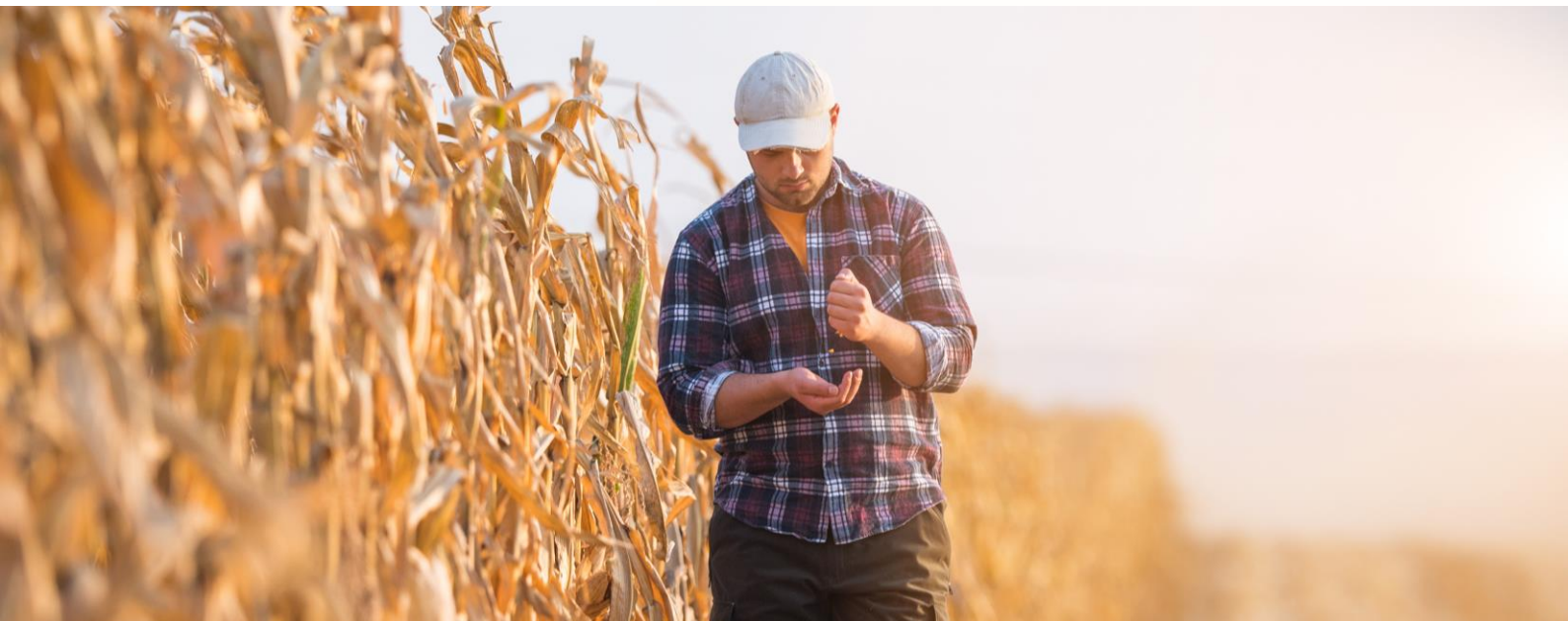




Mental health in agriculture: preventing and managing psychosocial risks for farmers and farm workers

Summary

Authors: Evelyn Donohoe, Francesco Camonita, Valentina Tageo, Camille Guey, Ilana Zejerman, Laura Todaro, Lode Godderis and Anke Boone.

Project management: Michaela Seifert - European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA).

This report was commissioned by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA). Its contents, including any opinions and conclusions expressed, are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of EU-OSHA.

Neither the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work nor any person acting on behalf of the Agency is responsible for the use that might be made of the following information.

© European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2024

Reproduction is authorised, provided the source is acknowledged.

For any use or reproduction of photos or other material that is not under the copyright of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, permission must be sought directly from the copyright holders.

Cover picture: © Dusan Kostic - stock.adobe.com

This report¹ investigates the impact of psychosocial risk exposure for farmers and farm workers using a combination of desk-based research and interviews with key stakeholders from the sector. Good practice examples show the range of prevention and intervention measures that can be implemented to improve the mental wellbeing of farmers and farm workers. Finally, a list of considerations and policy pointers for improving occupational safety and health (OSH) in the agricultural sector are presented based upon the findings.

Psychosocial risks in the agricultural sector are complex

Self-employed farmers form the majority of the agricultural workforce. 93% of the EU farms are family farms where 50% or more of the agricultural labour force is provided by family workers. The workforce of more industrialised farm businesses are farm workers with a high percentage of migrant or seasonal farm workers. Most of the psychosocial risks identified in this study concern both categories with some risks specifically affecting farm workers.

In general, psychosocial risks in agriculture, may emerge from poor working conditions relative to work design, organisation, management and/or the workplace's social context. Psychosocial risks, stress and mental health issues are important challenges facing the sector, as up to half of farmers and farm workers exceed 48-hour weeks. Rates of stress, anxiety, burnout, suicide and depression are high. For example, one in four Irish farmers face burnout, and in France, one farmer suicide takes place every two days. Furthermore, agricultural work is labelled as one of the most hazardous occupations in Europe, with the sector being amongst those with the most fatal accidents in 2021.

Psychosocial risks within agriculture are complex, given the specific characteristics of the sector, such as the seasonal nature of agricultural produce, animal care, the need to be constantly available for work and the general remoteness of farms.

Additional psychosocial risks in the agricultural sector include equipment breakdown, ergonomics, financial instability and insecurity, regulatory pressures, health concerns, and professional status. Risk differs according to farming typology (e.g. dairy farming versus crop production), as some farmers and farm workers are more impacted by chemical exposure and others are more impacted by risks associated with animal husbandry.

Social isolation and inability to rest cause distress

Farming cultures often evoke images of resilient individuals embodying values such as stoicism, strength, and traditional ideologies of masculinity and patriarchy, who persist despite adversity. These cultural narratives have deep roots in the historical and social contexts of agricultural communities, where survival and success depend heavily on hard work, endurance and the ability to withstand challenging conditions.

Difficult working conditions mean workloads are often unrelenting. Added to this, lone working in isolated rural areas and the constant need to be available – cause feelings of loneliness and social isolation, significant factors impacting overall wellbeing. The requirement to be constantly available is a tangible risk to social relationships, can lead to family conflict, and is detrimental to the psychosocial wellbeing of farmers and farm workers. There are limited opportunities for rest and relaxation, a major cause of occupational stress impacting farmers' and farm workers' fatigue levels, leisure time and mental wellness. A lack of infrastructural investment in rural areas and the rise in autonomous, isolated working are exacerbating these risks.

Furthermore, values and behaviours associated with traditional farmer cultures influence help-seeking behaviours and mental health stigma, as masculine stereotypes, stoicism and rural socio-cultural norms (e.g. gender division of labour) are internalised by males and females alike. This may again contribute to farmers and farm workers withdrawing and self-isolating, and farmers' reticence to discuss problems, combined with a tendency to self-isolate, means issues worsen over time. Additionally, farmer prejudice and stigma, associated with public beliefs that farming practices are harmful for animals and the

¹ The full report is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/mental-health-agriculture-preventing-and-managing-psychosocial-risks-farmers-and-farm-workers>

environment, are causing feelings of alienation. According to sector stakeholders, public attitudes are having a profound impact on farmers' and farm workers' feelings of dignity, value, importance, and physical and psychological safety, influencing the decisions of potential newcomers and farmers' children to remain in or enter the sector.

Economic, regulatory and administrative pressures are critical stressors

Financial insecurity contributes to feelings of uncertainty and unpredictability among farmers and farm workers. This risk is more likely to impact farmers than farm workers, as farmers have ultimate responsibility for farm and business survival. In some cases, regulatory compliance, controls of exports, food prices and the receipt of subsidies (e.g. the EU's common agricultural policy) are shaping farmers' livelihoods and the agricultural market. Economic policy, market pressures, credit accessibility, reductions in bargaining power and the inability to control the return on investments lead to adverse mental health outcomes including stress, depression and, in worst-case scenarios, suicide. Fear of financial disaster precipitating business failure and farm loss, pressure to continuously invest to sustain productivity levels, tight profit margins, low incomes and wages, job loss and farm profitability contribute to financial strain. For example, in France, twice as many farming households live below the poverty threshold as the national average.

Economic, environmental and regulatory policies impact farmers' administrative burdens with increasing regulations becoming a significant source of stress. Proper understanding and implementation of these policies are crucial for income stability and farming practices.

Moreover, financial insecurity and regulatory pressures challenge farm succession. Thus, safeguarding against farm loss is a significant concern, particularly for older farmers. Downward pressure on farm owners is contributing to a trend of farm consolidation and business restructuring. However, initial financial gains from larger farming enterprises may eventually lead to more intensive production as farmers need to produce more to survive economically. Additional risks associated with farm consolidation include increased management responsibilities and reduced social support due to rural population decline.

A sector experiencing profound transformation

Transformations in agriculture, influenced by increased capital intensity, digitalisation, climate change, demographic decline and rising demand for organic produce, give rise to additional stressors. The demographic profile of the stereotypical male farmer is changing as farmers and farm workers exit the sector and women and migrants take up vacant roles. Meanwhile, digitalisation is underway, although unevenly spread across the EU. Likewise, converting to organic agriculture is a growing trend associated with increasing demand for organic produce, among other factors. Universal requirements linked with each of these trends, including climate change, involve altering work practices, and making financial investments and upskilling necessary.

Unique stressors are also inherent in each of these trends. Climate change, evident by the increased incidence of prolonged heatwaves, leading to drought, and number of floodings, poses risks to productivity, reduces farming businesses, limits access to essential services, and affects the health of animals, crops, farmers and farm workers. Workloads increase and new tasks (e.g. night-time watering) emerge, further impacting resting time. Mental health outcomes linked to climate change include an increased risk of depression, hopelessness, trauma and solastalgia. Meanwhile, policy measures attempting to counteract the negative effects of climate change increase feelings of stress and uncertainty. Additionally, new technologies increase cognitive workload, result in feelings of monotony and loneliness, trigger concerns about data privacy and security, and cause an overall loss of autonomy and control associated with dependence on external providers for rectifying issues linked to new digital tools.

Amid this backdrop, concern for agriculture's future is leading some farm owners to convert to organic farming. Farm conversion can take up to three years, and stressors encountered during this period can include reduced yields, adapting to stronger ethical accountabilities, financial uncertainty, higher workloads, reorganisation of labour and food production, and scepticism among support networks. These factors can trigger feelings of anxiety, nervousness and incidences of severe stress.

Demographic factors and farming type increase psychosocial risk exposure

Groups more vulnerable to psychosocial risks in agriculture are women, seasonal and migrant workers, and younger and older adults, according to the literature and sector stakeholders. Additionally, belonging to a farming family and engagement in specialised, industrial and conventional agricultural production (e.g. pig farming, dairy production) are associated with higher exposure to psychosocial risks compared to practising diverse or organic farming.

Specific risks for women farm workers are twofold. Firstly, women's role in farming families and the associated social expectations, along with the household burden they bear, can cause role conflict and stress. Meanwhile, the risk of domestic violence in remote, rural locations is an additional vulnerability factor. In conjunction with these stressors, female farmers and farm workers, who make up almost one-third of the workforce, must deal with challenges including land rights and succession planning, professional recognition and inclusion, income inequality, and discrimination to access agriculture-related education, finance and technology. Furthermore, as gender roles evolve, conflict may arise between males and females in the sector, further impacting the mental and emotional health of both groups.

Young and older farmers, as well as farm workers, experience specific psychosocial risks. For example, work experience levels are correlated with coping mechanisms and resilience levels. For younger farmers, specific risks include a lack of farming experience and challenges associated with the continuation of family farming. This latter factor is specifically linked to bureaucratic and legal hurdles. Additionally, farmers' children are exposed to work–family conflicts from an early age and intergenerational conflict associated with farm modernisation may be a contributing factor to family conflicts. Farm succession and income concerns during retirement are also stressors for older farmers, which cause them to work beyond retirement. As such, physiological changes and comorbidities impact older farmers' and farm workers' physical capacity and increase their risk of experiencing an occupational injury, itself a mental health stressor.

Migrant and seasonal farm workers are making up a growing proportion of the agriculture workforce. Challenges experienced by this group of workers include physically, psychologically and/or sexually abusive work and living conditions, liberty restrictions, and irregular, sometimes illegal employment. Rural areas are known to be 'medical deserts'. Thus, limited healthcare combined with legal issues, exacerbated by language and cultural barriers, intensifies the significant impact of these risk factors. Furthermore, episodes of discrimination and racism from the local population and family separation increase the likelihood of distress, worsening stressors associated with loneliness and social isolation. Low-skilled farm workers have higher concerns about workplace conflict and are more vulnerable to psychological violence from employers. Income and job insecurity further impact migrant, seasonal and low-skilled workers' stress levels.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other (LGBTQ+) individuals may also be at heightened risk of developing mental health problems; however, neither the literature nor sectoral stakeholders discussed this factor.

Mental health problems are widespread

Studies indicate a statistically higher occurrence of **suicide** rates in the EU and globally among farmers and farm workers compared to other occupations. In one study 20% of farmers experienced suicidal thoughts. Risk factors for suicide completion include long working hours, financial precarity, poor social relationships, and access to lethal means (e.g. chemicals, medication, guns and ropes). Unforeseen events, such as economic recessions, can increase suicidality, and changes to income subsidies may be an additional stressor for farmers. Equally, prolonged adverse climate events might also contribute to suicide outcomes.

Stress is the most prevalent response to psychosocial stressors, with financial insecurity being the primary driver. Contributing factors are regulatory and administrative pressures, disruptive global issues (e.g. war in Ukraine), safeguarding the farm for future generations and agriculture's unique position in the macroeconomic system. **Fatigue** is consistently associated with negative mental health outcomes, with disturbed sleep patterns increasing the risk of injury and illness; thus, initiatives available in some EU Member States that provide respite and replacement workers are invaluable supports for farmers

and farm workers. Furthermore, social isolation, alienation and a lack of social support significantly exacerbate distress levels. These factors are worsened by public prejudice towards farmers and internalised values in farming cultures, influencing help-seeking behaviours, and where mental health issues arise and distress intensifies, self-isolation can increase. This may further impact help-seeking ability, already influenced by the low availability of community resources and cultural norms in rural areas.

Depression, burnout and anxiety are other prevalent negative mental health outcomes. According to surveys nearly half of interviewed farmers and farm workers showed symptoms of depression, one in four respondents faced burnout and one in five had symptoms of depression. Work–family conflict, legacy issues, high workloads, financial insecurity, task design, a lack of social support, social relations, and pressure from economic and environmental policies contribute to depression and burnout. Women are more likely to be diagnosed with **anxiety disorders** than men, and a plethora of worries regarding health — whether it be the health of animals, plants, farmers or family members — are potent contributors to feelings of anxiety. Other health outcomes linked to psychosocial risks in the agricultural sector included substance misuse, feelings of anger and frustration, and the development of musculoskeletal diseases.

Extrapolating findings on the impact of mental health on farm businesses is challenging as nine out of 10 EU farms are family-owned where at least half of the activities are carried out by farmers, their children, relatives and partners. Most farmers are also employed elsewhere, muddying the waters further. Indeed, literature on organisational outcomes arising from farmers' and farm workers' mental health problems is scarce. From what is available, absenteeism, job turnover and the allocation of disability pensions are indicated as potential negative outcomes threatening business survival, fiscal expenditures and employee turnover rates.

A lack of comprehensive data makes it challenging to quantify the prevalence of psychosocial risks and the extent of other mental health issues in the sector, despite the fact that awareness of the importance of mental health is growing.

Address the sources of risk to protect farmers' and farm workers' mental health

To improve mental health in the sector, addressing the sources of risk — production, organisational, reputational (i.e. public perception of farming practices), financial and human (e.g. stigma) — is paramount. Some countries have already taken steps in this direction via specific policy initiatives and research projects. These countries aim to tackle the sources of risk by providing programmes, public resources and recommendations enhancing mental health outcomes. Most of the good practices identified in this report favoured individual interventions by providing important services such as specialist farmer helplines (e.g. Lebensqualität Bauernhof, Austria), respite programmes (France and Finland), awareness-raising and training about mental health and psychosocial wellbeing at work (e.g. RAPSY, Belgium), and the provision of peer networks (e.g. *Bondekompisar*, Sweden; Agri Woman, Poland). Specific tools at the disposal of farmers and employers include the Farm Safety Foundation's 'Little Book of Minding Your Head', a resource defining different mental health problems, providing practical advice, including a tool for users to identify and cope with stress. Additionally, time-limited EU-funded projects, such as FARMWELL, providing a range of tools for farmers and farm workers across the EU, were also highlighted for their cost-effective interventions.

Protecting farmers' mental health is inherently linked to job satisfaction. Thus, a thriving farm, having a secure succession plan, financial security and income stability, business efficacy and entrepreneurial competency were all found to have a positive effect on mental health outcomes. Equally, making farm improvements, whether by implementing digital tools or converting farm type, mitigates a range of psychosocial risks. This includes improving workloads, increasing autonomy and control, stabilising incomes and reducing costs, and increasing attachment with farms and nature.

Further guidance and research

Tackling psychosocial risks in the agricultural workforce requires political intervention, and the support of intermediary organisations such as farmers' and farm workers' representatives. Considerations that emerged from this study include:

Considerations for farmers and employers

- **Evaluate psychosocial risks** in agriculture and develop action plans addressing those risks by using practical online tools such as the EU agricultural OiRA tool.
- Develop, implement and enforce **workplace OSH policies**, including policies addressing psychosocial risk factors.
- Invest in **OSH training** including modules on psychosocial risk and mental wellbeing.
- **Diversify** farming practices which benefits farm production, farm profits, health and ecological outcomes.
- Ensure **migrant and seasonal workers** are employed according to local laws and regulations and provided with adequate accommodation, support and supervision.

Considerations for sectoral, intermediary organisations and education services

- Develop and maintain solid and **supportive networks**.
- **Promote agriculture's reputation** by enhancing appreciation among citizens to reduce stigma.
- **Train and provide tools** to recognise the signs and symptoms of mental health issues.
- **Develop and promote easy-to-use online risk assessment tools** for farmers and farm workers such as the EU agriculture OiRA tool.
- **Increase mental health awareness** through communication activities by creating group activities and culturally appropriate campaigns.
- **Strengthen resilience, skills and digital literacy** through personalised training and individual career coaching.
- **Address financial security** by supporting farmers to develop comprehensive business management plans.
- Provide tailored support and **assistance with setting up a farm**.
- **Promote gender equality and diversity** via tailored training addressing diversity and inclusion.
- **Integrate migrant workers** via initiatives that include language training and ensure the provision of safe and secure accommodation.

Policy pointers

- Improve **infrastructure and access to healthcare in rural areas**, including domestic violence services.
- Enhance **access to public support programmes** and provide specialised services tailored to agricultural challenges.
- **Enhance cooperation** between national agriculture, occupational health, and health and social care departments.
- Prioritise **reducing elevated suicide rates** and mental health issues within farming communities.
- Address financial insecurity to **guarantee fair pricing for agricultural produce** and farmers' revenues.
- Support **farm inheritance** by providing legal guidance and financial assistance to young farmers to help alleviate succession concerns.
- Establish specially designed **support services for farming women and other groups** (e.g. migrants, young and older farmers and farm workers).
- Create opportunities for **rest and relaxation** through **specific substitute programmes**.
- Support **farm conversions** and the diversification of farming practices and raise awareness of the benefits of non-conventional, organic farming.
- Support **legislative initiatives and programmes** that address regulatory bottlenecks and reduce administrative burdens.

Future research directions

- Collect more comprehensive EU-level data on mental health outcomes in the agricultural sector.
- Close research gaps related to climate change, digitalisation, and specific risks for LGBTQ+ workers, female farmers and non-owner farm workers.

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) contributes to making Europe a safer, healthier and more productive place to work. The Agency researches, develops, and distributes reliable, balanced, and impartial safety and health information and organises pan-European awareness raising campaigns. Set up by the European Union in 1994 and based in Bilbao, Spain, the Agency brings together representatives from the European Commission, Member State governments, employers' and workers' organisations, as well as leading experts in each of the EU Member States and beyond.

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

Santiago de Compostela 12
48003 - Bilbao, Spain
E-mail: information@osha.europa.eu
<http://osha.europa.eu>