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Background:

Until very recently, there was an unfortunate lack of published knowledge on the mental health of Canadian farmers. It was this reality that led to the national survey on Agricultural Producer Stress and Resilience, conducted by Andria Jones-Bitton and colleagues from the University of Guelph (September 2015 to January 2016). Responses were obtained from 1132 producers across Canada. Presented here are preliminary results from that survey; statistical analyses to identify risk factors and potential associations with demographic, lifestyle, employment characteristics, etc. are on-going.

Perceived Stress

Stress was measured using the Perceived Stress Scale, a validated self-report scale widely used in the literature. Approximately 45% of our surveyed producers were classified in the *high* stress category. The word stress is commonly used, perhaps to an extent where its seriousness is negated. It should be noted that stress is closely associated with poor health practices, procrastination, decreased life satisfaction, depression, anxiety, increased illness, increased risk of heart disease, and higher death rates.

Anxiety & Depression

Anxiety and depression were measured using the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale, a validated self-report scale widely used in the literature. More than half of surveyed producers met the scale definition for “anxiety caseness”; specifically, 25% were classified as mild, 25% as moderate, and 8% as severe levels of anxiety.

Over one-third of producers met the scale definition for “depression caseness”, with 20% of cases as mild, 12% as moderate, and 3% as severe.

Both the anxiety and depression scores, and prevalence of anxiety and depression, were higher than the general population norms for the scales and the results from previous producer studies in the UK and Norway that used the same scale.

Burnout

We measured burnout using the validated Maslach Burnout Inventory. This scale has 3 subscales: professional efficacy, emotional exhaustion, and cynicism. More than half of producers scored high on professional efficacy, meaning they had high expectations for continued effectiveness at work. Approximately 1 in 5 producers had low professional efficacy.

Unfortunately, one-third of producers scored high in emotional exhaustion, and 2 in 5 producers scored high in cynicism. Hence, surveyed producers scored high in two of the three components of burnout. Burnout can impact wellbeing, productivity, job retention, and production.

Resilience

Resilience can be defined as the ability to bounce back from adversity or challenge. We measured resilience using the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, a validated and widely used scale. Roughly two-thirds of producers had levels of resilience that were lower than that of the United States general population. Resilience can protect against depression, anxiety, stress, and suicide. Fortunately, resilience is also something that can be practiced and learned.

Help-Seeking & Satisfaction with Industry Support

Surveyed producers had favourable attitudes towards help for mental health. Over two-thirds of producers indicated that seeing a mental health professional can be helpful, that they would seek professional help if they were worried or upset for a long period of time, and that seeking professional help did not make them a weak person. Unfortunately, perceived stigma remains an issue: 40% of producers said that they would feel uneasy seeking professional help because of what other people might think, and one-third said that seeking such help can stigmatize a person's life.

Level of satisfaction with industry support for mental health was sought; among Canadian dairy cattle, beef, sheep, goats, poultry and pork industries, just 12% to 60% of producers indicated being satisfied or very satisfied current industry supports. Hence, there is considerable room for improvement in producer mental health support in Canada's livestock industries.

Summary

Our Canadian producers showed high levels of stress, anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and cynicism, as well as low levels of resilience. They also expressed positive attitudes towards help-seeking, and low levels of satisfaction with current industry support.