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Tasha Howard
Utah State University, tasha.killian@usu.edu

Paige Wray
Utah State University, paige.wray@usu.edu

Jacob Hadfield
Utah state University, jacob.hadfield@usu.edu

Joshua Dallin
Utah State University, josh.dallin@usu.edu

Callahan K. Ward
Utah State University, callie.ward@usu.edu

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USU Extension’s Focus on Stress and Mental Health in Rural Agriculture

Tasha Howard, Paige Wray, Josh Dallin, Jacob Hadfield, Callie Ward

Abstract

Many agriculture producers are seeking help to combat stress, mental illness, and suicide. Although some resources exist, there is a gap in resources specific to mental health in rural farm and ranch life. In response, Utah State University (USU) Extension developed a mental health education course to address stressors within agriculture.

Introduction

In 2017, nearly 38,000 working-age people (16-64 years old) in the United States died from suicide. The agricultural industry was one of the top five major industry groups with higher suicide rates compared to the general study population; 36% of total suicides were in agriculture (Peterson et. al., 2020). While many farmers, ranchers, and their families face extreme stress and mental health issues, these individuals lack educational and supportive resources to address farm stress and mental health. There is a general lack of professionals and relevant curricula targeted to mental health among agricultural producers and their families (Summers et al., 2019). In response, USU Extension developed a research-based outreach course to address stress and mental health in agriculture. USU Extension sought to develop a course that uses de-stigmatizing language in content materials, provides community members with a step-by-step process for identifying and responding to mental health warning signs, and creates a network of informed community members who can aid and respond appropriately to mental health.

Response and Target Audience

In response to the need for farm and ranch specific mental health resources, USU Extension formed a team of faculty from both Home and Community and Agriculture departments. The faculty team had expertise in mental health, as well as working with farmers and ranchers. Combining varied experiences, the team was able to develop a research-based educational course with a mix of teaching and application activities. This course was adapted to an online format during COVID-19. The one-hour course was designed based on feedback from a group of 26 agricultural producers who attended a pilot Mental Health First Aid training. The course, entitled “*The Biggest Asset is You*” helps farmers and ranchers recognize the need to take care of their mental health, and the mental health of their friends, neighbors, and family.

The course was delivered as a part of the Pesticide Certification training for producers in the Urban and Small farms conference. The conference attracted participants of different genders

and age groups across all 29 counties in Utah. While *The Biggest Asset is You* course targets rural populations, several participants did not reside in rural Utah. However, all participants were employed in the agricultural industry. In total, 388 individuals participated in the educational course during the conference.

Outcomes and Impact

A recent needs assessment informed our evaluation design. Evaluation questions included issues related to farm and ranch mental health, knowledge in recognizing, identifying, and responding to mental health issues, and intentions to adopt best practices to improve mental health. Evaluation data were gathered from 186 participants. Using a pre-post design, results indicated participants had an increase in knowledge related to recognizing, identifying, and responding to mental health issues after completing the course. With respect to intentions, more than half the number of total participants (62%) stated they intended to adopt mental health best practices. The evaluation also gathered qualitative data from participants. Many participants discussed their own personal experiences with suicides. One participant said:

“a friend was talking about.... going to take their life. I was on the phone with them, the line got disconnected and they were not answering my calls. I called the police and let them know.... he later thanked me for getting him help.”

Public Value

As a new initiative, *The Biggest Asset is You* course at USU Extension led to an increase in producers' knowledge of mental health best practices. As we continue to deliver the course to more participants, we expect a positive impact on mental health among rural agricultural families throughout Utah. We also plan to increase efforts on creating a network of informed citizens who can appropriately address mental health in agriculture. Faculty shared their experiences of personal interactions with participants, and one had a surreal awareness, indicating “*we really are saving lives.*” (J. Dallin, personal communication, February, 2020). Next steps include an expansion of evidence-based information and transition to an online course format. The USU Extension team has partnered with the USU Center for Persons with Disabilities (CPD) to provide a more in-depth, online-based instruction which includes how agricultural gatekeepers (agricultural faculty, farm credit and lending agents, rural congregation leaders, etc.) can recognize and respond to mental health warning signs. Additionally, the CPD will provide further expertise through a mental health practitioner to inform best practices to reduce stress among farmers and ranchers.

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