

the personal nature
of **AGRICULTURE**



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“Where do cowboys go to cry?”

When this question was raised at a recent stress management workshop, an immediate response was “They don’t, and they won’t.” But it’s not that simple. Although there are many ranch and farm men who seek help when facing personal challenges, there are also those who find it difficult and even refuse to seek help. Why?

This publication explores that question by looking at how men’s upbringing makes seeking help a challenge, social and family barriers to seeking help, characteristics of helping professionals who work well with men reluctant to seek help, and what men can do to help themselves.

Gender Identity

Gender identity is a person’s perception of what it means to be a man, woman, boy, or girl. Learning what it means to be “male” or “female” is one of the most difficult and complex lessons in life.¹ Young boys, for example, are rewarded by their parents and teachers for conforming to expected standards. Playmates congratulate each other for performing like men. Mentors pat boys on the back for their masculine achievements.

Beliefs about how men ought to behave are constructed at many levels in society and in the minds of men. A masculine identity generated by news media, artists, teachers, historians, parents, and public figures dominates how men think about themselves. Because men in any subgroup (e.g., ranchers and farmers) tend to share the same cultural history, they perceive similar notions about how to behave.²

These common understandings of masculinity constitute a dominant gender identity. This identity requires that men be independent, strong, self-reliant, competitive, achievement oriented, powerful, adventurous, and emotionally restrained.³

This leads to four traditional attitudes about masculinity:

- men should not be feminine (“no sissy stuff”),
- men should strive to be respected for successful achievement (“the big wheel”),
- men should never show weakness (“the sturdy oak”), and
- men should seek adventure and risk (“give ‘em hell”).⁴



This traditional view of being male causes many men to hesitate to seek help from others. For example, some men are taught that masculine power, dominance, competition, and control are essential to proving one's masculinity; that vulnerabilities, feelings, and emotions in men are signs of femininity and are to be avoided; that masculine control of self, others, and environment are essential for men to feel safe, secure, and comfortable; and that men seeking help and support from others is a sign of weakness, vulnerability, and potential incompetence.⁵

Traditional Counseling

Comparing the goals of traditional counseling with the expectations of traditional male socialization illustrates why men are often reluctant to seek help from others. Many traditional approaches to counseling ask that clients develop a sense of self-awareness and share their emotions with a therapist. Yet men appear to be socialized away from self-awareness and encouraged to control (or hide) their feelings. In addition, traditional counseling is designed for people who admit they have problems, but men are generally taught to cope on their own and not admit that they need help. Counselors often ask clients to disclose their vulnerabilities. Men, however, are taught to hide their vulnerabilities to maintain a competitive edge. Finally, counseling requires clients to explore their lives openly with another person, while men are socialized to be in control of their lives, implying that any self-exploration should be done independently and on an intellectual level. It is understandable why men might avoid a process that requires them to consider failure instead of success, cooperation instead of competition, and vulnerability instead of power.⁶

Although these comparisons are not meant to suggest that men have the wrong attitude toward counseling or that traditional counseling assumptions are the "right" way, they do highlight the differences between male socialization and the expectations of many traditional counseling methods.

Barriers to seeking help

Although traditional socialization is a prime cause for men's reluctance to seek help, there are other social or family constraints that also impact their willingness and/or ability to seek help.

Changing Services. During the farm crisis of the 1980s, mental health services and rural churches played a major role in supporting and counseling farmers and ranchers. Some of the mental health programs that were designed to help distressed farm and ranch families at that time are still operating. Today, however, mental health services are less available and accessible than they were in the 1980s. In current state-supported mental health programs, there is an increased focus and priority on serving the serious and persistent mentally ill population with less national, state, and local attention to the types of mental health needs arising from farmers or ranchers in crisis. Furthermore, with today's reimbursement systems, local mental health programs have less flexibility to respond to mental health needs resulting from the farm crisis.⁷

In many instances in the 1980s, ranchers and farmers were provided an entrée to a helping system through the pastor of a church or





through a referral made by the clergy of a friend.⁸ However, with

the decrease in rural populations and the reduced number of individuals involved in religious work in rural areas, the number of rural churches is declining, and hence the availability of this important support for ranchers and farmers is declining as well.

Changing rural lifestyles. Although the rural lifestyle has long been considered an ideal way of life for many, there are subtle changes that are impacting help-seeking among ranchers and farmers:

- fewer ranchers and farmers with more miles between them creates greater isolation,
- a growing global economy affects local prices and creates greater competition and less cooperation among ranchers and farmers,
- urban migration to the country increases the possibility of rural community fragmentation,⁹
- increased use of technology reduces the opportunity and need for social interaction, and
- less national recognition of the plight of agriculture causes a decreased emphasis on providing supportive resources.¹⁰

Family perceptions. For decades ranch and farm families have had less participation than the general public in human service programs. Explanations for this include a conservative, rural ethic that increases the reluctance to seek help, difficulty in gaining access to services, and distrust of helping professionals in general.¹¹ In addition, since men can be reluctant to seek help, they may be responsible for the reticence of an entire family system to seek help.

To find out what would prevent farm families from seeking help from social agencies even if they needed to, researchers Emily Martinez-Brawley and Joan Blundall interviewed Pennsylvania and Iowa farm families. According to Martinez-Brawley and Blundall, farm families' perceptions of obstacles to seeking help included:

- concerns about their reputation in the community,
- lack of understanding about what services do and how they work,
- having grown up with the idea of not seeking help from social agencies,
- lack of money,
- feeling that one must solve one's own problems,
- fear of being perceived as lazy,
- fear of being perceived as mentally ill,
- distrust of helping professionals, and
- pride.¹²

In spite of these and other barriers to seeking help, many men do seek help and benefit from this support.

When men seek help

Because male socialization emphasizes independence, emotional stoicism, and maintaining the upper hand in relationships, men's resistance to seeking help should be anticipated, understood, and respected. Unfortunately, however, this has not always been the case because initial meetings between resistant men and counselors often turn out poorly. This leaves men reaffirmed in their distaste for counseling and the counselors disheartened about men's potential as therapy clients.¹³ However, this does not have to be the case. Mental health professionals who are successful in increasing the likelihood that





men will benefit from seeking personal help employ what is known as the **APPLE principle**:¹⁴

Be Accessible – Successful rural mental health professionals are readily available to ranchers and farmers. They employ toll-free phone numbers and 24-hour hotlines if possible. They are flexible with visits and do not limit them to 50-minute hours or 8 to 5 time slots. They have a visible presence in the community—at meetings, coffee shops, and sporting and school events—where they can get to know producers and develop trust.

Be Personal – Helping professionals accommodate a rancher or farmer on his terms. They are willing to meet around a kitchen table, in a mobile home, or in a barn. Being personal also means working with an entire family if necessary.

Be Professional – A high degree of professionalism is critical to supporting men reluctant to seek help. Effective mental health professionals exercise careful management of personal and professional boundaries in the helping relationship to protect confidentiality and still maintain friendships.

Be Linked – Distressed ranchers or farmers are most likely facing a myriad of personal problems such as financial, legal, health, childcare, and retraining issues. A helping professional needs to be connected with the variety of community services available so that a coordinated effort can be used to support a ranch or farm family and quick access to crisis care can be provided if needed.

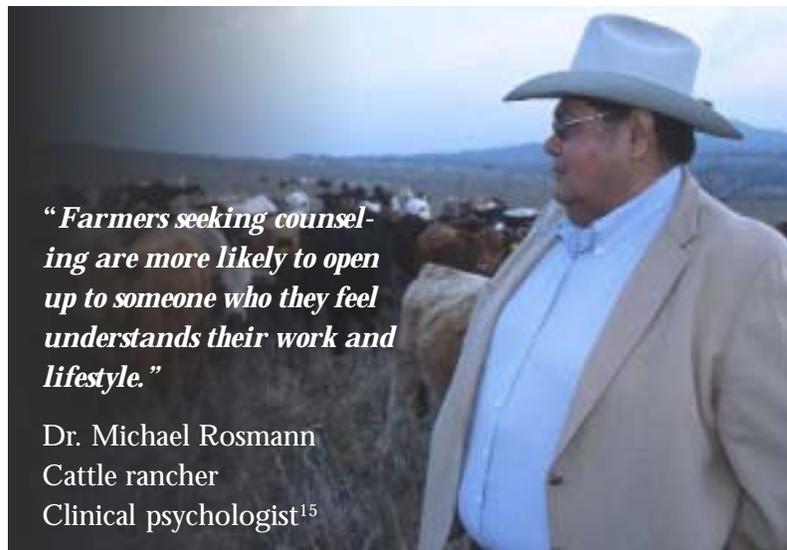
Be Empathetic – Mental health professionals and volunteers who have familiarity with agriculture appear more credible to ranchers and farmers. These mental health

workers are able to talk about things like the small amount of money producers make on hay, wheat, milo, or corn and about how expensive water, fuel, fertilizer, or machinery is.

While the characteristics of helping professionals can enhance a farmer's or rancher's experience with a counselor, certain approaches to counseling can also be beneficial to reluctant males.

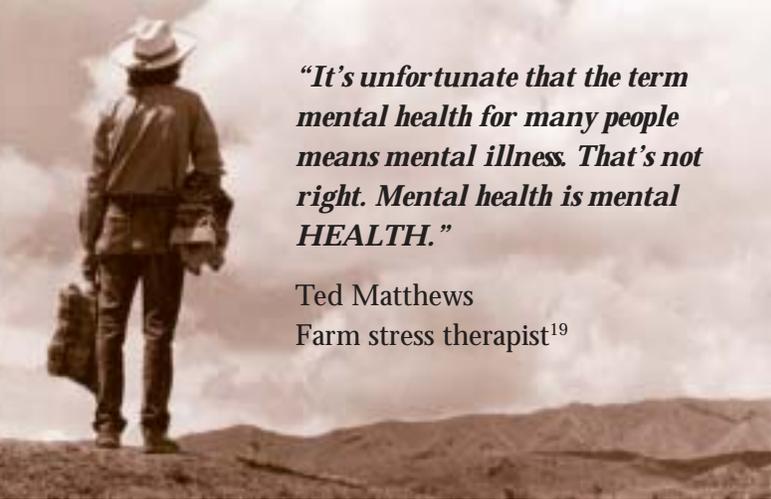
Adopt a cognitive-based, solution-focused counseling approach

Ranchers or farmers endorsing traditional roles of masculinity who may have a stereotypical view of counseling as entirely emotionally focused might be more likely to seek help if they understand that counseling can be successful without an open, emotional style.¹⁶ A cognitive-behavioral approach which emphasizes problem solving, skill building, and personal mastery may be more effective than a counseling approach that emphasizes emotional expression and self-disclosure.¹⁷



“Farmers seeking counseling are more likely to open up to someone who they feel understands their work and lifestyle.”

Dr. Michael Rosmann
Cattle rancher
Clinical psychologist¹⁵



“It’s unfortunate that the term mental health for many people means mental illness. That’s not right. Mental health is mental HEALTH.”

Ted Matthews
Farm stress therapist¹⁹

Minimize mental health jargon

The wide use of mental health terms should be avoided because people in crises do not see themselves as being mentally ill and usually are not.¹⁸

It’s important to speak in terms that ranchers and farmers can relate to. They respond more favorably to words such as workshops, consultation, and personal coaching rather than to the notions of counseling or therapy.²⁰

How men can help themselves

How can ranchers and farmers find out what to look for, expect, or ask for in seeking the services of helping agencies or individuals?

- Ask friends. “Let’s say somebody has a situation in which he.... Who do you know who is good at helping folks solve a problem like that?” If two or three people identify the same professional, great!
- Call the helping professional, introduce yourself, and don’t be afraid to admit skepticism about whether counseling will do any good. Describe the situation and ask, “How much experience have you had with helping ranchers with this kind of situation? What do you advise in such a situation? What do you charge? How do I know you’ll keep what I say confidential?” Ask any other questions that you have.

- React to your gut feeling as you interview each professional. Is this a counselor who can be trusted? If not, call and interview someone else. It’s better to drive 60 miles to talk with a trusted person than to drive five miles and hate the entire experience.²¹

If working with a counselor is uncomfortable, then seek someone else (e.g., friend, pastor, or other trusted individual) who will listen and give some practical help, insight, or support. Or, call an anonymous crisis hotline.

If the cowboy won’t seek help

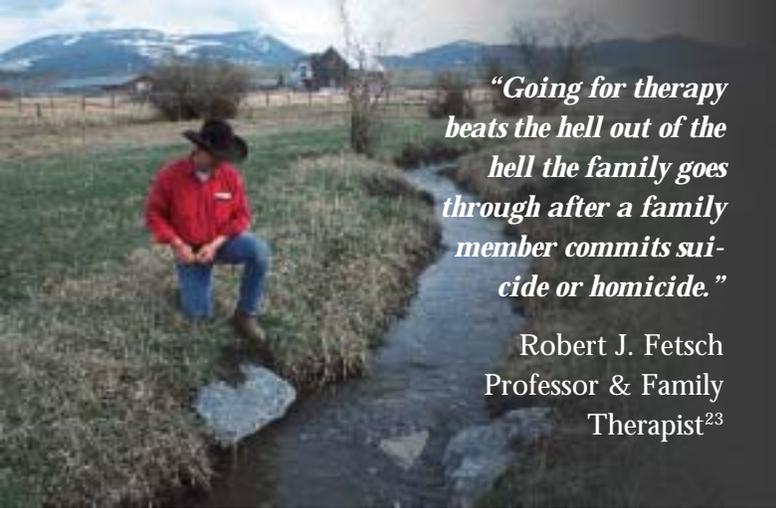
When ranch or farm men are having difficulty dealing with personal challenges, talking with a skilled listener is recommended. This is especially important if personal frustration is likely to lead to aggression or violence. There is strong evidence that ranchers, farmers, and their families benefit from working with a counselor.²²

However, for any of a number of reasons some men will refuse to seek help from others. The alternatives that exist for such men are to:

- change their attitudes about their problems,
- adopt behaviors that minimize the personal consequences of the problems, and
- take proactive steps to gain a sense of control over the problems.

For an in-depth description of alternatives for dealing with agricultural challenges and stress, see the *Agriculture Producers and Stress Series B-1124.1-6* available at www.uwyo.edu/ces/FAMILY/LIFE/LIFE_Main.html.





*“Going for therapy
beats the hell out of the
hell the family goes
through after a family
member commits sui-
cide or homicide.”*

Robert J. Fetsch
Professor & Family
Therapist²³

The bottom line for ranch or farm men is to avoid sweeping problems under the rug, burying them inside, or pretending that they will magically go away on their own because they most likely will not.

In summary

Ranch and farm men are not a homogenous group. They do not respond to challenges and difficulties in identical ways. Rather than suggesting that men need to be more expressive (“Why can’t you be more communicative? Let’s talk about your feelings”), those around them should appreciate the fact that for the most part these men are confident in their own abilities and strengths and will take steps to find solutions to their challenges according to their masculine ideology.²⁴

Trust and **respect** are the two qualities most often cited as what men look for in a helping relationship. Since traditional male socialization makes developing these feelings difficult, finding mutual trust and respect is a welcome relief.²⁵ It provides the opportunity to successfully resolve personal challenges.

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