Guide to Discussions about Mental Health
About this guide
This guide is a companion document to the Rural Resilience training designed by Michigan State University Extension and the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development. It has been intended for participants from American Farm Bureau Federation, National Farmers Union, or Farm Credit Council who have completed the online training program and have attended an in-person training about leading conversations related to mental health. The purpose of this guide is to provide written information about leading conversations with others who have taken the online component of the training, about talking with people who may be struggling with their mental health, and how to refer those struggling to appropriate resources. The information in this guide is research-based. This guide is not meant as a substitute for professional mental health services. If you are interested in leading a discussion, the free online training is open to all Farm Bureau members and staff. You can register for the free online training here.

This work was sponsored by the Farm Credit Council for the American Farm Bureau Federation and National Farmers Union.

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Why talk about mental health?

Mental health issues are common. Nearly one of every five adults in the United States experiences a mental health issue (SAMHSA 2019). Many people have experience with mental health issues either themselves or with someone they know. Talking about mental health can help people to feel more comfortable with the topic, either by discussing the issue with people in need or in disclosing their own mental health struggles. In short, talking about mental health can break down stigma that makes it difficult for people to get help.

How can we prepare ourselves for conversations about mental health?

First, we can think about the **goals** for the conversation. What are we hoping we might be able to do in a conversation with someone about mental health? Is the goal to allow the person space to discuss their concerns? Is the goal to be able to share resources or suggest coping strategies? Maybe we have a different goal in mind. Identifying the goal in advance of the conversation can help shape the types of questions we might ask or how we plan to engage with someone.

Second, we can **develop questions** we may want to ask the person. Keep in mind that there may be a difference between information you want to know and the types of questions that will be helpful to the person. Are we asking something simply because we want to know, or because the question inspires reflection or sharing in a way that is beneficial to the person we are talking with? Writing or typing questions can be helpful to remembering them and also to working on wording of questions. Open-ended questions (such as those starting with who, what, where, when, and how) provide greater opportunity for dialogue than closed-ended questions (such as those starting with is, are, does, or did, that often yield a yes/no response). We can ask follow-up questions like “what do you mean?” or even paraphrase back to the person what we believe we heard them say, to check for understanding.

Third, we can **consider what our role is** in the conversation. At times, we may wish or be asked to provide help to an individual. We have to decide for ourselves what we are willing to offer and what would be beyond our scope. For instance, we may feel comfortable providing a glass of water or tissues, or we may not. We may feel comfortable offering someone a ride, or we may not. What you are willing to offer may be different than what someone else is willing to offer, and that is okay. Make sure you consider what your limits are in providing assistance.

The person you are in conversation with is part of a broader social network. Who else in their network may be useful to engage in the conversation? You can **encourage the person you’re speaking with to reach out to their support system**, such as family members, friends, healthcare providers, spiritual leaders, mentors, or anyone else the person has been able to turn to during difficult times.

Keep in mind that conversations about mental health can be very challenging. Make a plan for how you will take care of yourself after the conversation has concluded. What is a nice or relaxing thing you can do for yourself?
How can active listening be helpful?

Active listening is a process of engaging with someone while they are speaking, to encourage them to share more and to connect in an empathetic way. When engaging in active listening, we may form better relationships with the person we are speaking with because we are working to understand their experiences and beliefs, and we respond in ways to reflect what has been shared. Worthington and Fitch-Hauser (2016) provide more information about types and components of listening.

When engaging in active listening, listen to understand, not to respond. So often we are listening in conversations to know how to reply to someone, so we form quick reactions and responses before someone is done sharing their thoughts. Remind yourself it is okay to slow down and stay in the space of listening to what the person is saying. If they used a particular word or phrase, what does that mean to them? You can ask this question to understand their perspectives in greater depth.

The process of active listening is about sharing space with someone who wants to talk about their experiences. This also means that we do not need to rush to solutions. Many times, we may want to be helpful by providing strategies and solutions. Often, people want to feel heard by those around them, which means they may need or want to be immediately presented with options for action. Asking questions to check for what the person means or how an experience impacted them can help the person to explore how they are doing. At times, people may be more solutions-focused, and that is okay, too.

Active listening is also about focusing on the experience of the person you are talking with, rather than your own. Limit the use of stories about yourself and be aware of times you may unintentionally shift the conversation back to yourself. Saying “I know exactly what that is like because…” turns the conversation to be about you and your experience rather than focusing on the person who is trying to share.

You can ask probing or paraphrasing questions to ensure common understanding. For instance, “tell me more about that,” can be a good phrase to invite someone to elaborate on something they have said. Rewording what you have heard the person share and asking whether your understanding is accurate is another approach.

As you listen to someone speak, listen for what emotions they are expressing. You can reflect the feelings back to the person to make sure you understand what they are communicating. “It sounds like you feel very sad about that. Is that right?” is an example of reflecting a feeling.

During conversations, lulls and silence may happen. Learn to be comfortable with silence. Work on increasing your tolerance for silence by allowing the other person to think, reflect, and return to the conversation however they may wish to. One way to do this is by counting to ten in your mind while you wait for the person to respond. Allowing for silence can be beneficial.
What resources can be helpful?

It can be helpful before you begin a conversation to have a list of resources available to share with people you speak with. There are a number of useful resources you may draw from. Be sure to engage the person you are speaking with in the decision-making process about which resources to use.

**Farming Organizations**
American Farm Bureau Federation – Rural Resilience: [https://www.fb.org/programs/rural-resilience/](https://www.fb.org/programs/rural-resilience/)
American Farm Bureau Federation – Farm Town Strong: [https://farmtownstrong.org/](https://farmtownstrong.org/)
National Farmers Union – Farm Crisis Center: [https://farmcrisis.nfu.org/](https://farmcrisis.nfu.org/)
Farm Credit Council – Farm Stress Management: [https://farmcredit.com/community/farm-stress-management](https://farmcredit.com/community/farm-stress-management)

**Health and Related Organizations**
Rural Health Information (RHI) Hub – Rural Response to Farmer Mental Health and Suicide Prevention: [https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/farmer-mental-health](https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/farmer-mental-health)
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or [https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/](https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/)
Crisis Text Line: Text “GO” to 741741 or [https://www.crisistextline.org/](https://www.crisistextline.org/)
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
SAMHSA Treatment Locator: [https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/](https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/)
Emergency responders can be helpful during times of crisis. If you are concerned about the person’s wellbeing and safety, you may choose to call 911.

**Cooperative Extension Resources**
Michigan State University Extension – Managing Farm Stress: [https://www.canr.msu.edu/managing_farm_stress/](https://www.canr.msu.edu/managing_farm_stress/)
North Dakota State University Extension – Farm and Ranch Stress: [https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/farmranchstress](https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/farmranchstress)
University of Minnesota Extension – Coping with Rural Stress: [https://extension.umn.edu/rural-stress](https://extension.umn.edu/rural-stress)
University of Wisconsin Extension – Resilient Farms, Families, Businesses & Communities: Responding to Stress: [https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/farmstress/](https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/farmstress/)
Iowa State University Extension – Farm Stress Management: [https://www.extension.iastate.edu/dairyteam/farm-stress-management](https://www.extension.iastate.edu/dairyteam/farm-stress-management)
References


Appendix A: Conversation Planning Worksheet

Planning my conversation with: __________________________________________

Goals for the conversation:

1.  ______________________________________________________________
2.  ______________________________________________________________
3.  ______________________________________________________________

What do I already know about the situation?
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________

What is my role? What kinds of help am I willing to offer?
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________

What questions will I ask?

1.  ______________________________________________________________
2.  ______________________________________________________________
3.  ______________________________________________________________

What resources might be helpful to take with me or inform them of?
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________

Who else may be a good person for them to talk with?
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________

What will I do after the conversation to take care of myself?
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________
Appendix B: Example Scenarios

Scenario 1

You’ve lived in a small, rural community for the last 18 years. The McDougal family, who you have known ever since you moved there, has fallen on hard times. They have not been able to keep up with day-to-day work since Mr. McDougal (age 46) lost his arm as a result of a machinery injury about two years ago. Unfortunately, Mr. McDougal did not have an accidental death and dismemberment insurance policy. The McDougal’s are struggling to pay their debts, so Mrs. McDougal (age 44) has started working at the grain elevator to supplement their family’s income. Because you also have kids in the same school, you note that the McDougal children (ages 9, 13, and 16) have dropped out of extracurricular activities at school to spend more time helping on the farm. In the past, you also would see the entire McDougal family in church almost every Sunday, but they have been absent from services for several months. In church last Sunday, one of your friends tells you that he heard that Mr. McDougal has been frequenting the town bar during the day while the children are in school and Mrs. McDougal is working at the elevator.

When you stop by Mr. McDougal’s farm for a visit, he asks about what kinds of resources might be available to prevent their farm from going into foreclosure. As you talk about where his farm and family are at financially, he says that, “I totally feel like all of this is my fault. The accident just messed everything up! I feel like I’m just a parasite living off all the work of my wife and now my kids. Sometimes I think my children would be better off without me...”

Active Listening: Ask, Probe, Attend, Restate, Paraphrase, Summarize, Reframe

Questions:
What signs of stress stand out to you?

- The children have dropped out of extracurricular activities.
- The family stopped regularly attending church.
- Mrs. McDougal now has outside job (financial difficulties).
- Mr. McDougal has been frequenting the bar (substance use).
- “Sometimes I think my children would be better off without me” (risk of suicide).

The accident changed a lot for you and your family. How are you handling/cop ing with the changes?

- The children have dropped out of extracurricular activities
  - “I’ve noticed the kids haven’t been at...”
  - “The kids have been working a lot around the farm.”
  - “How has your family been impacted?”
- Stopped regularly attending church
  - “It seems like you have stopped going to church, when I know that was really important to you. Could you tell me more about that?”
- Financial difficulties - wife now has an outside job
  - “How has Mrs. McDougal off the farm job changed things?”
  - “Have you shared your feelings with her?”
  - “What are her thoughts?”
• Alcohol use – frequenting the bar
  o “How have you been coping with your feelings?”
  o “I’ve noticed you have been at the bar a lot lately. Could you tell me more about that?”
• Statement – “Sometimes I think my children would be better off without me”
  o “I’m concerned about you. Are you thinking about suicide?”
    ▪ If the response is yes, do not leave Mr. McDougal alone.
      • Does Mr. McDougal have a plan?
        o If yes, what is the plan? Having a plan indicates a higher level of risk, but there is still risk even if he does not have a plan.
      • What resources can be activated?
        o National Suicide Prevention Hotline?
        o Go to the hospital?
        o Call 911?
        o Call a family member, like his wife, to come be with him?
    ▪ If the response is no:
      • Who are Mr. McDougal’s supporters/support system?
      • Is Mr. McDougal interested in a follow up meeting or check-in with you at another time?
        o Does Mr. McDougal prefer the meeting in person/phone?

What resources might you offer?

• National Suicide Prevention Hotline?
• Crisis Text Line?
• Emergency services – 911?
• Local mental health or substance use services phone number?
• Local spiritual leader or religious organization phone number?
• Something else?
Scenario 2

Jason and his family are farmers that you have worked with for years. After an unusually wet spring, flooded fields made planting 25% of Jason’s crops impossible. Making matters worse, anticipating a good growing season, Jason purchased and a like-new tractor. Jason is carrying heavy financial burden associated with the coming loss in revenues associated with being unable to plant crops and large loan payments.

During a routine phone call, Jason tells you, “I’m done with this! All I do is work to put food on the table and keep a roof over my family’s head. Right now, I can’t do either. I work 80 hours a week and have nothing to show for it.” Jason went on to say that his wife (Becky) of 10 years said that “he isn’t the same person she married.” After the brief discussion, you schedule a visit to the farm.

Active Listening: Ask, Probe, Attend, Restate, Paraphrase, Summarize, Reframe

Why are you going?
- You have a long existing relationship with Jason.
- Jason is experiencing high levels of stress related to flooded fields.
- Jason made a comment that could mean he is considering suicide.
- Jason shared that his wife is identifying a change in his behavior.
- You want to be a support to Jason and his family.

Who are you meeting with?
- Jason, who is a long-time customer.
- Jason’s wife could also be included in the meeting.

What is Jason’s preferred method of communication? What would work best for this conversation?
- Telephone?
- In person?
- Texting?

What might you encounter?
- Jason could be experiencing several thoughts or feelings:
  - Sad
  - Angry
  - Depressed
  - Withdrawn
  - Outspoken
  - Lackadaisical
  - Lack of concentration
  - Irritable
  - Nervous
  - Crying
  - Overwhelmed
  - Exhausted/Tired

How much time is needed?
- Set aside ample time.
  - Ensure that you are present and attentive to the discussion.
- Set expectations with Jason about how much time you are able to spend in conversation.
  - “This is an important conversation and I want to check in with you. I have an appointment at 3:00, so that gives us a little over an hour.”
What can you help them with?

- Use active listening skills – offer space for Jason to share, gain knowledge of Jason’s concerns.
- Offer information about available programs and resources.
- Ensure that Jason and his wife are safe.
  - Ask if Jason is considering suicide.
    - If the response is yes, do not leave him alone.
  - Does Jason have a plan?
    - If yes, what is the plan? Having a plan indicates a higher level of risk, but there is still risk even if he does not have a plan.
  - What resources can be activated?
    - National Suicide Prevention Hotline?
    - Go to the hospital?
    - Call 911?

What resources might you offer?

- National Suicide Hotline?
- Crisis Text Line?
- Local mental health services phone number?
- Local spiritual leader or religious organization phone number?
- “My Coping Strategies Plan” handout referenced in online (D2L) training?
- Something else?