

Why Ranchers and Farmers Are Reluctant to Seek Counseling and How Family Practitioners Can Help

Randy R. Weigel

Abstract

Men, especially ranchers and farmers, avoid seeking counseling for personal problems because growing up male is often characterized by an emphasis on independence, competition, emotional restraint, and maintaining the upper hand in relationships. How men are socialized, as well as social, family, and personal barriers, cause many ranchers and farmers to be reluctant to seek help. But family practitioners -- Extension professionals, family therapists, and family service providers -- can provide valuable support to the ranchers and farmers who need their help. Drought, commodity prices, stock market, and other agricultural issues increase stress for agricultural producers. Financial pressure can place individuals at greater risk for depression, anger, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide. These conditions may increase the need to seek help in dealing with the impacts of these situations. But, because growing up male is often characterized by an emphasis on independence, competition, emotional restraint, and maintaining the upper hand in relationships, many ranchers and farmers are reluctant to seek help, especially counseling. Why do some men find it difficult and even refuse to seek help for personal challenges? How can others help?

These questions are explored by looking at how men's upbringing makes seeking help a challenge; social, family, and personal barriers to seeking help; and how family practitioners can provide needed support. This article is not meant to ignore the needs of female ranchers and farmers under stress, but addresses the needs of men who are far less likely to seek mental health counseling and four times more likely to commit suicide (Weigel 2001).

Male socialization

Learning what it means to be "male" or "female" is one of the most difficult and complex lessons in life (Brannon 1985). 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 (Harris 1995). These common understandings of masculinity constitute a dominant gender identity. This identity 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") (Brannon 1985).

This traditional view of being male causes many men to hesitate to seek help from others. For example, 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 (Robertson and Fitzgerald 1992).

Barriers to seeking help

Although traditional socialization is a prime cause for ranchers' and farmers' reluctance to seek help, there are other social, family, and personal constraints that 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. For state-supported mental health programs today, 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 (Beeson 1999).

Likewise, 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 (Heffernan 1999). 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;
- 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 (Reese 2002).

Family perception

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. In addition, since men more often head these families and because they can be reluctant to seek help, they may be responsible for the reticence of the 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, Martinez-Brawley and Blundall (1989) interviewed Pennsylvania and Iowa farm families. They reported 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.

Male approach to counseling

Comparing the goals of traditional counseling with the expectations of traditional male socialization also illustrates why men are often reluctant to seek help from others. For example, 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 (Robertson and Fitzgerald 1992).

In spite of these and other barriers to seeking help, many ranchers and farmers do seek help and benefit from the support of others.

How family practitioners can help

Beeson (1999) suggests that family practitioners who are successful in increasing the likelihood that ranchers and farmers will benefit from seeking personal help employ what he calls the **APPLE principle**.

- *Be Accessible.* Successful family practitioners 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.* Family practitioners 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 family practitioners 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.* Family practitioners and volunteers who have a familiarity with agriculture appear more credible to ranchers and farmers. These mental health workers are able to talk about how little producers make on hay, wheat, milo, or corn, and about the high cost of water, fuel, fertilizer, or machinery.

When ranch or farm men are having difficulty dealing with personal challenges, talking with a skilled listener is highly recommended. There is strong evidence that ranchers, farmers, and their families benefit from working with a counselor (Fetsch and Zimmerman 1999). Family practitioners can give important advice to ranchers and farmers on what to look for, expect, or ask for in seeking the services of helping agencies or individuals. Some examples of that type of advice follow:

- 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 that 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 5 miles and hate the entire experience (Fetsch 2002).

If working with a counselor is uncomfortable for the rancher, farmer, or family, suggest seeking someone else (e.g., a friend, pastor, or other trusted individual) who will listen and give practical help, insight, or support. Or, suggest calling an anonymous crisis hot line.

Finally, ranchers or farmers endorsing more 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 consistent with a less open emotional style (Wische et al. 1995). Suggesting 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 (Cook and Heppner 1997).

In summary

Whether providing direct counseling, facilitating client referrals, or delivering educational programs, the family practitioner's attitude can enhance the willingness of reluctant ranchers and farmers to seek help for personal problems. What appears most helpful in supporting these men is that family practitioners:

- 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 (Hargrove 1986).
- 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 (Fetsch and Zimmerman 1999).
- Create an atmosphere of trust and respect. Since traditional male socialization makes developing these feelings difficult, finding mutual trust and respect is a welcome relief (Garfinkel 1985).

- Realize that most ranchers and farmers are confident in their ability to find solutions for their problems. Involve them in solving their own problems and encourage decisions that are best for them (Bosch and Griffin 2002).
- Know that ranching and farming is not just an occupation or job. For many men, being a rancher or farmer is a very complex psychological, sociological, and some would say, spiritual connection. Ranching and farming is a way of life, a profession, a covenant with the land, and a commitment to the future (Beeson 1999).

Perhaps the most important message family practitioners can convey to ranchers and farmers reluctant to seek help 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.

References

Beeson, Peter G. 1999. Farm crisis and mental health summit: A summary of findings. In *Party-line*, ed. Peter G. Beeson, 28-29. St. Cloud: National Association for Rural Mental Health.

Bosch, Kathy, and Charlie Griffin. 2002. *Weathering tough times: Responding to farmers, ranchers and rural business persons*. University of Nebraska West Central Research and Extension Center, North Platte. On-line: http://www.panhandle.unl.edu/tough_times/2 (retrieved October 2002).

Brannon, Robert. 1985. Dimensions of the male sex role in America. In *Beyond Sex Roles*, ed. Alice G. Sargent, 296-316. St. Paul: West Publishing Company.

Cook, Stephen W., and P. Paul Heppner. 1997. Coping, control, problem-solving appraisal, and depression symptoms during a farm crisis. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* 19(1):64-75.

Fetsch, Robert J. 2002. "Cowboys" personal e-mail, 8 March.

Fetsch, Robert J., and Toni S. Zimmerman. 1999. Marriage and family consultation with ranch and farm families: An empirical family case study. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 25:485-501.

Garfinkle, Perry. 1985. *In a man's world: Father, son, brother, friend, and other roles men play*. New York: New American Library.

Hargrove, David S. 1986. Rural community psychology and the farm foreclosure crisis. *Journal of Rural Community Psychology* 7(2):16-26.

Harris, Ian M. 1995. *Messages men hear: Constructing masculinity*. Bristol: Taylor and Francis, Inc.

Heffernan, Judith B. 1999. Mental health and ministry: The vital connection. In *Party-line*, ed. Peter G. Beeson, 16-18. St. Cloud: National Association for Rural Mental Health.

Martinez-Brawley, Emilia E., and Joan Blundall. 1989. Farm families' preferences toward the personal social services. *Social Work* 34(6):513-522.

Reese, Peter. 2002. Whatever it takes. *Successful Farming* 100(7):18-22.

Robertson, John M., and Louise F. Fitzgerald. 1992. Overcoming the masculine mystique: Preferences for alternative forms of assistance among men who avoid counseling. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 39(2):240-246.

Weigel, Randolph R. 2001. *The personal nature of agriculture: Men and depression* (B-1104). Laramie: University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service.

Wische, Andrew E., James R. Mahalik, Jeffrey A. Hayes, and Elizabeth A. Nutt. 1995. The impact of gender role conflict and counseling technique on psychological help seeking in men. *Sex Roles* 33(1-2):77-89.

Author

Randy R. Weigel, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Extension Specialist, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Wyoming

Cite this article:

Weigel, Randy. 2003. Why ranchers and farmers are reluctant to seek counseling and how family practitioners can help. *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues* 8(2).