

# **“It’s a great life, if you can stand it”: Farm wives in South Georgia discuss farmer and farm family stress**

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Data gathered Fall 2022, with follow-up meetings with participants in May, 2023.

Thanks to all the local Georgia Farm Bureau offices and women's committees in the participating counties, for their help with recruiting participants for this study and support of rural health programming.  
A huge thank you to the participants who generously gave of their time and their life stories.

## **“It’s a Great Way of Life, if You Can Stand It”**

### **Farmer and Farm Family Stress: Findings from Focus Groups with Farmers’ Wives in South Georgia**

Farmers experience multiple stressors and challenges as they work to produce food and fiber for the world. Farming is physically demanding, with long hours, isolation, and high risk of work-related injury. Many factors important to the success of a farm are outside of farmers’ control—weather events and increasing weather uncertainty, unstable input and commodity prices, and changes in tariff policies, to name a few. Recent economic downturns and supply chain disruptions as a result of the pandemic have also impacted farm functioning. All of these factors can contribute to elevated levels of stress, depression, and anxiety in farmers. (Basey et al., 2021; Scheyett, et al., 2020; Scheyett et al., 2023).

Understanding the stress levels experienced by farmers can be difficult. Independence, privacy, and stoicism are highly valued in farming and rural communities (Ferris-Day, et al., 2021), making farmers reluctant to voice their stresses and emotions. In addition, stress has impact beyond the farmer, and can affect the entire farm family. Farm spouses have multiple demands and challenges that can result in significant stress (Jean & Karbowski, 2020). It has also been shown that high levels of stress in farm fathers is associated with higher levels of farm-related accidents in their adolescent children (Stoneman & Jinnah, 2015).

A recent study (Scheyett, et al., in press) found that the people farmers are most likely to trust and talk with are their spouses. Therefore, in this study we sought to center the voices of farmers’ wives, to explore the stresses they see in their farmers as well in their families and in themselves, to discuss the coping strategies they use to manage stress, and to learn about effective ways in which University of Georgia Cooperative Extension can support farmers and farm families.

#### **Methods**

Six focus groups were conducted for this study, located in six rural counties in Southwest Georgia. Participants were recruited by local Farm Bureau staff in collaboration with local Extension agents. Criteria for participation in the focus groups were: having been married to someone who farmed; living on the farm currently or at some point in the past; and being 18 years of age or older. In total, 29 women participated in these focus groups.

The focus groups were led by one of two researchers with significant experience in farming life, with support from an additional researcher with some farm life experience. Focus group questions asked participants to discuss stress in their farmers, in their children, and in themselves, as well as discuss farmer and farm family coping strategies to manage stress. Participants were also asked what kind of information they believed would help farmers and farm families to manage stress, and how best to deliver this information. Focus groups lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. All groups were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

A thematic analysis was completed for the data gathered, using the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were independently line-by-line coded by two researchers, one of whom had co-facilitated the focus groups; from this they consulted and generated a commonly-agreed upon set of initial codes. These codes were used to recode the data, with an initial inter-coder reliability of Cohen's Kappa=0.4042, indicating moderate agreement. Code disagreement was discussed by the two researchers until consensus was reached. Codes were then organized into broader themes that were more fully described.

Characteristics of focus group participants are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

*Focus Group Participant Characteristics (N=29)*

	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Female</b>	29	100%		
<b>White</b>	29	100%		
<b>Age (years)</b>			48.9	14.4
<b>Education</b>				
<b>High School</b>	3	10%		
<b>Some College</b>	7	24%		
<b>2-year degree</b>	6	21%		
<b>4-year degree</b>	7	24%		
<b>Some Graduate School</b>	1	3%		
<b>Graduate degree</b>	5	17%		
<b>Caring for children at home</b>	11	38%		
<b>Children ages 0-5</b>	8	28%		
<b>Children ages 6-13</b>	10	34%		
<b>Children ages 14+</b>	4	14%		
<b>Working outside the home</b>	18	62%		
<b>Number of years married to farmer</b>			26.3	14.8
<b>Number of years on farm with farmer</b>			24.8	14.8
<b>Total number of years living on a farm</b>			36.3	19.3

## Results

### Stress in Farm Families

When discussing stress, participants identified stressors and stress dynamics in four domains—in farmers, in themselves as wives, in their children, and as a result of lack of time. Each domain is discussed below.

#### *Farmers and Stress*

Two primary themes were identified regarding farmer stress: 1) lack of control; and 2) driven and constant.

Participants identified lack of control as a major stressor for farmers. They discussed at length all of the important factors needed for a farming season to be successful, and discussed how the majority of these factors were outside of the farmer's control. These factors included weather, input costs, commodity prices, pests, disease, equipment expense—a of which left them with the sense that they could never get ahead of these financial impacts. A participant described these factors by saying “...*And having no control over really what we are able to sell our commodities for. And we can determine whether we want to buy a quantity of chemical to grow the crop, but we really have no leverage on the sales price. And I think that's probably the thing that bothers them the most along with the weather.*” (Participant WS5). This lack of control, particularly in men with a strong sense of independence and a need to be in charge, led to significant stress. As noted by one participant

*I have a type A personality husband, and they really should not be farmers because nothing is in their control. Nothing is in his control right now... one thing that he can't control, we had a major breakdown. And a major breakdown doesn't cost just a couple hundred dollars or a few thousand dollars. It cost about \$25,000 this last time. So can't control the weather. We can't control the producers. We can't control when they're going to be there and when their corn and when their products are ready. Now we can't control the buying points. Participant SS2*

The stress of farming was seen as exacerbated by farmers' driven nature and constant work, grounded in a deep commitment to their work. Participants used phrases like “it's in their blood” and “they are driven” to describe the depth of commitment felt by farmers. One wife stated “*We know they are all driven to do what they do because they are workaholics so to speak, and they give it their all*” (Participant WS6). This deep love of farming resulted in high stress during times when things were not going well. One participant whose husband and son both farmed, and whose husband had given it up, described it in this manner

*Once they get it in them, they cannot get it out of them. They love it. He would have never done anything else but farm, my son, or my husband. That was his passion was farming, and he loved it. When things went right, he was good, but when the stress of the-- I don't know. It was everything. Participant MS2*

Because of this deep-rooted commitment, participants reported that farmers could never stop thinking about the farm, that the worry was constant and relaxing was very, very difficult. One woman explained it by saying

*Never being able to really let go. Even if you were to remove yourself and go on a two-day vacation, you can't ever stop worrying about what's happening at the farm. Whether it's the cows getting out when you're out of town or a hurricane coming through and ruining your irrigation or-- it's just you can never--detach from it truly. And it's part of their blood. They know what they're doing when they get into it, but that's just a constant cloud. Participant CoS3*

### *Stress and Farmers' Wives*

When discussing their own stress as the wives of farmers, participants discussed a range of challenges. Two primary themes emerged from these discussions: 1) doing almost everything that's not farm work (plus farm work); and 2) emotional labor.

In describing their role as farm wife, women painted a picture where they were responsible for nearly everything that is not actual farm work, functioning independently and clearing the way so that the farmer can focus solely on the huge task of farming. A participant explained it as *"We have to have the mindset of, if it has to do with our kids or my household or our schedule, that is 100% on me. If he can show up, that is a bonus, but I don't need him there. I can handle it all"* (Participant CoS7). Several participants described feeling like single parents, one saying *"And it's single parenting, and it's nothing anything against our husbands by no means, but the wives have to be very, very independent. They have to be able-- and I'm talking about they have to be able to fix stuff around the house"* (Participant CoS2). Several noted that adjusting to this level of responsibility was particularly challenging for women who had not grown up on a farm and had not seen this growing up. Others noted that this feeling like a single parent could lead to long hours without another adult and a real sense of loneliness; one participant discussed how this was particularly challenging when the children had grown and left the farm and the wife was alone by herself most of the day while the farmer works long hours.

Sometimes wives' responsibilities included working outside of the farm, which was often needed for steady income and for health insurance. Despite the idea that nearly everything that is not farm work was the responsibility of the wife, many women also contributed to farm work, either by keeping the books for the farm and/or by engaging in actual farm labor. Juggling these large and competing demands was a high stressor for participants. One wife described her responsibilities in this way

*Just the amount of things you have to keep up with. Because you're still a mom. You're still a housekeeper. You're going to your job. You're doing paperwork for the farm. You're tending hay for the farm. You're breaking hay for the farm. You're feeding cows. You're working cows. You're doing so many different jobs. Getting the homework done. That's stressful. And then you get a phone call, "Hey, can you pick up some parts..."*  
Participant SS5

A number of participants wondered if their spouses truly understood the overwhelming nature of these multiple demands. As stated by one wife

*So it's like you're taking care of parents, you're trying to take care of the house and the farm and your men folks and expecting new babies. And it's a lot that I don't think-- and I don't think that they mean it. I know [husband]I doesn't mean it intentionally, but I think they think we've just got it all together and they're the only ones with all this on their mind, but it's not, it's a lot. Participant WS7*

A second theme emerging from these focus groups was the heavy lift of emotional labor required by farmers' wives. Participants discussed feeling responsible for generating a positive mood in the home during their farmer's difficult days. One wife noted "... I think it's also up to... me to be uplifting in our household because there are things going on. I mean, we have had horrible days, God, just absolutely horrible days starting from the ground up. And it's just he can't help but wear a little of it on him." (Participant CoS7). Wives felt that being positive was important, even if that meant hiding one's own feelings. "You just kind of hid it... Yeah, just hid it and be a smiling face which, for some nights, it doesn't go as well as others. But I mean, I think that trying to be positive helps" (Participant ES3).

A second related form of emotional labor women described was tolerating stress-related irritability from their husbands. They reported feeling that patience and understanding were really important parts of their roles, particularly since they were the ones closest to the farmer and thus understood the most about the stress he was going through. Being able to ignore a farmer's short temper was essential. One participant put it this way "And I know that they don't mean to, but you're the person closest to them, so any time they're under stress, boy, you're going to get the brunt of it. You're going to get the snappings and the ta ta ta, and you're just like-- I just learned to just-- I'm like, "Hmm. Whatever." (Participant SS2).

A final form of emotional labor reported by many wives was that of family mediator or peacekeeper. This was particularly seen in families where both the father and son are farming together. Sometimes, they reported, the father would not think the son was doing a farm task correctly or well, and the wife would need to intervene. Participant WS3 explained "So my son has that stress of not filling his daddy's shoes kind of thing. It's like nothing he does is never good for [husband]. So I have to kind of--be the mediator." (Participant WS3).

Many participants saw this as a generational issue,

*Yeah. This lack of communication-- my husband will say one thing, and he was having trouble with the hay baler the other day, and so then when his son came to help him, [farmer] said, "Well, now, here I've been having trouble. It's been doing this," and of course, he immediately thought his daddy was telling him how to rake hay, and he says, "I know how to rake hay." So the communication between generations...telling them something is not right, or they did something wrong, or, "Did you tear up this hay baler, and you didn't tell me?" You got to be peacemaker, a mediator somewhat. So I sent him a text. I said, "I know your daddy gets on your nerves, just try to be patient."*  
Participant SS6

### *Stress and Children*

Participants agreed that farm children, particularly older children, could sense when their farm father was experiencing high stress. In addition, participants with younger children experienced their own stressors as a result of being in a farm family. The two predominant themes here were: 1) more is expected of farm children; and 2) farm children need to understand that this is how their life is.

A number of participants talked about the greater levels of responsibility placed on children in farms, with an expectation that they will contribute to farm work from an early age. One mother stated

*The typical age that legally I think they can start working for somebody is, what, 12 or 13? Like buying groceries or whatever. Farm kids, there is no age limit. I have a 5-year-old, and I mean, we bought a new farm and we actually cleared a lot of the timber off of it. And me and my kids, me and my four children, we were out there picking up the stumps because that's what it required.* Participant CoS4

Because of these expectations, farm children often forego social activities in which many of their friends participate. One participant said ruefully “*They are expected younger to pick up the responsibilities and I guess-- our middle one is six and he's been asking to play baseball. I don't know if we can play baseball. When??*” (Participant CoS3). Another participant with teen children noted

*It's a stressor we're going through now with kids that are teenagers. There's so few of their friends who grow up on the farm that now is a constant battle a little bit at our house because our expectations are different than friends. Just from, "On Saturday morning, I need you to get up and do this or participate and help." And growing up, I had tons of friends that I could say are on the same boat as me, and now, they don't.* Participant CoS6

Many of the wives talked at length about the time demands placed on farm fathers, and that as a result fathers are often not present at home. They felt that farm children need to understand this; one said “*You got to let them know what's going on. Dad's not just MIA. He's out here working...And if he's out moving hay ...they would pick up the corns and earn a little money [with him]. And I think they're a lot more level-headed than non-farm children*” (Participant KIS3). Helping children understand the reality of farm life was seen as another one of wives’ responsibilities.

*You need to make sure they realize it. You need to start from age two, telling them that, "Your daddy is a farmer. It takes him all this time working to make a home for us and to provide because it's a hard profession, but we get to live out here in the country."* Participant SS3



### *Lack of Time*

In discussions, it was clear that a major stressor for farm families was the lack of time available for family because of the all-consuming nature of farming. Participants expressed frustration and sadness as they discussed this. One wife stated

*Time is huge. The things that they miss... Everything. They miss everything...Everything. Vacation, we can't go on a vacation. We went on a seven-day vacation. [husband] came home twice. He left vacation. And I was there by myself-- well, I had the dogs with me. So he will leave. You can't be gone for more than two or three days at the time.*

Participant SS2

Participants spoke wistfully about all of the family events farmer missed. This was particularly difficult for women who had not grown up on farms. One stated “*It's a shock to you as a mother, is if you live on a farm or whatever, in your husbands' farms, they're going to miss a whole lot of birthday parties, and Christmas is going to be no. Thanksgiving is going to be a [just a] day, and Easter is usually during planting season* (Participant CaS3).

They also talked about the number of their children’s events farm fathers missed, and the emotional toll it took on them. “*The first thing they do when they're at a performance or on the field somewhere. They're looking for you. Where are my parents? Where's everybody? And they only see one, and they're like, 'Well, Dad couldn't make it again because he's farming. He's too busy.' ”* (Participant SS2).

Similarly, wives noted that it was very difficult to find time for husband and wife to be together, particularly during planting and harvesting. They described snatching moments of time wherever they could. One recollected the last time she and her husband went to town:

*And the last time, we saw some people from our church, and my husband was like, "Yeah, we're coming to town because we haven't seen each other much in like six weeks or something. He had worked every weekend." And they were like, "He's taking her to a Tractor Supply?!" because that's where we were.* Participant ES5

### **Coping with Stress**

Focus group participants described multiple ways in which farmers and their families cope with the stresses of farming. Predominant themes here were: 1) faith; 2) knowing it’s a good life; 3) coping activities; 4) talking with others who “get it”; and 5) making creative use of time.

Faith was seen as a bedrock for many participants, and a tremendous support and source of strength as well as an opportunity for social connection. This was true for both the wives and their farmers. One woman explained

*I think a lot of times too with [husband] when I-- and probably y'all too, y'all's husbands. I mean if it wasn't for our faith, that gets him through. I mean, it really does because, I mean, I think, a farmer that doesn't believe in the good Lord, I mean, I don't know where they get their strength from but, I mean, I know that's where ours comes from a lot, through our faith.*

Participant WS7

Faith, and specifically prayer, were identified as important in managing stress, with one participant explaining “*And for us, that's where our faith plays in... We pray about it. Faith has been a very important part of our stress management on the farm.* (Participant CoS8). A participant linked the importance of faith to the lack of control farmers experience, seeing faith as the supportive belief that God was in control. Another participant put it simply: *If you don't have that faith, you would go mad.* (Participant CoS4).

A second coping stance many participants identified was seeing and being grateful for farm life, knowing that it’s a good life, even if it is difficult. One participant said, with slight irony, “*...it's a great way of life if you can stand it. But you have to have perseverance, and you have to have faith, and you have to have hope. And you have to be optimistic that it's going to pay out one day, hopefully.*” (Participant KIS3).

Participants were particularly proud of the fact that farm life was a good life for children, with one mother saying “*I'm excited that we-- I love the farm and [am] glad we could raise our children there.*” (Participant WS7.) Participants discussed the skills farm children learn, and saw these skills and responsibilities as building character and work ethic, and as good preparation for the future. They also saw it as instilling a love of farming. One participant elaborated on the benefits for children

*I think it's a great life for the kids, to be honest. It's just the best. It is. And my boys would say the same thing, even though it was hard...It is the best. And with us working with him, the kids are learning things that a lot of kids don't know. A lot of kids don't know. So I mean, that part is really good. A kid might not like it, those farm chores. But they know how to drive by the time they're 13 or 12. They can change tires. And pull a trailer and back a trailer. And work on the trailer.* Participant SS7

Participants described a number of activities that they and farmers used as coping activities. Many involved nature. One described her husband’s love of their dog, saying “*My dogs are [farmer’s]. He'll go out on the porch and just love on them. And I think that has been his stress release too*” (Participant WS3), while another described hunting as a stress relief; “*My husband, some of his stress relievers are he's looking forward to our weekend in North Carolina, Labor Day weekend to go hunting opening seasoning.*” (Participant MS3).

Similarly, wives talked about nature, one saying *I love horses. I raised quarter horses for many years. And so when I get the opportunity, I like to ride*” (Participant KI3), while another talked about enjoying mowing her lawn

*My lawn mower is a stress relief. And he won't let me drive the one on the farm. He says I'll tear something up. But ... that is a big stress relief for me. That's what I tell them. That's my therapy on Thursday. Thursdays is my yard day. That's my day. I cut my grass. I [fix] my yard.* Participant WS4

Activities that involved quiet, peaceful time, and simpler tasks with a sense of accomplishment, such as mowing and gardening, were discussed as important stress relievers.

Interestingly, several women noted that working outside the farm was a coping mechanism, giving them the opportunity to think about something other than the all-consuming farm, unlike the farmer's situation. One wife noted that while she left the farm, her husband could never get away from the ever-present stress of the farm, stating

*Well, that's what I was thinking while she was talking, my outlet is going to work. I can leave the farm at home, but my husband, he, and my son doesn't have something to go to, so I don't know how to solve that problem. What would help them be able to release their stress? I can go to my work, but they don't have anything. And I don't know what it would take.* Participant CaS2

Another way of coping with stress identified by participants was by talking with others who understood farm life, talking with others who “get it.” Women spoke about how farmers sought each other out, to have a few minutes to talk with another farmer. They described local spots where farmers gathered in their communities, like a local Mexican restaurant with a table where all the farmers sat. One described farmers finding each other by saying “*Like cats in the street, they call each other. They run into each other at the fuel pump or at the seed company or whatever. They're always at the common places you would see farmers, they talk.*” (Participant CoS3).

Women described this talking as a way to decrease isolation among farmers and to help them understand that setbacks were not their fault, that everyone was struggling. She noted

*I know they internalize it and they think, "I'm the only one that's feeling this amount of pressure." So when someone stands in front of them and says, "You're not the only one. And probably the man to your left and the man to your right is feeling the same thing that you're feeling," it makes you go-- because y'all, it is better to know that everybody's suffering.* Participant CaS7

Wives described talking with others who shared their lived experience as an important coping strategy for themselves as well. Knowing that others had the same struggles was comforting and normalizing. One wife stated

*I think it helps to have friends in-- because it is really easy to get sad. On a Friday night, when all your friends and spouses are going to dinner or gathering somewhere, and you're like, "Here comes me laying by myself again or I wish I could go but I can't." It's really easy to find yourself in that place, and so it's helpful to me to see [other farm wife] in a show by herself and I was like, "I'm not the only one doing this. And this is normal and it's okay and it doesn't mean-- so making sure I don't put myself in a position where I'm the only person living that lifestyle.* Participant CoS6

It was also important that the talk not be only venting. One said it was important “*Being able to do something fun. It doesn't have to be like, 'All right, let's slam our husbands about how bad it's*

*been, ' you know? But more like just a social thing to get with other people who get it."* (Participant ES3). Several participants spoke fondly about events in the past where they had been able to get together for activities or to do crafts—"paint parties" were mentioned repeatedly as relaxing and fun activities.

Finally, many women talked about how important it was to make creative use of time, and take moments to be together when they could find them, despite the huge time demands of farming. A simple hour to grab a meal away from the farm was seen as important for stress management. One wife talked about using the drive to and from a parts store as "couples time" for her and her husband.

*I think piggybacking off of that too, sometimes the time together is not necessarily a trip. "Hey, I've got to go down to so and so to pick up this. Do you want to ride with me?" ...I use to be like, "No, no. I'm not riding." And now it's like, "I guess." ...Then when I complain about not seeing him in a few days, he's like, "You could have rode with me. We could have spent a whole two hours together." Participant ES3*

Another participant described the importance of making intentional time, even doing family chores.

*And it's important for us to have our time. Just me and him, like last night. We put the kids to bed. We took all the clean laundry to the bedroom. We put on a movie, and we did laundry together. And we didn't talk about farming. We didn't talk about anything but what was on the TV and doing laundry and us for an hour or two. It was just our time. And that's also very important to us in our relationship with just managing stress in general within the family, is our time together. When we can get away and just not worry about things for a little bit but each other. Participant CoS3*

Making creative use of time was also important to ensure that farm fathers and children had time together. During planting and harvest fathers were often in the field before children woke up and did not return home until well after they were in bed. Thus, creative use of time was important, and wives were proud of the strategies they had developed. One explained "*When the kids were small, I would make lunch and we'd all go to the field, and we'd have lunch with daddy. Because by the time daddy got home you would be fed, bathed, and in bed. So that we'd go to the field and have picnics*" (Participant CaS5). Another described having her two-year-old ride in the fields with his father

*I try to do that same thing, trying to get our son to go with him if he is just checking the beans real quick or something. He'll ride with him and he loves that. He woke up one morning this summer, and he woke up when [husband's] alarm went off and he said, "Work beans!" Because he went to work with him the day before, so he loves any chance he can get. And of course, my husband lights up to see him excited about it too, so I guess that's what we do. Participant ES5*

## Stress Management Messaging and Actions

The final discussion in the focus groups explored stress management messaging for farmers and farm families. Here the conversation fell into three major themes: 1) characteristics of the message; 2) content of the message; and 3) remember the wives.

Participants were very clear that if we wanted to keep farmers' attention, the characteristics of a good stress management messages would be that it was brief, direct, and easily accessible. One participant stated emphatically "*And most farmers, if it's a long thing, you're going to lose them. So that's why I think just little snippets and things along the way even at these meeting you kind of bring it up.*" (Participant MS2). Even text would need to be quick, with one wife saying candidly, "*Something quick. If it's too long-- on my cell phone, if I scroll down, and it's way too long, I'm like, 'Nope. It's not worth that.'*" (Participant SS3).

Wives also emphasized the importance of being easily accessible and straightforward in messaging. One suggested having a calendar or magnet, with a message on the top that read "*For help, call this number...Is what goes on the top, for help, for help. Call this number for help... Oh yeah, don't try to beat around the bush. Just be upfront and direct*" (Participant CaS3). Another recommended a QR code that could be put on farm equipment, which linked to information about help for health and mental health. Getting messages to places farmers frequent was discussed, including calendars, posters and flyers at Farm Bureau and Farm Service Agency offices, banks, seed and parts stores, and local restaurants. In addition, participants talked about tailoring messages to particular age groups and specific communities.

In order to ensure that stress management messages are accessed, participants felt it was important to integrate them into activities farmers already do. Several suggested placing messages in farm business publications and farm-related newsletters, or having messages farmers could access by phone and listen to while in a tractor or their truck. They suggested considering rural radio stations, the Farm Monitor, and Young Farmers magazine as additional ways to share information on stress management. One participant reflected these ideas in this statement

*I don't know if there could be some podcast. I don't know if farmers would listen to that while in the tractor, or if they have Sirius in their car. I don't know if they would be willing to listen to that... don't know if they would be willing to listen to a CD while traveling or something like that. Or maybe some radio station that they listen to. I know the radio station that we have access to their tri-state area-- that people in the tri-state area listen to, so. And there's a lot of farmers that listen to local stations.*

Participant MS3

All participants were enthusiastic about including stress management messages in existing meetings, with one wife saying "*to reach an audience like that, it's going to have to come in action in terms of meeting them at production meetings and those kinds of things just because they're not going to pick up a pamphlet and read it*" (Participant ES3). They were particularly positive about including stress management messages in Extension production meetings, as had

been piloted in the six counties where these focus groups were held. One participant summed it up by saying

*Well, I like the idea that they introduced it in one of the other meetings. If you tell these men that, "Out here is a meeting for you to learn manage your stress. I'm signing you up," they're not going to go...They're not going to go. They're not going to admit that they have stress. But if they put it in the row crop meeting or on the cotton production meeting, on the peanut production meeting, and they're there [they will listen]*

Participant WS3

When discussing the content of the messaging, wives emphasized the importance of making the topic more acceptable. Some suggested framing the conversation within “health” rather than “mental health,” perhaps using texts to send messages and incorporating some of the health messaging developed by FACS agents and specialists. One participant noting “*I feel like if you focus it more on health, it would be a better—sometimes, mental health seems more taboo, and people are like, ‘Oh, I’m fine.’ Because people don’t want to talk about that or share that, and I think that goes back to the manliness.*” (Participant ES3). Others suggested normalizing messages by having them placed in locations that farmers frequent for agricultural purposes, and that framing the conversation as a way to help someone else, rather than needing help oneself, might make it more acceptable to farmer. They felt farmers were more likely to communicate peer to peer. One participant ruminated

*... he may walk into the FSA (Farm Services Agency) office and go take out his phone and take a picture of that number [on the poster] and send it to the wife or someone. He’s not going to recognize it in his own self, but in today’s time, he may recognize it, like I said, in his son or grandson or his neighbor... Or, well, he can see and go, ‘Hey, it’s not so bad to call this number. Why don’t you call this number?’ Or the wife go—or actually what happens is he takes a picture of the number. He comes home and he tells me and he says, “Send this to [another farmer wife].”* Participant CS5

In addition to stress management information for farmers, participants wanted information for wives and caring others, specifically on “*warning signs and where to get help if stress becomes high risk ... Here’s what to look for, here’s what to do, here’s what not to do. Here’s what to say, here’s not what to say. Just very simple, something that people can remember* (Participant CaS7).

Participants noted that in our efforts to help farmers with stress management, we needed to be sure to remember the wives. Wives are key to helping farmers manage their stress and stay healthy, but wives have their own unique stresses, and need support as well. They suggested having parallel wives’ meetings during the farmers’ production meetings, and working with the women’s groups at Farm Bureau or the Cattleman’s Association. One participant summed this up beautifully by saying that wives needed

*“anything like that the women can go to just to get out for that couple hours...And to realize that there are others like us, like [other participant] said earlier, we’re all in it together... Yeah, like when we do the painting...There’s others like us. We’re not the only ones, and we need that networking too. Not just the farmers, but we need that. That same kind of support system. Participant CoS9*

## **Discussion and Next Steps**

### **What We Learned**

Throughout these focus groups participants confirmed that farmers feel high levels of stress, in part due to the number of variables outside of their control that determine economic success for a farm. This lack of control is made more stressful by farmers’ deep commitment to their farm, where farming is “in their blood” and is a continuous commitment that is never forgotten or laid aside. Farm wives see this stress close-up, and also experience their own stressors. Most stressful are the demands to take care of almost everything other than farming so as to give the farmer unencumbered ability to farm, while also having to help with the farm as needed. Farm children also experience stress, with early responsibilities regarding the farm, and expectations that they will understand that farm life is different and they cannot do everything their friends do.

Time was discussed as the most precious commodity on a farm—there is never enough time to do everything. Because of the demands of farming, time is sacrificed elsewhere, particularly time with family. Vacations are few (if at all), and often interrupted by demands from the farm. Farm fathers feel the stress of not being able to attend children’s special events, children feel the stress of being the only ones without a daddy at their games and performances, and also feel the stress of being unable to participate in extracurricular activities because of the time demands these would make on the family.

Despite these stressors, it is clear that farmers, farm wives, and farm families as a whole are resilient, strong, and have great pride in their way of life. While our work has focused on the stressors of farm life, it is important to balance that with the hardiness and stress with the positive assets also. It would be very easy just to focus on the negatives, but the pride the women expressed in having their family living and working on the land, the work ethic and values gained by their children, and the quality of time that is spent together are all assets that should be recognized and honored.

Farmers and farmers’ wives have developed multiple coping mechanisms to deal with stress. Primary among these are faith and gratitude. Faith was seen as central to many farmers’ and farm wives’ coping, with prayer uniting families from the time children are little. In addition, farm wives remind themselves frequently that farming is a great life and a valuable and rich experience for their children, which built character and strong values.

Farm wives described multiple stress management strategies they and their farmers employ, particularly related to time with animals and nature. Wives described working outside the farm as both stressful and a stress reliever, since this gave them the opportunity to be away from the farm and its stresses. One particularly striking coping strategy was the creative and intentional use of time. Wives described using small bits of existing time to bring the family together; things as simple as riding into town for a tractor part with their husband or bringing the children on a picnic in the fields where their father was working. This creative use of available time mitigated some of the stress experienced during particularly busy times such as planting and harvest.

A final important stress management mechanism noted by wives was having time to talk with others who understand their lives. For farmers, this meant time talking with other farmers and sharing ideas, worries, and experiences. This usually happened informally at stores, gas stations, and Extension meetings. This time to talk was identified as helpful for wives as well. Knowing that they are not the only ones experiencing these stressors, as well as having time to relax and not think about the farm at social gatherings and activities, were seen as important stress management strategies.

Based on these discussions with farmers' wives, if Extension services are to be maximally useful in addressing stress among farmers and their families, the content and the characteristics of stress management messaging are important. Because of the pressures of time, messages must be simple, clear, direct, and accessible- in places where farmers are already working. This could include messages that could be accessed while driving or on a tractor, that are easily seen on a calendar or in an office, or that are woven into existing meetings such as production meetings.

Content must also be carefully presented. Given farmers' stoic independence and reluctance to admit weakness, plus the stigma surrounding emotional and mental health issues, framing stress as a health issue was seen as important. Having simple content on how to manage stress, what dangerous levels of stress look like, and where to go for help are the key messages needed. These messages should be shared with farmers, their wives, and others in the community who can support them.

Normalizing conversations about stress is also important. Crafting messages that convey "you are not the only one" or "we all have stressful times" will make farmers more likely to listen to stress management messages. Having these conversations with farmers in meetings and settings where they are interacting with their networks will also help normalize the conversations.

Finally, to address farm family stress Extension needs to pay attention to farm wives, not merely as people who can support farmers but as individuals who need support and stress management activities themselves. Providing information on how they can help their husbands during stressful times is only part of what is needed. Farmers' wives need support systems with others who understand their lives, social connection, and time for themselves. Extension should explore opportunities to make this happen, perhaps in collaboration with local Farm Bureau or Young Farmer groups, or by inviting wives to a parallel meeting during times where farmers gather at Extension for production meetings and other events.



## **Actions Taken Since These Focus Groups**

While formal analyses of these focus groups will not be completed until results have been presented to participating members, Extension has already begun to engage in some activities in response to the information provided by participating wives. These include:

- A blog on stress management, *Thriving on the Farm*, which focuses on snippets of information about managing stress, information on stress management activities that can be done in less than 10 minutes, and that has a read-aloud function so that posts can be listened to from any location;
- Expansion of stress discussion in production meetings, which happened in 12 counties this year, and is now expanding with training for agriculture-related community leaders, and which is being formally evaluated for impact;
- Research-based message testing with farmers that is being used to create brief and impactful flyers, posters, and cards where both the words and images have been vetted by farmers.

## **Next Steps**

Important next steps for this Extension initiative will include development of a comprehensive stress management resource kit that can be made accessible to farmers and also shared with wives, other family members, and caring community members. This should include small visual reminder items, like QR codes and calendars, as well as videos, podcasts, blogs, flyers, and websites. Informing people about the existence of this resource kit will require an intentional plan, focusing on integrating the information and resources in already-existing farming events. Tailoring responses and strategies for disseminating information to each county will be important if there is to be real uptake and impact.

In addition to the resource kits, Extension can explore ways to host, co-host, or facilitate the creation of events for farmers' wives (paint parties seem to be a popular idea). These events could occur at the same time as farmers have their meetings at Extension, or could be free-standing. The two important elements will be creating an opportunity for farmers' wives to talk with each other, and making the event a pleasant and relaxing one, so as to provide wives with a truly stress-reducing experience.

Extension is committed to promoting farmers', farm wives', and farm families' health and wellness. Building capacity in managing stress is one part of wellness, and the Extension *Rural Georgia Growing Stronger* team is eager to hear farm families' thoughts and suggestions for ways we can provide support.

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