



# HELPING FARMERS & AGRICULTURAL PROFESSIONALS MANAGE STRESS

**2,450**

people participated in MSU Extension's farm stress programs from 2016 to 2019.

**20**

states are implementing MSU Extension farm stress management workshops nationally.

**4**

Bury Seeds, Not Stress webinars held on emotional and behavioral health topics.

## PRIORITY

### A R E A S

- Helping farmers and farm families improve their mental health.
- Teaching agricultural professionals how to help those in need of mental health support.
- Reducing stigma surrounding mental health issues.
- Supporting farmers through stressful times, such as financial- and weather-related crises.

## IMPACTS

Through MSU Extension's farm stress programming, farmers, their families and agricultural professionals alike learned stress management techniques, about resources to get through tough times, ways to communicate with farmers under stress and more. Of farm stress management participants surveyed:



**99%**

reported improving their understanding of the warning signs of suicide.



**99%**

reported learning where to send people for mental health help.



**98%**

reported increasing their confidence in communicating with someone experiencing stress.

To support farm stress programming, contact Cheryl Eschbach at [cheryl@msu.edu](mailto:cheryl@msu.edu). To bring farm stress programming into your community, contact Eric Karbowski at [karbows8@msu.edu](mailto:karbows8@msu.edu).

**“ This has been super helpful! I've been dealing with a lot of stress lately, and now I am more confident with handing my stress. ”**

• Participant in MSU Extension's farm stress programming



## CONFRONTING THE COMPLEX PROBLEM OF FARM STRESS

Farmers, growers and agricultural producers face a great deal of stress and uniquely challenging situations. Fluctuating commodity prices and interest rates and uncooperative weather all create stress. Stigma around mental health issues makes it difficult to ask for help, especially in rural communities and among farmers and farm families. Unfortunately, this can manifest in mental health crises and even suicide; the suicide rate among U.S. farmers is estimated to be 1.5 times higher than the national rate.

Cooperative Extension's structure and enduring, strong relationships in the agricultural community can help address this complex problem. In Michigan, many farmers already come to MSU Extension when they have questions related to their operations or a crisis on the farm. MSU Extension provides a valued approach with objective, research-based information that allows individuals to determine for themselves what decisions or actions are in their best interests.

In creating and developing its farm stress management programming and outreach, MSU Extension has leveraged decades-long relationships in farming communities and combined the deep expertise of its farming and behavioral health educators. To date, MSU Extension has built a suite of farm stress resources that includes online factsheets, community outreach, a pilot text messaging program, and a free webinar series.

## THE FARM STRESS MANAGEMENT NATIONAL SUMMIT

In January 2019, MSU Extension hosted the Farm Stress Management National Summit in East Lansing. The day before the summit began, MSU Extension held a Mental Health First Aid training that allowed participants to earn certification in that topic. A total of 99 summit participants from 23 states attended. Most were educators from the national Cooperative Extension System, including many who work directly with farmers on crop planning, farm management and transition planning. Others were family and consumer sciences educators who provide mental health programs.

By training Cooperative Extension educators, MSU Extension can expand the reach of farm stress programming in countless districts and states to reach farmers, farm families, financial lenders, state inspectors and anyone else who works in agriculture. Of the 2019 summit's attendees, 98% agreed the summit was a good use of their time, with 83% of attendees reporting that they learned new strategies for working with agribusiness in their communities.

## TRAIN-THE-TRAINER ONLINE COURSE FOR COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

After the successful January 2019 national summit, several states asked MSU Extension to hold training sessions in two key farm stress programs, Communicating With Farmers Under Stress and Weathering the Storm: How to Cultivate a Productive Mindset. In response, MSU Extension launched an online Farm Stress Management Train-the-Trainer course. This self-paced course is delivered on the Desire2Learn (D2L) platform and prepares Extension staff members from across the U.S. to facilitate both programs.

The training combines recorded slide presentations, interactive activities, opportunities to network and collaborate with other participants in an online community, and access to farm stress resources. After completing the course, newly certified facilitators receive access to the training materials so they can offer the "Communicating" and "Weathering" workshops in their communities.





## TRAINING PARTNERS, EXPANDING COMMUNITY REACH

In 2019, MSU Extension and the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development delivered an online course on farm stress management to 483 Farm Service Agency (FSA) employees. Another 424 FSA employees attended a training session in Detroit that featured scenario-based learning, small-group discussions and facilitated role-playing activities.

The FSA is the division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture that is responsible for implementing farm conservation regulations and laws. FSA employees work directly with farmers and agribusiness professionals, which means they are often among the first to notice warning signs of farmers' mental distress.

Survey feedback from the FSA trainings showed positive outcomes. Ninety-one percent of participants indicated that the training improved their ability to serve customers and clients who are experiencing stress, and 80% said it improved their ability to manage their own stress.

In 2019, MSU Extension and the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development also began providing farm stress training and educational materials to the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Farmers Union, and the Farm Credit Council.

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# 483

Federal Farm Service Agency employees received online farm stress management training from MSU Extension.

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***“ I will be able to communicate with stressed farmers with more tact, and have a better approach to not make things more complicated or stressful for them. ”***

• Participant in MSU Extension's farm stress programming