

COVID stress is the tip of iceberg for farmers' mental health

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Farmers' mental health was already at a critical point prior to COVID-19, which widened existing cracks in support according to new research.

Researchers from the University of Reading, the University of Exeter and Sheffield University found that while COVID-19 led to worsening

mental health among farmers, those surveyed said that they were already struggling prior to the pandemic. Incoming changes to the basic payment system to [support](#) farmers following Brexit were a major factor for worsening mental health, alongside heightening issues such as isolation, bureaucracy, and climatic conditions.

MPs, agricultural leaders and academics heard today about results from the Landscapes of Support for Farming Mental Health project, which was funded by the ESRC in response to the global pandemic and the impact it had on farmers.

Neil Parish MP, Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee who attended the presentation of the research said:

"I'm glad to be attending this workshop tackling mental health issues in [rural communities](#). Farmers and others in these communities often face stress caused by isolation, insecure incomes and unpredictable weather.

"My parliamentary committee has launched an inquiry into rural mental health and I'm hoping we'll learn valuable lessons from the 'Landscapes' project.

"Expert research into this issue from the 'Landscapes' team and others will help inform the recommendations we'll eventually make to the Government about how its support to rural communities on mental health matters can be improved."

Dr. David Rose, Elizabeth Creak Associate Professor of Agricultural Innovation and Extension at the University of Reading who led the research said:

"Like many people in society, COVID-19 had a profound effect on the agricultural community, but one of the biggest impacts was to widen the

already existing cracks between farmers and their support networks, and exacerbated the poor mental health that many farmers were already experiencing.

"COVID itself was just the tip of the iceberg, with the biggest change to agriculture as a result of Brexit beginning in January 2021. Against the backdrop of huge regulatory change, the first wave of the global pandemic was especially hard on farmers with the driest spring on record, the removal of formal and informal [support networks](#) and major shifts in patterns of consumption and demand."

Charities, trade and governmental bodies normally play an important role in supporting agricultural communities, but the research highlights how usual touch points for those services and informal help were unavailable.

During the presentation, the research team identified how the wide range of formal and informal sources of support are usually available for farmers. They noted that formal support channels are often signposted by peers, friends, and roles such as vets or merchants.

Charities and organizations that support [farmer](#) welfare suffered major loss of income and affecting of services like many in the third sector. The team also found that the unique context that farmers and families who often live in isolated, rural communities face contributed to mental health stressors.

Dr. Caroline Nye, Research Fellow at the Centre for Rural Policy Research at the University of Exeter said:

"Formal support systems for the agricultural community have long played a vital role towards maintaining not only business resilience but also personal wellbeing. The challenges currently faced by farmers continue to put pressure on their business, their resources, and their

[health](#).

"It is important to understand how farmers might best be supported into the future, and how support organizations' sustainability is impacted by major crises like COVID-19, as the sector faces some of the most important transitions in agriculture of this generation."

Dr. Ruth Little, Lecturer in Human Geography and member of the Institute for Sustainable Food at the University of Sheffield said:

"In addition to COVID-19, post-Brexit policy uncertainty weighs heavily on the minds of farmers and their families—it has created a 'perfect storm' in terms of fuelling stress and anxiety. This project points to important evidence on both the need for support mechanisms to be in place and indicates ways to ensure that this support is effective, well-funded and as joined up as possible."

Due to particular demands that rural agricultural communities face, the researchers recommend that [mental health](#) first aiders are urgently trained to provide signposting and support for farmers. Furthermore, the shift to online provision for many support services and charities makes the digital divide on broadband access more urgent to ensure that provision can reach farmers, their families and supporters.

Provided by University of Exeter

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