

Mental health support for UK farmers needs radical overhaul, say researchers

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Farmers facing worsening mental health problems are experiencing what researchers call a strained "landscape of support" in rural areas.

A study published today in the *Journal of Agromedicine* indicates how the COVID-19 pandemic led to increased levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and suicidal feelings among the UK's farming population. It raises concerns around what the research team calls "landscapes of support," with civil society organizations fighting to support [farmers](#) alongside primary mental healthcare services which are sometimes inaccessible and inadequately suited to rural communities.

The research team conducted two surveys answered by more than 200 farmers and 93 support providers across the UK, and in addition carried out in-depth interviews with 22 supporters of [mental health](#) in farming across Great Britain.

Farmers are essential workers, but some have been shown to suffer with poor mental health as a result of being relatively isolated physically, socially, and culturally. At the time the pandemic hit the UK, farmers were already facing substantial uncertainty around transitions away from the EU's Common Agricultural Policy.

By interviewing and surveying supporters of farming mental health, including chaplains, charities, auction mart staff and primary healthcare, the research found that mental health services are strained in rural communities and provide uneven coverage across the country. Some healthcare settings can be inaccessible and lack an understanding of farming, while informal spaces of social support are being eroded due to the loss of rural community. Mental health charities are struggling with funding and with the trauma of helping farmers through difficult times.

Academics are now calling on policymakers to take urgent action to help rural-proof primary mental healthcare services and better support civil society organizations which widen the safety net for farmers.

The research project was led by Cranfield University's David Rose,

Professor of Sustainable Agricultural Systems. He said, "The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated issues with farmers' mental health that we already knew existed. For example, primary mental healthcare provision in parts of the UK is based on urban delivery models that do not suit rural communities. This leaves civil society organizations fighting to fill the support gap, but these organizations face their own struggles.

"This issue needs urgent attention to ensure farmers get the support they need and help civil society organizations to flourish. We want devolved governments to urgently address this and ensure support is in place for future shocks."

Dr. Caroline Nye, Research Fellow at the University of Exeter, said, "Recognition that mental health issues exist in rural communities in the UK is, by itself, not enough. Our research demonstrates that those who have been working hard on a professional level to support our farmers over the last few years face multiple challenges. Attention therefore needs to be focused on ensuring that these bodies are supported in being both adaptable and sustainable over the long-term, for the benefit of the communities whom they serve."

Hannah Rees, a dairy farmer from Pembrokeshire in Wales, aged 26, remarked, "It's great that more is being done to support those in agriculture, but I do still feel there is a long way to go.

"It's important to reduce the stigma attached to mental health. Also, I think we need to stop taking a blanket approach that counseling is the only way to help people. Discussion groups and Zoom meetings are other fantastic ways of providing support and countering loneliness. I believe we should see the introduction of mental health first aid training for those working in agriculture."

Stephanie Berkeley, of the Farm Safety Foundation, added, "I welcome

the findings of this study and agree that urgent action is needed to support the ongoing mental health of our farmers. They work long hours every day, through global pandemics and uncertain times, to put food on our plates—but this dedication comes at a price.

"We need immediate action at government level to improve the primary mental healthcare provision for those living and working in rural communities and we need to take the pressure off the rural support groups and charities who have been relied on to provide support for those in crisis situations."

Co-authors on the paper were: Dr. Faye Shortland (formerly University of Reading), Dr. Caroline Nye (Exeter), Professor Matt Lobley (Exeter), Dr. Ruth Little (formerly University of Sheffield), Dr. Jilly Hall (SPSN), Dr. Paul Hurley (formerly University of Reading), and Professor David Rose (Cranfield University, formerly University of Reading).

Flavian Obiero, a farmer from East Sussex, said, "As a Kenyan-born, black man in British agriculture, my mental health is in good nick. Despite the usual perception of prejudice from under-exposed people in the countryside, my experience in the industry has been largely positive. That said, we are still a long way off from any significant change in people's mentality to personnel diversity in the industry."

Eveey Hunter, an arable farmer from Hertfordshire, offered, "As wonderful as our industry is, it can be a very lonely and isolating place for some. There are a lot of stressful factors which determine success or failure in businesses, most of which are out of our control—global markets, huge inflation of input costs and of course the weather. There is also unfortunately a stigma attached to talking about feelings, mainly with men, which is something that needs to be addressed."

Kate Miles, from the DPJ Foundation, a mental health charity that

supports the agricultural community in Wales, noted, "Over the last two years, we have seen an increase in demand for our service. We know that farmers value speaking with someone who understands the pressure that they face, and this understanding is vital in mental health services. We see pockets of good work taking place across the country, including in rural areas. However, this needs to be consistent no matter where you are geographically."

Trudy Herniman, an advisor for Cornish Mutual, which offers [insurance](#) to farms, businesses and people living and working in Cornwall, Devon, Somerset and Dorset, remarked, "The issues raised for farmers and those working in [agriculture](#) following the COVID-19 pandemic are still very much there and now even more exacerbated. Coming out of the pandemic we had the war between Ukraine and Russia, everyone feeling the effect on fuel and input cost rises. But farmers then experienced volatility in the weather as storms damaged buildings and electricity supplies.

"Farmers find it hard to ask for help and when they are distressed find it difficult to overcome the barriers by not being able to get a doctor's appointment. Using my mental health first aid training, myself, and others from Farmerados (a welfare charity) go to markets and shows and bring tea and cake and a safe space to talk. We offer support or a listening ear. It is crucial in helping to reduce the anxiety and stress experienced by farmers and those in the farming community."

More information: David Christian Rose et al, The Impact of COVID-19 on Farmers' Mental Health: A Case Study of the UK, *Journal of Agromedicine* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/1059924X.2022.2137616](https://doi.org/10.1080/1059924X.2022.2137616)

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