Agriculture Wellness Edition – January 2020

This edition of the CT Farm Risk & Management newsletter will focus on one of the most significant risks facing our agricultural community – mental health. As has been made clear by each of these newsletters, and by the firsthand experiences of each and every one of you, that a life in agriculture is full of risks and, although rewarding, can be incredibly stressful. Learning to manage these risks and the associated stressors in a healthy and productive way is imperative to one’s well-being. Knowing where to turn when these stressors become too much to manage for you or someone else is often not as apparent as it may be in other vocations or communities. UConn Extension addressed these issues last year by forming a subcommittee focused on wellness in agriculture. On December 5, 2019 UConn Extension held the first annual Connecticut Ag Wellness Summit. Much of the material presented below is borrowed from presenters or materials from the Ag Wellness Summit.

USDA RMA Vision Statement:

“Securing the future of agriculture by providing world class risk management tools to rural America.”
The Human Animal: Recognizing Behaviors and Learning to Engage

Dr. Jennifer Quammen is founder of Veterinarian Coaching, a business focused on helping veterinarians THRIVE in life, love and work.

Dr. Jennifer Quammen was the perfect candidate to kick off the Ag Wellness Summit. Her high energy, lightheartedness, and sense of humor was welcomed as she began her talk on what are some very hard and heavy topics: mental health, anxiety, and suicide. She recognized that these are problems facing our entire society, but working in veterinary medicine for many years, she admitted that the agricultural community is disproportionately affected by these issues. The topic hit home for CT residents as one agricultural stakeholder shared that the biggest topic coming up in her county this year is stress. Dr. Jen began her talk on “The Human Animal” in hopes of encouraging those in attendance to understand the human brain, how it works in relation to stress, and how one can alleviate some of this stress.

“So, what is the elephant in the room then?” she inquired. She shared with us the acronym FAST (Fear, Anxiety, Stress, Trauma). These are issues that many of us face and if these are issues that we are facing, chances are someone else is facing the same issues. Dr. Jenn urged us to listen to that voice in our head when something does not feel right, to act, especially when the voice is telling you something about someone else. There is a great deal of shame and stigma surrounding these issues; someone who needs help may not always be in a position to ask for help. She joked further, “I never thought I would have to deal with people so much in agriculture. Plants and animals - ok, but usually people pursue this line of work to get away from people.”

To understand how we can better help ourselves and others, the presentation took an anatomical turn. Jenn presented the crowd with some information on how the brain works. Assuring the crowd that humans are indeed animals too, she explained how animals’ brains work, “an animal’s brain has five motivational components that stimulate the hypothalamus: fight, flight, freeze, food, and fornication (The Five F’s). The first three are stress responses.” The latter two are only concerns when an animal is not in a stressed state. She elaborated, “however, humans’ brains are unique in their ability to utilize reason and logic.” We have the ability to react, as an animal would in a stressful situation without thinking (fight, flight, or freeze), or we can respond. Responding utilizes this part of the brain unique to humans and yet responding in a healthy way is easier said than done in most situations, especially stressful ones.

Dr. Jenn didn’t necessarily give us rules of engagement when responding to stress, nor did she lecture on how to properly deal with the stress of others. However, she did give us a set of tools that, if utilized, would put us in a better position to deal with everyday stressors and as well as help others who may be dealing with similar issues. The first is to focus on your breathing. “Most of us breath with our chest. This is stress induced. Our natural way of breathing is with our abdomen”, she stated. An attendee added, “if you watch a baby breath when its sleeping it is the stomach that is rising and falling, not the chest.” A way to correct this is to allow yourself to breath with your stomach or to practice simple breathing exercises. These you can do on your own. The best part is that no one will ever know you are doing this. Drinking plenty of water, half your body weight in ounces per day, was next on the list. She told us most people are running around dehydrated and this wreaks havoc on your brain’s ability to function properly. Lack of sleep has similar effects on the brain. “Most people need 6.5 to 8.5 hours each night. Only about 2% of the population can manage with 4-5 hours”, she stated. She also recognizes that this may not always possible given the nature of a life in agriculture. Yet, she insisted.
To end her presentation, Jenn shared a final, important tool: support from your peers. She said talking to others is an incredibly powerful tool. Giving your support to others and knowing that you also have support is often all that is needed to avoid a crisis. And it is often those without support systems in place that fall victim to unnecessary stress, anxiety, and even worse, suicide. The community represented in the room showed that there are places to turn to and people to rely on during your time of need. For more information about the CT Ag Wellness Program and to access any of its resources, please visit https://ctfarmrisk.uconn.edu/agstress.php.

Getting Your Hands Back on the Wheel
Focus on ‘Controlling the Controllables’

Jon Jaffe is a Farm Business Consultant with Farm Credit East. Jon has 36 years of experience in ag lending, income tax preparation and farm business consulting. Jon grew up on a dairy farm and then owned and operated his own dairy farm for a few years.

Jon Jaffe took a very personal approach to his talk, sharing with the audience stories of heartache and triumph spanning the entirety of his career in agriculture. He was the first to admit that he is no expert in the topic of mental health, but he has had a lot of experience with stress, particularly that which arises for those in agriculture. Jon’s talk “Getting Your Hands Back on the Wheel: Focus on Controlling the Controllables” gave attendees an approachable and relatable set of tools to dealing with issues that arise when owning and operating a farm business.

Much of the talk focused on the business side of farming which included business planning, lending, and farm succession. He demonstrated that these are often the make-or-break aspects of farming. One of the most prevalent issues facing family owned farms is the family itself, more specifically the “interesting dynamic” that exists between the junior and senior generations. “There needs to be more of a focus on this generational gap. There is often disharmony between these two generations with different ideas about what should be done, especially when it comes to farm succession” he stated. The senior generations will tend to retain control longer than the junior generation would like. The junior generations usually have plans for changes which often do not sit well with the senior generation. This disharmony can lead to unnecessary stress on both the business and family side of things. “It’s important for the senior generation to have an exit strategy and for the junior generation to participate in the development of a succession plan”, he continued. This is one of the “controllable” components in agriculture. Having a proper succession plan is imperative to the longevity of any farm.

Jon shifted his focus to the very nature of farming. “It’s a 24-hour business” he stated in a way which indicated that he wasn’t saying anything that those in the audience didn’t already know. The very nature of farming is not something that can be controlled or changed overnight. However, he did offer the audience this, “There is a need to separate out the business from the personal time. Dinners with the family shouldn’t be spent planning what tasks are going to be completed the next day.” He admitted that farming is an
emotional rollercoaster at times, but if you can learn to “turn it on/off”, it can be a very powerful alternative to succumbing to the burden of the everyday stress, especially during times which are meant to alleviate this. He suggested that we all, “remember why you are farming”.

So, what are the controllable versus uncontrollable stressors? How should we treat them? Jon suggested that we be vigilant in treating these things separately. Learn to identify which things are in your control and which are not. Stress originating from controllable things can be mediated by simply controlling for these things; make a change. Record keeping is a great way to avoid a great deal of controllable stress, especially when it comes to tax season. Jon has done income tax preparation for many years as says that much of the anxiety surrounding taxes comes from poor record keeping throughout the year. “If they had only made an effort to keep things more organized, they wouldn’t be running around last minute the day before their taxes are due”, he said. However, the stress from uncontrollable things can be a bit more difficult to navigate. “The weather, that’s a huge one”, Jon sated. This is something that we have absolutely no control over. Knowing this might not always reduce the stress but considering these things ahead of time and having a plan in place can certainly help to reduce the anxiety of unfavorable weather conditions. And if nothing else, you can rest assured knowing that you did all that you could.

At the end of Jon’s talk he offered some simple tools to help prevent and mediate stress. The first, which he mentioned multiple times throughout his talk was to have a plan. This means a plan for everything: succession, market fluctuations, tax preparation, weather, etc. The second: follow through on the plan. A plan serves no purpose if it is not implemented. A small, simple tool that Jon himself stands by is making lists. Make a list for anything that you can. This is a great way to visualize things that need to get done. Getting these things out of your head and organized on paper can make even many large tasks seem manageable. These large difficult tasks also play a role in mediating stress and anxiety. Jon stated that, “Taking care of the difficult things first help to reduce looming stress and give a sense of accomplishment. Don’t let things linger.” Finally, he said to give yourself props. Recognize yourself for your accomplishments. Many things can create stress. However, these same things can become a source of pride and strength once they are taken care of. “Give yourself a pat on the back. Take a break. Do something that is fun”, he suggested. We don’t have to let stress and anxiety rule our lives. We may not be able to get rid of it, but there are many ways to reduce this stress by learning to deal with it in a healthy way.

**Crop Insurance – The Farm Safety Net**

“Agriculture is an inherently risky business. Farmers and ranchers need to regularly manage for adverse weather and financial, marketing, production, human-resource, and legal risks.

Federal crop insurance is the pre-eminent risk management solution for farmers and ranchers, providing effective coverage that helps them recover after severe weather and bad years of production. For some farming and ranching operations, crop insurance is the difference between staying in business or going out of business after a disaster. For the next generation, crop insurance provides the stability that will allow them to begin farming.”

- USDA
CT Resources & Awareness: Where to Turn?

Andrea Iger Duarte, LCSW, MPH is the Suicide Prevention project Director in the Prevention and Health Division of the CT Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, Office of the Commissioner.

Mental health awareness is a relatively recent development, especially in the realm of agriculture. This is concerning as a disproportionate number of farmers succumb to mental health ailments, including suicide, when compared to other vocations. Stigma is partially to blame for this, however, ignorance has played a major role in the slow building awareness of these issues. Andrea Iger Duarte participated in this year’s Ag Wellness Summit to provide attendees with some information regarding suicide and mental health in Connecticut. She also provided a wealth of resources for those both directly and indirectly affected by mental illness. Below are some highlights from her talk and links to the aforementioned resources.

National & Connecticut Data:

2016 – General Statistics:

- In 2016, 44,965 people died by suicide in the US; 388 in CT. There are an estimated 25 suicide attempts for every one death by suicide. This translates to about 1,124,125 suicide attempts in the US and 9,700 attempts in Connecticut. It is important to note that Connecticut suicide rates do sit below the national average.

### CT Violent Death Reporting System (2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ages &lt; 25</th>
<th>Ages 25 - 64</th>
<th>Ages &gt; 64</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>131</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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- Perceived to have Depressed Mood
- History of Ever Receiving Mental Illness or Substance Abuse Treatment
- Currently Diagnosed with a Mental Health Problem
- Currently Receiving Mental Health/Substance Abuse Treatment
- History of Attempted Suicide

When looking at trends across years, suicide rates have been increasing. This is especially true for both middle-aged and older adults.

- When we look at the circumstances surrounding suicides in Connecticut, we see a few common themes. Many of these themes are shared across the age groups. Below is a graphic containing the Top Five Known Circumstances by Specific Age Categories.

Connecticut Suicide Demographics:

- Men are more than twice as likely to commit suicide than women for almost all age groups. It is more often older individuals as well. The age groups that are most affected by suicide are men and women ages 45-64, followed by those above 65 years old. These age groups account for the senior generation of farmers who suffer from a disproportionate amount of farm stress due to things such as farm succession, business planning, and aging.

Upcoming Events:

Thursday - January 23rd, 2020

**AG LABOR 101 PLUS NEW LABOR LAWS & HOW TO TRAIN AND KEEP GREAT EMPLOYEES**

8:30 am - 3:30 pm, Lunch provided, Free program RSVP by Jan. 21st to joann@cfba.org or call 860-768-1100
One-on One Advising Sessions

2020 One-on-One Sessions

View more info here

Wednesday January 29th, 2020
Middlesex Extension Center
1066 Saybrook Rd Haddam, CT
9:00 am - 3:30 pm

Tuesday February 18th, 2020
Wamogo Agri-Science Center
98 Wamogo Road Litchfield, CT
9:00 am - 3:30 pm

Thursday March 12, 2020
Tolland County Extension Center
24 Hyde Avenue Vernon, CT
1:30 pm - 8:30 pm

Solid Ground Farmer Training

Review of Top 10 Issues on Veg Farms in 2019: Pests, Disease, Soils, Climate Change, Oh My! - With Matt DeBacco & Kip Kolesinskas

January 29th, 2020 (3:30 – 6:30 pm) @ Middlesex County Extension Center – 1066 Saybrook Rd, Haddam

Farmland Access - With Will O’Meara (Land For Good)

February 6th, 2020 (3 – 6pm) @ Hartford County Extension Center in Farmington

Managing Invasive Species on Small Farms - Bryan Connolly (Framingham State University & Cobblestone Farm)

February 2020 – (Details TBD)

Season Extension Day
Saturday, February 1, 2020 @ Middlesex County Extension Center – 1066 Saybrook Rd, Haddam (View Flyer Here Season Extension Day!.pdf)

Lunch is included in $20 registration fee. RSVP online http://bit.ly/ExtensionStore

Market Access and Food Safety: The potential for Farm to School to scale up your business - Shannon Raider-Ginsberg & Indu Upadhyaya (UConn Extension)

Wednesday, February 5th, 2020 (4 – 7pm) – (Hartford area Location TBD)

UConn Extension: CT Farm Risk & Management

Risk management is an often overlooked strategy that can make a difference in the success of your farm. Our mission is to provide farmers and agribusinesses with information to improve farm financial management and reduce risk.

UConn Extension CT Farm & Risk Management: We are on a collaborative journey.

How. We co-create knowledge with farmers, families, communities, and businesses. We educate. We convene groups to help solve problems.


Join us.