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A National Perspective of Mental Health Awareness Among Agricultural Workers

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Abstract

The knowledge and perceptions of mental health resources for agricultural workers were explored at the 2024 American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) National Conference. Data were gathered via a voluntary survey conducted at the event. With 137 completed surveys, the study revealed that the participants desired more information regarding agricultural mental health resources and revealed their preferences for receiving this information. These findings will lead USU Extension to create impactful educational resources to better address mental health awareness and education needs in agricultural workers.

Introduction

Every day, ag workers deal with the stresses of animal health, weather unpredictability, equipment malfunctions, the rise in costs of feed and repairs, early morning and late-night work, and stress in their personal lives (Utah State University Extension, n.d.). According to Nigel et al. (2019), from 2012 to 2017, the net cash income of farms dropped by 33% after adjusting for inflation. As inflation continues, this economic pressure on farms is expected to increase (Hernandez, 2023). According to a 2023 needs assessment conducted by Utah State University (USU) Extension, mental health and wellbeing services were consistently ranked as high priority with a ranked discrepancy score (RDS) of -55 (Narine, 2023). This discrepancy score represents the urgency of a need. This national survey aimed to learn from participants about their perceptions of mental health challenges. Findings shed light on the existing awareness of mental health challenges in agriculture and the need for education about mental health resources.

Response & Target Audience

The Ag wellness-managing agricultural stress survey was created and implemented at the National American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) Annual Convention in Salt Lake City, Utah, from January 20–22, 2024. Attendees were invited to participate in a survey about ag wellness and mental health. USU Extension agents had a booth at this convention's trade show event, and the survey was administered throughout the trade show hours. As a nationally attended event, the AFBF convention provided the unique opportunity to compile perceptions of agriculture mental health challenges and education from participants nationwide.

The target audience for this survey was the attendees of the AFBF National Convention. USU Extension personnel recognized that these attendees represented a national “sample” of agricultural professionals. The survey was available to anyone at the trade show willing to participate, resulting in 138 completed surveys ($n = 138$).

Results

The survey conducted at the 2024 AFBF annual convention provided insights into the mental health awareness and educational preferences among agricultural workers. The findings illustrate the responses to the various questions posed to the participants. Nearly all respondents (99.3%) confirmed their connection to the agricultural sector, either directly or through someone they know, highlighting the relevance of the survey content to the attendees (See Table 1).

Table 1

Connection to Agriculture

Question	Yes	No
Do you or do you know someone that works in the agricultural business?	137 (99.3%)	1 (0.7%)

Most of the respondents (86.2%) expressed a need for more education regarding mental health issues affecting agricultural workers, indicating a gap in current knowledge or resources available to them (See Table 2).

Table 2

Need for Mental Health Education

Question	Yes	No
Could you benefit from more education on the mental health of Ag workers?	119 (86.2%)	19 (13.8%)

More than half of the participants (58%) reported a personal or second-hand experience with mental health struggles within the agricultural community, underscoring the prevalence of mental health issues in this sector (See Table 3).

Table 3

Personal Connection to Mental Health Challenges

Question	Yes	No
Do you or do you know someone in Ag that struggles with mental health?	80 (58.0%)	58 (42.0%)

While a majority (73.2%) of respondents knew where to find mental health resources, there remains a large portion (26.8%) who are unaware, pointing to an opportunity for improved dissemination of information (See Table 4).

Table 4

Awareness of Resources

Question	Yes	No
Do you know where to find resources?	101 (73.2%)	37 (26.8%)

When asked about their preferred methods for receiving information on agricultural wellness, the most favored approach was online videos, chosen by 57 respondents. This was followed by

articles and in-person sessions, suggesting that digital media might be an effective channel for delivering mental health education to this demographic (See Table 5).

Table 5
Preferred Methods for Receiving Information

Method	Number of Responses
Online Videos	57
Articles	42
In-Person	32
Mail-In Materials	31
Virtual Classes	30
Self-Paced Courses	23

The survey results confirm that most attendees at the AFBF National Convention are connected to the agricultural sector and express a clear need for enhanced mental health resources. Online videos emerged as the preferred format for receiving information, indicating a significant demand for virtual educational content. These findings suggest that Extension programs should prioritize the creation of accessible, video-based educational materials tailored to the specific needs and preferences of the agricultural community.

Public Value

The survey findings reveal that while a significant portion of attendees (73.2%) know where to find mental health resources, an even greater number (86.2%) are eager to expand their knowledge. There is also a preference for receiving this information via online videos, suggesting that digital formats are both accessible and desirable for this audience. Based on these insights, USU Extension programs are well-positioned to develop and disseminate online video resources that address mental health awareness and education for agricultural workers, effectively meeting the community's expressed needs and preferences.

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