



---

FARM BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

# RURAL MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

PROGRAM

---

The agriculture industry is facing profound challenges, with rapidly changing technologies and consumer demand. Contradictory and often competing forces, such as global markets, a widening gap between local economies and increased local scrutiny of ag practices demand the development of new tools to support all types of agriculture and the men and women who farm. Farmers are known for their work ethic and strong sense of pride. And while these traits can be virtues, there is a downside in that they can cloud perceptions and lead to a denial of problematic situations. The absence of a rural mental health policy means that farmers often have nowhere to go and no one they feel comfortable talking with when stress, anxiety and depression compound financial problems. Creative solutions are needed to provide a package of high quality and cost-effective services that address mental health needs in all agricultural communities. However, we must make sure we don't further separate the farmer from the community.



The Rural Mental Health Support program is operated through the Farm Business Management program within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system. The program is a multifaceted approach to addressing the importance of mental health services in helping farm families to achieve their business and family goals. The fundamental goal of the Rural Mental Health Support Program is to help rural people address the various emotional issues arising from a rural economy experiencing rapid change and the effects of increasing farm consolidation on both farmer and non-farmer alike. It is a non-traditional program in that the therapist goes to the clients and works with them on their turf. Because farmers are reluctant to go to counselors, the counselor goes to them, often conducting sessions across kitchen tables. This approach is effective because a diagnosis of mental

illness is not a prerequisite and no additional reimbursement for services is required. The counseling is part of the tuition farmers pay for their Farm Business Management courses. Problems are addressed in a way that provides healthy alternatives for the person, their family and the community. Taking positive actions to help reduce stress levels can lead to more satisfied and productive farmers, FBM instructors, farm service providers, ag lenders and their respective families.



## The Rural Mental Health Support Program addresses such problems as:

- Frustration with agencies and bureaucratic hassles
- Partner and labor relations
- Communication between family members, business partners and lenders
- Changing role for women on the farm
- Stress from seeking financial assistance
- Family relationships
- Concern about weather
- Uncertainty over markets and their trends
- Working with other farmers for more profitability
- Fear of losing the family farm
- Feelings of dread or hopelessness
- Stress, anxiety and depression
- Domestic abuse

We probably all recognize some of the feelings described here and feel stressed or anxious from time to time. The first important step in tackling stress or anxiety is realizing that it is causing you a problem.

*The goal is to help keep life in balance, learning to manage the many stressors you face and your reaction to them.*

Stress is a fact of life for people in many occupations, including those who work on the farm and in agriculture-related industries. Some pressure on the job can keep you on your toes, but too much stress can damage your physical and mental health. Prolonged stress can increase your chances of developing heart disease, high blood

pressure and digestive problems like ulcers. Stress also affects your immune system, leaving you more vulnerable to colds, flu and other infections. Any number of physical ailments can also be related to stress, anxiety and depression.

### BACKGROUND

When western Minnesota was devastated by flooding in 1993, the Federal Emergency Management Agency implemented a program, called Project Hope, to help the area's residents cope with the disaster. When flooding occurred again in 1997, Project Hope II was launched. Two Farm Business Management instructors joined in the effort to connect farmers with the service. Having these already highly trusted and regarded professionals provide the outreach and referrals increased the use of the FEMA program.

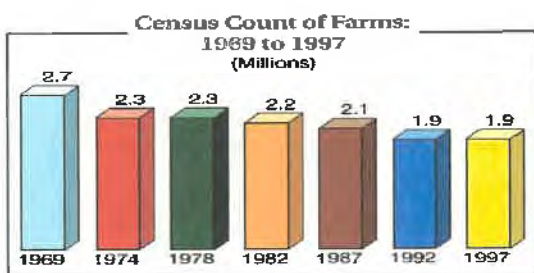


Following up on the success of Project Hope II, the Rural Mental Health Support Program was incorporated into the Farm Business Management program at Ridgewater College in 1998 to address the importance of mental health services in accomplishing the program's and the individual's goals.

## The days of only needing a strong back to be a successful farmer are long gone...

**1900:** To produce 100 bushels of corn, 35 to 40 hours of labor was needed. Equipment used was a two-bottom gang plow, disk and peg-tooth harrow and a two-row planter. Yields were about 40 bushels per acre.

**2000:** A farmer can produce 150 bushels of corn on one acre of land in 1.2 hours of labor. This is possible with a farmer using a tractor, 10-bottom plow, 30-foot plow, 30-foot tandem disk, planter, 25-foot herbicide applicator, 30-foot self-propelled combine and trucks.



### What's the future of agriculture?

A Star Tribune article (9/26/99) sums up the feelings of Minnesota's farmers:

*In the midst of still another farm crisis, the men and women who operate many of the state's 78,000 farms fear it won't be them – or their offspring --growing crops and raising livestock. In their eyes, the family farm, an economic artifact that has deep cultural roots as well, will be utterly blown away by globalization and massive corporate muscle. And something precious will be lost, they say.*

*Make no mistake: These people are downright terrified when they confront their prospects. Having managed to survive the farm*

*crisis of the 1980's, which obliterated thousands of their neighbor's operations, they're facing a tangle of intertwined challenges. Every commodity price they receive has crashed, even as overseas markets have shrunk and competing foreign producers have by protected by their governments. The rapid consolidation of agribusinesses has left them facing a dwindling handful of commodity buyers and seed and chemical suppliers that have tremendous market clout. And even though billions of dollars in emergency aid has been flowing from the federal government, a half-century of certainty has been stripped away as the government has largely gotten out of the business of reliable price supports.*

The days of only needing a strong back to be a successful farmer are long gone. Today, the farmer needs to understand accounting, management, global markets, variables such as changing crop prices – often as unpredictable as the weather. As the demands of farming continue to increase, the necessity for addressing rural mental health needs becomes more acute. This program is designed to work in a plethora of areas from crisis intervention to helping farmers organize a co-op to better utilize their resources. By providing tools to Farm Business Management Educators, rural lenders, and others, we can better serve rural families and their communities.



## It's not just a job...

Farming is not just a job. It is a lifestyle. It has a heritage, culture, tradition and rules all its own. And unless you have lived it, or were born into it, you will never fully understand the depth of its roots. Farmers do not ever leave their place of employment – they live in it and around it, they breathe it and they live for it. They believe in what they do, and are continuing sometimes hundreds of years of heritage and family history.



The stigma of seeking help for mental health services combined with the independent, self-reliant nature of farmers prevents many from seeking the help they need. It is okay not to understand the farm family culture. But any program offering mental health services to farmers should be sensitive to the farm culture. The Rural Mental Health Support Program is part of the Farm Business Management Program. The value of the collaboration between the FBM instructors and the therapist cannot be overstated in its ability to positively affect farmers. Understanding how they support each other and further the goals of the farmers makes both jobs easier. The first step in the process is an awareness of the mental health

services and what it can do for farmers as they face the complex issues of running their operation. Likewise, the Rural Mental Health Support Program offers services for the rural ag lenders and other farm service professionals who may take on some of the struggles their clients are facing. Ag professionals are easily taxed on both personal and professional levels. They can also suffer stress-related illnesses, divorce and job loss. If these individuals working with farmers are mentally healthy, they will provide a healthier outlook to the farmer. They will also enjoy their job more, which can prevent burnout. By providing mental health services to Farm Business Management instructors, ag lenders, Extension Educators, veterinarians, accountants, clergy and others, they, in turn, can provide a road map to farmers, who are unused to accessing services. This has the added benefit of creating internal stability for the program, maintaining stable workers within rural communities.



The problems and issues faced by farmers are often multi-faceted and cumulative in nature, neither solely economic in origin or impact. A coordinated team approach to providing mental health services means that rural residents receive more individualized services focused on the circumstances that are affecting all aspects of their lives.

*The following examples are but a few that have helped raise broader systemic issues and concerns for the Rural Mental Health Support Program.*

ISSUE: How can there be a healthy intergenerational transfer of a farm operation where each family member has his respective goals met?

Farm Business Management was at an impasse in dealing with a 76 year-old father and his 40 year-old son and their differing opinions on capital investments for the future. The son wants to take over the farm and use it as collateral to get needed capital for investing in new machinery and needed improvements. On the other hand, the parents are concerned about guaranteed monthly income and don't want to risk that income by having loans against the farm.



ISSUE: Where farming success brings out differences of opinion as to future directions, how can an escalation of frictions be avoided?

Three hog farmers started out with modest financial means, but have enjoyed remarkable financial success as a corporation. They now face internal differences of opinion as to future directions. The group's task structure is unwieldy and cumbersome because each member is doing all the tasks in the operation's management. All want to succeed, but the shared fear is that differences will escalate and the corporation will be dissolved.



The Rural Mental Health Support Program strives to reduce stress, anxiety and depression for farmers, farm service professionals and their respective families. The holistic approach involving the farmer as a team member permits the examination of options for economically borderline farm families. The farmer's involvement in the decision process increases his commitment to seeing an economic difficulty through to a resolution, whether it is a long term or immediate crisis.

Little research has been done to document the cost of stressed-out, tired farmers. We do know that workers in other high-stress occupations have high rates of turnover and absenteeism, and more accidents and injuries. Promoting broader team approaches to managing stress sources in farming will increasingly spell the difference between a failed farming operation and a successful one, for both families and farm service providers. Central to this is recognizing and addressing the counseling needs of farmers and farm service providers. No longer is farming a simple way of life. Instead, pastoral images of family-run operations have been replaced by the stress-ridden corporate ventures where one bad crop year can often mean the difference between survival and the end of an operation. Put simply, farming has become big business, where larger profits, or profits at all, entail greater risks and increased stress levels. Available existing programs and services for the agricultural community can't fully address farmers' concerns. Staff in the local Farm Business Management outreach program indicated that approximately 35 percent of their clients needed to be referred for services including counseling, consultation and dispute mediation. Additionally, 93.3% of Minnesota Farm Business Management staff indicated that

they encounter problems with farmers that involve counseling issues on the job but only 13.4% of the respondents felt they had the time and expertise to deal with issues beyond financial management.



Rural America has traditionally been viewed as a rather stable environment, somehow isolated from the many dramatic changes that occur in mainstream and urban society. However, the farm crisis of the 1980's and the continuing economic decline of rural America in the 1990's have produced dramatic social and economic challenges that have a direct impact on the mental health of rural residents. However, rural communities have unique opportunities to develop and maintain collaborative relationships, such as the Rural Mental Health Support Program. By incorporating mental health services with the educational offerings through Farm Business Management, scarce resources are more effectively leveraged to support rural families and provide a full array of services for them.



## Stable funding is needed to make the Rural Mental Health Support Program a permanent component of the Farm Business Management program.

There's plenty to talk about in agriculture these days. Low crop prices persisted through much of 2000, while production expenses soared. Congress approved additional financial aid in response to the weak prices and rising production costs. And unless crop prices dramatically improve for 2001, another emergency aid package will be needed this year. Based on provisions in the 1996 Farm Law, the money available to farmers through market transition payments will drop by \$1 billion dollars this year.

The economic pressures squeezing farmers are nothing new. However, the future of the agriculture industry depends on how the men and women who farm address the numerous and complicated issues they are facing today. Since its inception, the Rural Mental Health Support Program has provided valuable support to farmers, farm families and farm service professionals including Farm Business Management instructors. Through this program, many rural residents have learned how to deal with the emotional issues that have become barriers to successful farm operations and personal lives. It is hard to describe this program and what it has meant to individuals throughout Minnesota.

Many people have asked what can be done to help agriculture during the current economic situation. The last thing farmers want is another "program." But the Rural Mental Health Support Program is different. It's not just paperwork and a check. It's having someone who cares, will listen and support farmers and the culture of farming.

### Who's listening?

#### **Ted Matthews, M.S.**

Ted has worked with rural issues in counseling for over 20 years. He has been director of mental health services during two natural disasters in the 1990's. Ted also has extensive counseling experiences in the areas of domestic abuse, suicidology, crisis intervention, and family issues.

#### **Dan Marquardsen, M.S., L.P.P.**

Dan has implemented and supervised children's day treatment programs, providing direct services to children and their families. He also has experience in psychological testing, chemical use assessment, and therapy for adults and children, as well as marriage and family therapy.



## Farm Business Management

Local Program Administrator  
Dean of Management Education

*DelRay Lecy*

Central Lakes College  
1830 Airport Road, PO Box 99  
Staples, MN 56479  
(218) 894-5164

dlecy@gwmail.clc.mnscu.edu

### Northeast / East Central Instructors:

#### Aitkin

*Brad Irwin*

Aitkin High School  
306 2nd St. N.W.  
Aitkin, MN 56431  
(218) 927-2115 ext. 38

#### Duluth - St. Louis County

*Jim Takala*

9281 Hwy 37  
Iron, MN 55751  
(218) 744-1162

#### Foley

*Ken Johnson*

Foley High School  
520 Dcwey Street  
Foley, MN 56329  
(320) 968-8477

#### Little Falls

*Dave Stish*

Midstate Ed District  
Little Falls, MN 56345  
(320) 632-5417

#### Milaca

*Lee Todnem*

Milaca High School  
Milaca, MN 56353  
(320) 983-7205

#### Pierz

*Ben Jorgensen*

R.R. 2, Box 245  
Pierz, MN 56364  
(320) 468-6315

#### Pine City

*Jim Takala*

Pine City Campus  
1000 4th Street  
Pine City, MN 55063  
(320) 629-6764

#### Staples

*Bob Rick*

*Tom Schulz*

Central Lakes Ag Center  
1830 Airport Road, PO Box 99  
Staples, MN 56479  
(218) 894-5169  
(218) 894-5163