

Farm Stress and Grief in the Time of COVID-19

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I recently read an article from the Harvard Business Review titled “[That Discomfort You’re Feeling Is Grief.](#)” It’s filed under the category of “Stress” in their archives. Thinking about the stress farmers face every day it seemed pertinent to share this new form of stress that is descending on farm families as they cope with the realities of a global pandemic. Coronavirus has resulted in ‘stay-at-home’ mandates and social distancing. Coronavirus has left us feeling isolated and uncertain.

The article tells us that naming the feelings coming up around coronavirus might help us to manage them. The article’s author, Scott Berinato, names these feelings as grief. He explained our collective feelings about coronavirus this way: “We feel the world has changed, and it has. We know this is temporary, but it doesn’t feel that way, and we realize things will be different. . . The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us and we’re grieving. Collectively. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air.”

The issues the author mentioned were already impacting farm families: farmers have experienced an increasing loss of normalcy over the past decade in the face of a changing climate and lessening predictability in the seasons. A tumultuous and volatile economy has only compounded the loss of normalcy and is exacerbating farmers’ worry about the economic toll the industry may experience as part of the coronavirus fallout. Further, rural farming communities may be particularly vulnerable to feeling a loss of connection that comes with social distancing.

The author of the article described something called anticipatory grief to explain our collective mood. Anticipatory grief is premised upon uncertainty. He writes that when people experience anxiety, they may be experiencing anticipatory grief in an unhealthy way. The solution? To try to “**find balance in the things you’re thinking**” otherwise grief can manifest as physical pain or as a racing mind. Other strategies Berinato lists are “**come into the present,**” for example by naming objects in the room or finding items in the room that are a certain color, or by tuning into the five senses and stopping to breathe. He also recommends you “**let go of what you**

can't control" and focus on what you can. During this pandemic that might mean letting go of what your neighbor is doing and focusing more on what you can do to stop the spread. Last, he suggests people "**stock up on compassion.**" Here he means practicing understanding when people aren't acting like themselves and remembering that everyone is stressed and they may respond to stressors (or to normal day-to-day interactions) with less patience and more fear than normal.

As a final tip, Berinato tells us to **become okay with feeling our feelings.** If you feel sad, stay with it, let the feeling come and go on its own. As he put it "let yourself feel grief and keep going;" "emotions need motion." It's okay and normal for them to come and go. If feelings become overwhelming there are resources you can take advantage of. You can call us at AgrAbility Virginia for a referral or you can call your local extension professional. If you or someone you know may be contemplating suicide reach out to the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** by calling 800-273-TALK (8255) or texting 741741. Trained professionals at the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline are there to help 24/7. They can put you in touch with resources near you to get the assistance you need.

The following is a list of mental health resources. If you would like to add to this list, please contact Garland Mason at garlandm@vt.edu

Mental Health Resources in Virginia and Nationally

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-TALK (8255) Available 24/7 to anyone in emotional distress or at risk for suicide
- **Crisis Text Line:** Text "CONNECT" to 741741
Available 24/7 to provide crisis intervention via mobile messaging
- **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI):** www.nami.org
NAMI provides free classes and webinars for individuals who have family members experiencing a mental illness. The organization also provides support groups for individuals who may be struggling with negative thoughts, actions, or specific diagnoses. Information on diagnoses, symptoms, medications, and treatments are available on the website, as well.
- **Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services:**
www.dbhds.virginia.gov
- **Mental Health America (MHA):** www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/searchMHA
MHA provides information on diagnoses, symptoms, treatments, payment help, and referrals. Users can find their local MHA office through the website. Also, screenings are available via the website to use with individuals and then decide on appropriate referrals for future assistance.
- **Virginia AgrAbility:** www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/AEE/AEE-150/AEE-150.html
Virginia AgrAbility's website provides a PDF document discussing what stress is and the other diagnoses it can lead to, how to recognize these, why mental health is important, and additional resources on where to turn.

COVID-19 Mental Health Resources & News Articles

[Why your mental health may be suffering in the COVID-19 pandemic](#) by Laura Santhanam, PBS

A piece published by PBS describing the mental health implications of social distancing during global pandemic. Santhanam's article describes why social distancing is so effective, gives examples on how stress may manifest in adults and children, and provides advice from trusted experts on how to manage stress imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Santhanam, L. (2020, March 19). *Why your mental health may be suffering in the COVID-19 pandemic*. pbs.org. Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/why-your-mental-health-may-be-suffering-in-the-covid-19-pandemic>

[CDC Statement on Daily Life and Coping during COVID-19 pandemic](#)

A toolkit with tips on stress and coping as well as resources for caring for children and animals.

CDC. (n.d.) Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Daily Life and Coping. cdc.gov. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/index.html>

[COVID-19 Resource and Information Guide](#)

A resource guide with frequently asked questions relative to mental health and caring for those struggling with mental health issues during COVID-19.

National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI) (n.d.). COVID-19 Resource and Information Guide. Nami.org. Retrieved from <https://www.nami.org/getattachment/About-NAMI/NAMI-News/2020/NAMI-Updates-on-the-Coronavirus/COVID-19-Updated-Guide-1.pdf>

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