months post-training. We attempted to assess if the trainees used the skills that were taught.

Findings

Twelve Extension faculty were successfully certified in MHFA, YMHFA, and QPR. Together, they conducted 23 workshops (9 QPR, 6 MHFA, 8 YMHFA) from 2022–2023 and reached 224 individuals. UF faculty and staff who had Extension appointments accounted for almost half (103/224) of the participants. Table 3 displays the breakdown of the participant types. In addition, out of 67 counties, 40 (60percent), of the attendees were from the northwest, central and southeast areas of the state and had finished at least two types of trainings (Figure 3). For the effectiveness of the workshop, the follow-up survey had a 30 percent response rate (67/224) where 36 percent reported they had encountered someone in crisis. Sixty-seven percent referred someone for professional help, and 96

percent used at least one of the skills that were taught.

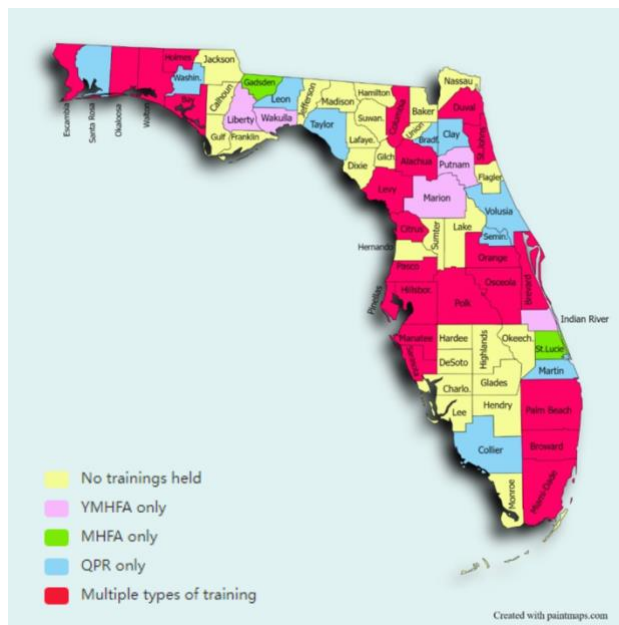
All respondents felt confident they could assist someone with a mental health issue because of the training that they received.

Table 3: Type of Participants

Training Type	Extension	Community*	Total
QPR	34	40	74
MHFA	17	54	71
YMHFA	52	27	79
Total	103	121	224

QPR: Question. Persuade. Refer; MHFA: Mental Health First Aid; YMHFA: Mental Health First Aid for Adults working with Youth.
 *Includes Non-Extension UF faculty and staff, farm-facing professionals, & local community.

Figure 3: Florida Counties Impacted



Discussion

Core stressors like natural disasters and economic issues are known to impact the farming industry. They either worsen medical conditions or trigger a mental health crisis and make farm families extra vulnerable to stress (Braun & Pippidis, 2020; Frohlich, Lindsey, & Radunovich, 2021). Our projects sought to minimize mental health stressors through research and training. At the beginning, we listened to our farmers and agriculture professionals to acknowledge their concerns. They suggested several feasible activities, one of which led to the formation of a UF network of agriculture experts. Next, our Extension faculty applied the evidenced-based mental health courses to train residents within their community. Through this effort, they reported how they helped identify, respond, and refer resources to those in need. The work also highlighted areas for improvement. For instance, we found 40 percent of counties still lacked mental health programming and a surplus of interdisciplinary partnerships would be essential to sustain our agricultural consortium. Finally, we will move forward with three initiatives: (1) increase our mental health training in the missing counties; (2) contribute to the Geographic Information Systems mapping to inform our weather disaster patterns; and (3) grow our partnerships through additional collaborations from the financial and legal sectors to further our network. We believe that our multidimensional strategy demonstrates that we are on the right path to tackle stress in Florida’s agricultural industry.

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