



Addressing Mental Health with Agricultural Workers

A tip sheet for Health Care Workers

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices.¹ When addressing mental health services with agricultural workers, it is important to learn about their culture, way of life, and things that impact their mental health like the nature of the work they do.

What causes agricultural workers stress?

Agricultural work is not easy and can cause stress given the nature of the work itself:

- Involves frequent travel/migration
- Long work hours
- Lack of safe and affordable housing
- Exposure to outside weather, animals, toxic plants
- Exposure to chemicals/pesticides
- Lack of sanitation areas/safety precautions
- Vulnerable to labor trafficking
- Lack of work benefits/job security

What are some concerns when talking about mental health?

- **Embarrassment** - Agricultural workers are often hesitant to talk about mental health and may not report symptoms because of embarrassment, which can lead to stress.
- **Fear** - Stigma around mental health exists. Agricultural workers may fear being judged or perceived as “weak” or “crazy” if engaging in mental health support.²
- **Differing cultural beliefs** - Counseling or therapy are not common for this population because of their culture, so agricultural workers may prefer to treat illnesses with homeopathic remedies and cultural practices.
- **Lack of privacy** - Agricultural workers tend to be very private and some prefer to discuss personal, family matters with clergy or members of their faith community.
- **Lack of resources or education** - Agricultural workers may not be able to afford treatment or be familiar with navigating the healthcare system.

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018, Jan. 26). Learn about Mental Health. Retrieved December 11, 2020 from <https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/learn/index.htm>.

2. Grzywacz, J. G. Mental Health Among Farmworkers in the Eastern United States. in *Latino Farmworkers in the Eastern United States* 153–172 (Springer, New York, NY, 2009). doi:10.1007/978-0-387-88347-2_7 Available at: https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-0-387-88347-2_7

Let's talk mental health!

How can I begin to discuss mental health with this population?

- 1. Create a confidential space:** Agricultural workers are often uncomfortable, embarrassed, or fearful of sharing private information. Review how patient health information is kept confidential and normalize talking about mental health by creating a safe space where patients feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The key is to establish trust and a genuine relationship when working with this population.
- 2. Follow their lead:** A patient's physical reaction will tell you a lot about their level of comfort in discussing mental health. When you discuss this topic, pay attention to any changes in their eye contact, physical movements, and/or tone of voice. If they are interested and ask questions, they are ready to talk. If they look away or stop talking, they may need more time to get comfortable with the discussion. Allow them to lead the discussion.
- 3. Begin with the mind and body connection:** Agricultural workers may not be aware that the mind is connected to the body, so talking about nutrition and exercise may be a good place to start addressing mental health. You may even find other stressors that limit an agricultural workers' ability to eat healthy and stay physically active. Be sure to have referrals ready in case they report any issues with food security, basic needs, or express an interest in joining a recreation center or gym. Information about alcohol, drugs, and harmful smoking may also be helpful to keep a healthy body and mind.
- 4. Discuss habits for positive self-care:** Self-care may be a new concept for agricultural workers, but it is important they know that doing positive activities helps them relax and stay healthy. Agricultural workers are very faith filled and family oriented, and often enjoy gatherings with family and friends, listening to music, dancing, cooking, praying, going to church, etc. Encourage them to have fun outside of work and to take time to do positive activities that reduce stress.
- 5. Identify ways to establish or expand a support system:** Agricultural workers find support in people they love and that offer comfort like family, friends, and church members. Discuss the benefits of expanding that support system to include a health care team and Promotores de Salud in the community, who can offer support when experiencing mental health concerns.
- 6. Have them complete a mental health assessment:** If an agricultural worker reports physical symptoms that are hard to manage and affect their daily life, let them know this could be a mental health concern and have them complete a mental health assessment form or screening tool. The results of the assessment will help you determine if a referral is necessary.
- 7. Encourage mental health services:** Mental health providers can explain mental health services and treatment options like medication, counseling, or hospitalization. Aside from offering services at your health center, you can also connect them to a provider in the community through [PsychologyToday](https://www.psychologytoday.com) or [FindHelp.org](https://www.findhelp.org), and offer crisis hotlines that are free, bilingual, confidential, and available 24 hours a day/ 7 days a week.

