



The mental health of farmers, a complex situation

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Relevance

According to Statistics Canada, the 2011 Census of Agriculture shows that almost 44,000 farmers proudly ensure this industry's future in Quebec. It is important to note that this profession can be hazardous to one's health. In fact, the risk of accidental injuries or death is well known in this line of work, including those associated with farming equipment. Various public health interventions, like awareness campaigns, are commonly used to improve farmers' physical health as well as the physical health of their family members (e.g., children, elderly parents). Recent statistics also indicate that mental health problems are not only present, but equally significant. A recent study of the Canadian labour force points out that farming is among professions with the greatest risk of suicidal death, with an age-standardized mortality rate in men of 31.4 suicides per 100,000 people per year (Mustard et al., 2010). In Quebec, a study carried out in partnership with the Coop fédérée reveals that other pre-pathological adverse effects to mental health (psychological distress, fatigue, and perceived stress) have a considerable impact on these workers (Lafleur et Allard, 2006). Therefore, it is important to pay special attention to farmers' mental health, and that we properly identify its particular explanatory dynamics.



How do we explain a farmer's mental health?

In general, health problems in the labour force involve explanatory dynamics, such as the worker's characteristics (age, gender, lifestyle, and personality traits), his or her close social environment (work and family), and the more distal environment (community and society) (Marchand, Durand, and Demers, 2006). Recognizing the contribution of these multiple influence levels, from which the risk and protective factors for mental health can result, will help draw a more complete portrait of the farmer's reality.

1 Society and community

On a societal level, globalization has had a profound impact on the nature of farm work. Whether it's market fluctuations for farm produce, application of economic policies, or the use of surveillance measures related to biosecurity, the resulting administrative constraints take a severe toll on farm owners. Furthermore, in terms of community, the notion of rural solidarity barely compensates for the lack of social recognition and the dwindling support networks that these workers face (Kallioniemi, Simola, Kinnunen and Kymäläinen, 2011).

Farming is among professions with the greatest risk of suicidal death.



2 Workplace and home environment

The work and the non-work environment are two aspects of life that are known to impact a farmer's mental health (Beauregard, Marchand and Blanc, 2011). Certain characteristics of farmers' work environment (work conditions and organization) should be examined in terms of their negative impact on mental health. There are many psychosocial risks related to professional stress: time factors imposed by weather conditions, massive quantitative workload, physical demands, etc. (Lunner Kolstrup et al., 2013). Special attention should also be paid to risks related to chemical exposure that can lead to neurological dysfunction associated with mental health pathologies (suicide) and pre-pathologies (anxiety and depression) (Chen et Stallones, 2011).

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With regards to the non-work environment, farming remains a family business for a large number of farm owners. Having these two environments in such proximity can lead to difficulties in balancing work and family life; difficulties such as conflicting roles and transferring negative elements from one environment to the other. Marital and parental tensions, as well as financial stress that weigh on the family, are also factors that put farmers' mental health at risk (Kallioniemi, et coll., 2011).

3 The worker

Finally, specific personal characteristics impact exposure or the effects of certain risk factors mentioned above. For example, most farm owners are men whose average age is over fifty. One can assume that the type and form of issues concerning the balance of work-family life (financial support of a young family or of an aging parent) will vary depending on the worker's age.

Conclusion

The mental health of farmers is a complex issue. Beyond the explanatory dynamics mentioned above, we must emphasize that mental health prevention and intervention efforts would profit by offering contextualized solutions, thus reflecting appreciation that these are workers undergoing this issue (Fuller, Edwards, Procter, et Moss, 2000).

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