

Farmer Mental Health: An important consideration in animal health and welfare systems

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If you can read this, please go to [menti.com](https://www.menti.com) and enter this code: 32 20 40

What stresses do our farmers face?

- Go to **menti.com**
- Enter this code: 32 20 40
- Then enter words to describe stresses that our farmers face

1-minute
audience
activity



dismal conditions—often enduring beatings and other forms of abuse—until the day they're slaughtered.



Harmful Toxins and Disease: What You're *Really* Paying For



We all need meaning and purpose.



National Survey of Farmer Mental Health*

- September 2015 – February 2016
- > 1100 farmers, all commodities, across Canada

- High Stress
- High Anxiety
- High Burnout
- Low Resilience

So, as has been observed in other parts of the world:

- **Our farmers experience higher levels of mental stress and distress than other occupations**

Death by suicide is also higher amongst farmers than other occupations (US CDC, 2016).

*Jones-Bitton et al., University of Guelph

Words from our farmers:

"I'm pulled in multiple directions and unable to maintain work-life balance, being exhausted but unable to take a break ."

"The main stress in my life... feeling ignored and marginalized by our government and our society."

"What makes me the most upset is I have everything I dreamed of - love, family and a farm - and all I feel is overwhelmed, out of control and sad."

"[I'm] destroying myself to make sure others are cared for."

"I just try to keep plugging along until death."

"It is a wonder we don't off ourselves more often."

So, we have a problem in Canadian ag.

- Many farmers are **struggling** in terms of their mental health
- High occupational stresses, most beyond their control
- Low resilience → **more** susceptible to the effects of chronic stress:
 - Physical illness, poor quality of life, depression, anxiety, suicide...

But, wait.

This Forum is about ***animal welfare***...

One Welfare.

Human and animal health and wellbeing are connected.

Farmer wellbeing impacts animal wellbeing.

- Farmers considered “**animal welfare and their own welfare as dependent on each other**” (Finland; Kaupinnen et al, 2010)
- “Taking care of [the farmers’] own wellbeing scored **the most important way to improve animal welfare**, but was *the most difficult action to put into practice...*” (Kaupinnen et al, 2012)

Mental health issues in animal neglect

- “**Physical and social isolation, addiction and mental health problems**” amongst farmers involved in animal welfare/neglect (Ireland; Devitt et al., 2014)
- Animal welfare problems associated with **depression, alcohol addiction, social problems, and stress** (Ireland; Kelly et al., 2011)
- Highest risk of animal neglect convictions were associated with “**economic and psychiatric problems**” (Denmark; Andrade & Anneberg, 2014)
 - And the farmers with convictions described preceding **financial trouble, technological breakdown, family problems, and stress**

“I don’t understand how anyone *could do that*. Just leave their animals like that.”

The slippery slope...

Perspectives from an attending veterinarian:

“I saw changes on the farm that it became evident to me that – okay, this is not his normal way of being... He just would do the bare minimum. He just couldn’t cope... it became too overwhelming to do a good job...

It impacts the animals because they don't get the care that they should have. And whether that's just that they don't get clean dry bedding that day, or maybe they don't get fed that day.

... the whole farm just gets rundown, pens don't get cleaned out, you know, you don't pay your bills, you don't do any of the things that normally would be routine little things...

And then it got to be the point that well, ‘that's too big of a job for me to do in one day so I can’t do that today anymore’...

... and it would just slide from there.”

It’s One Welfare.

So what do we need?

We need to act compassionately. With everyone involved.

- Human and animal wellbeing are linked.
- We need to protect animal welfare, AND remember there's a human being(s) involved. And that human being is likely struggling.
- We need to care about the person, as well as the animals.

*“You can go in and just be ruthless, but that certainly achieves very little in improvement in **the human situation you’re dealing with**, which many times is **equally as serious as the animal situation.**”*

(Devitt et al, 2014)

*“The thing that we forget about is when we see someone not doing a good job looking after their animals, we think we'll just teach them how they should be doing a good job and show them what they're missing on that, that would make things better. **But the reality is, they already know what they should be doing. There's something preventing them from doing it.**”*

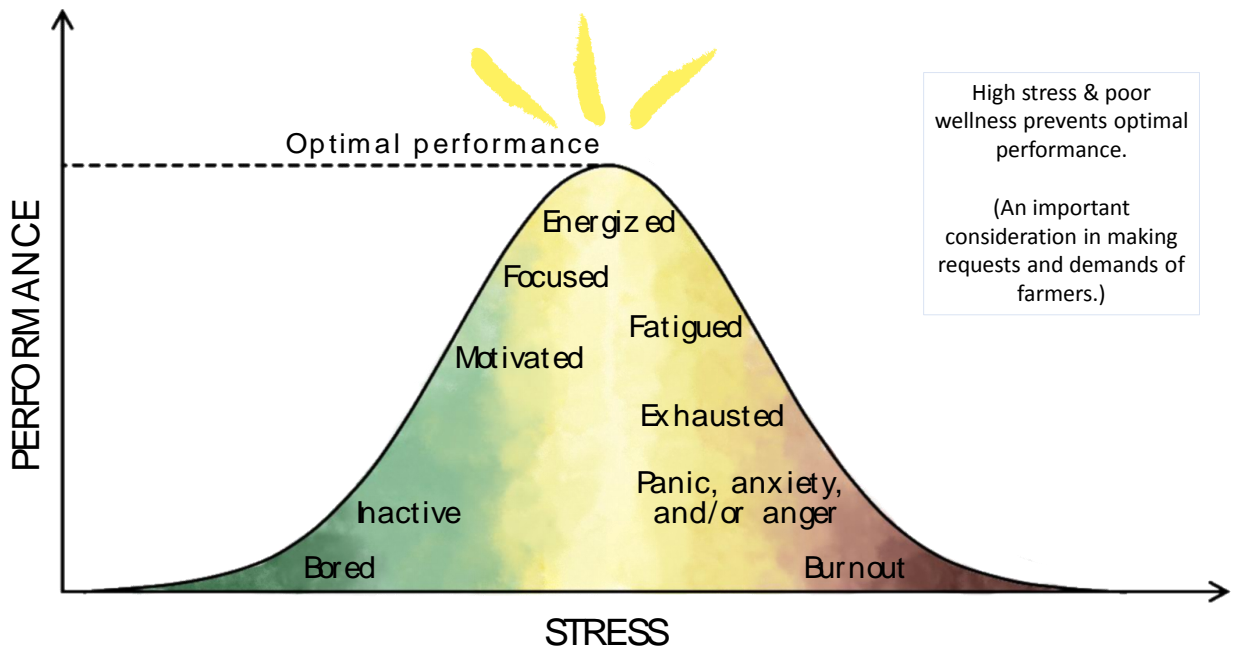
(Veterinarian participant, Hagen & Jones-Bitton, unpub.)

What will acting compassionately involve?

- Mental health literacy & empathy
- Ethical decision-making
 - E.g. Fraser's "practical" ethic (e.g. Fawcett et al, 2018)
- "Early Warning Systems" (e.g. Ireland)
- Partnerships with experts in mental health and agriculture
- Increased sensitivity in media reporting of neglect (Devitt et al 2014)

We need to support farmer mental health and wellbeing.

*"I felt that there was more for the animals than there was for me...
I felt there was nothing for my welfare."
(Farmer participant, in Devitt et al, 2015)*



Yerkes-Dodson Human Performance and Stress Curve

We need to support farmer mental health and wellbeing.

- We need a **national strategy** for farmer mental health in Canada
- We need to provide farmers with **better access** to support
 - Tele- services
 - Industry social workers
 - Relief work
- We need more **research** and development of evidence-informed **training programs** for agriculture
 - Build resilience, help farmers thrive
 - So animal health & welfare, and agriculture, can thrive

We need increased mental health literacy.

- Issues with low mental health literacy in agriculture
- We developed an agriculture-specific mental health literacy program
- 4-hour version being piloted
- Expect release in early summer 2019



We need to build relationships.

- Further include farmers in the discussions.
 - Participatory action
- Build trust between the stakeholders.
 - Farmers, veterinarians, industry, animal welfare, the public.
- We need to engage in discussion that “enables different actors in agriculture to find ways to help farmers under pressure.” (Andrade & Anneberg, 2014)

In short, we need to develop animal health and welfare systems that recognize One Welfare.

Summary

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- Mental health and wellbeing is an issue in agriculture.
- Human and animal wellbeing are linked.
 - So, human wellbeing is integral to animal health and welfare.
- We need to:
 - Treat all involved with compassion;
 - Develop a national strategy for farmer mental health, including increased service and training provisions;
 - Improve mental health literacy;
 - Build relationships and further include farmers at the table via participatory action.