



# SIEC ALERT

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SIEC ALERT is produced by the Suicide Information and Education Collection, a division of the Centre for Suicide Prevention. SIEC ALERT is a topical review of current literature relevant to suicide prevention.

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## RURAL STRESS

### Incidence of Stress and Suicide Among Farmers and Ranchers

Farmers and ranchers experience considerable stress (Simkin, Hawton, Fagg & Malmberg, 1998). While all farmers may experience it to some degree, those in mixed operations (eg., grain and livestock) experience higher levels of stress than grain farmers (Simkin, et al., 1998; Walker & Walker, 1987). Stressful life events are listed among factors increasing risk for suicide (Moscicki, 1997).

England and Wales have identified farming as one of the high risk occupations for suicide (Malmberg et al., 1997). Suicide rates have been found to be higher among farmers than in the general population in England and Wales (Malmberg, et al., 1997) and higher than among truck drivers in the U.S. (Ragland & Berman, 1991).

A small number of Canadian studies have not found the same result as that of other countries. In two studies by Pickett and colleagues (1999, 1993), suicide rates among Canadian farm operators were lower than among comparison populations of Canadian males. Additional research to confirm this finding has not been performed. Hawton et al. (1998) noted that Canadian studies did not include undetermined or accidental verdicts in their calculation, both of which were excessive in Ontario farmers studied and which may explain lower than expected rates.

### Sources of Rural Stress

Walker and Walker (1987) asked farmers to rank order sources of stress through completion of a Farming Stress Inventory. The top 10 stressors of farm men and women are presented below:

Men	Women
1. Rising Expenses	1. Rising Expenses
2. Low commodity prices	2. Low commodity prices
3. Concerns about farm finances	3. Heavy work load at peak times
4. Government regulations	4. Time pressures
5. Time pressures	5. Long work hours
6. Heavy work load at peak times	6. Worries about farm viability
7. Cheap food policies	7. Prolonged bad weather
8. Machinery breakdown	8. Machinery breakdown
9. Prolonged bad weather	9. Weather-related crop loss
10. Weather-related crop loss	10. Delay in planting/harvesting

Loss of personal control, cited by the Suicide Prevention Resource Centre (1999) as a primary stressor faced by farmers, may be common to many of the above-noted individual sources of stress.

### Symptoms of Stress

The Alberta Mental Health Board (2002) advises the farming community to be aware of the following symptoms of stress:

#### Physical

- ☞ increased heart rate
- ☞ rapid breathing
- ☞ tense muscles
- ☞ increased blood pressure
- ☞ sleep and appetite problems

#### Emotional

- ☞ irritability
- ☞ anger, yelling and losing one's temper
- ☞ lack of concentration
- ☞ feeling 'jumpy' and anxious

### Possible Strategies for Stress Reduction and Suicide Prevention Among Farmers

Hawton and colleagues (1998) suggested a variety of strategies that may help prevent suicide and problems related to stress among this population. Implementation and evaluation of these suggested strategies had not occurred at time of publication.

#### Mental and Physical Problems

- Knowledge transfer to farmers, to physicians and clinicians
- Offer out-of-area practitioner services
- Regular health and psychiatric checks
- Vigorous treatment of depression
- Domiciliary follow-up by general practitioners and psychiatric services as needed

#### Financial

- Specific strategies to support farmers with financial difficulties
- Greater flexibility of bank loans

#### Social Support

- Rural programs specific to relationship issues and bereavement
- Rural self-help groups and social clubs to increase support

#### Retirement

- Preparation for retirement schemes

#### Location of Initiatives

- Local and nation-wide initiatives

#### Means Restriction

- Restrict access to firearms or other methods where farmers are depressed or otherwise at risk

#### Rural Stress Initiatives

- Target high-risk farmers
- Facilitate support between farmers
- Coordinate services
- Simplify forms

#### Dissemination of Information

- To farmers through a variety of media sources

## SIEC SOURCES & RESOURCES

Photocopies are available from SIEC for documents on this list.

Please contact SIEC for pricing information.

SIEC #011378

Hawton, K., Simkin, S., Malmberg, A., Fagg, J. & Harriss, L. (1998). Suicide and Stress in Farmers. Colegate: The Stationery Office.

SIEC # 980540

Malmberg, A., Hawton, K. & Simkin, S. (1997). A study of suicide in farmers in England and Wales. Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 43(1): 107-111.

SIEC #980517

Moscicki, E. K. (1997). Identification of suicide risk factors using epidemiologic studies. The Psychiatric Clinics of North America, 20(3): 499-517.

SIEC #930960

Pickett, W., Davidson, J. R., & Brison, R. J. (1993). Suicides on Ontario farms. Revue Canadienne de Sante Publique, 84(4): 226-230.

SIEC #990720

Pickett, W., King, W. D., Faelker, T., Lees, R. E. M., Morrison, H. I., & Beinefeld, M. (1999). Suicide among Canadian farm operators. Chronic Diseases in Canada, 20(3): 105-110.

SIEC #910154

Ragland, J. D. & Berman, A. L. (1991). Farm crisis and suicide: Dying on the vine? Omega, 22(3), 173-185.

SIEC #020168

Simkin, S., Hawton, K., Fagg, J., & Malmberg, A. (1998). Stress in farmers: A survey of farmers in England and Wales. Occupational and Environmental Medicine, 55: 729-734.

SIEC #020350

Suicide Prevention Resource Centre (1999). Agricultural Service Provider Suicide Awareness Presentation. Unpublished guide.

SIEC #960137

Walker, J. L. & Walker, L. (1996). Characteristics and Correlates of Stress in Canadian Farm Families. Unpublished manuscript.

## INTERNET RESOURCES (web addresses current at time of publication)

Alberta Mental Health Board. "Managing Stressful Times" brochure [http://www.amhb.ab.ca/16207\\_StressBrch.pdf](http://www.amhb.ab.ca/16207_StressBrch.pdf)

Canadian Mental Health Association. "18 tips for dealing with stress and tension". <http://www3.sympatico.ca/cmha.toronto/stressn.html>

Canadian Health Network. <http://www.canadian-health-network.ca/customtools/homee.html>

Manitoba Agriculture and Food. Manitoba Farm and Rural Stress Line. <http://www.RuralStress.mb.ca>

Saskatchewan Agriculture, Food and Rural Revitalization. "Farm Stress Line" [http://www.agr.gov.sk.ca/DOCS/about\\_us/organizational\\_info/Fsf0394.asp?](http://www.agr.gov.sk.ca/DOCS/about_us/organizational_info/Fsf0394.asp?)

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The Centre for Suicide Prevention is a program of the Canadian Mental Health Association.