

Growing Sober: Exploration of Negative and Positive Factors Influencing Stakeholders in Rural Communities

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Introduction/Need for Research

Stress in society is a growing concern. According to a recent study conducted by the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, seven out of ten adults in the United States say they experience stress or anxiety daily. Stress has been defined by Greenberg (1984), as “the physical, mental, or emotional reaction resulting from an individual’s response to environmental tensions, conflicts, pressures, and other stimuli.” Occupational stress is becoming a growing trend among all populations, including rural/farming communities (Lawver & Smith, 2014). In previous studies, rural teaching and farming stress levels are higher than the average working American (Lawver & Smith, 2014; Chen & Stallones, 2011). Although Flinn and Johnson (1974), stated that the rural life is healthy one, Chen and Stallones (2011) noted rural communities may face unpredictable and uncontrollable stressors. Rural Healthy People 2020 (Bolin, n.d.), reported that mental health and mental disorders were among the top three concerns of those working in rural communities.

As society continues to see an increase in mental health instability, some research turns to proactive approaches, such as methods of coping with stress (Aldao, Nolen, Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2009; Compas et al., 2014). As people encounter stress, they interact with the stressful environment and employ coping mechanisms to manage stress to lessen the impacts of the stress physically, mentally, and well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The literature on coping styles has largely been conducted within the United States; there is virtually no research focused on rural pre-service agriculture teachers and farmers in the United States. A comprehensive search into the coping mechanisms employed by rural/farming communities yielded few results, this indicates minimal research on the topic. This suggests steps must be taken to address the occupational stress among rural/farming communities.

In order for Universities to prepare pre-service teachers for their careers and to influence rural/farming communities it is important to understand the specific needs of these communities, it is important to understand what factors are affecting the rural pre-service teachers and the farmers. The methods used for coping in a stressful situation may be causing the increase of mental health illnesses, depending on if they use positive or negative coping method (Dunkley, Lawkowski, Lee, Preacher, 2017). Coping strategies, including efforts to regulate emotions in response to stress, have been identified as a key mechanism linking perceived stress and stressful life events to the development of mental health problems (Aldao, Nolen, Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2009; Compas et al., 2014).

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

Resiliency Theory, a strength-based approach to adolescence health, guided this study. Resiliency theory supplies the scaffolding for studying and understanding why some youth grow up to be healthy adults in spite of risks exposure (Garmezy, 1991; Masten, Cultuli Herbers & Reed, 2007). Resiliency focuses on individual variables that could potentially disrupt adolescence development from risk of problem behaviors, mental distress and poor health outcomes. Applying a resiliency lens to examine the coping methods in rural communities

provides an opportunity to consider how we can study systematically adolescent health using a strengths-based approach (Zimmerman, 2013).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the positive and negative coping mechanisms used by farmers and rural pre-service teachers in the event of handling occupational stress through quantitative methods. Using a convenient sample, farmers and rural pre-service teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire that sought to identify positive and negative stress-reliving (coping) approaches. The questionnaire was guided by literature on coping and stress-reliving techniques.

A questionnaire was administered to 188 participants including farmers (N=112) and pre-service agricultural teachers (N=76) who were in different stages of their careers. The convenient sample composition ranged in age of 18-81 and from rural (81%), urban (1%), and suburban (18%) communities. The questionnaire asked the participants if they, family member, or a friend have ever been diagnosed with depression, and if they had ever attempted or considered committing suicide. Participants were then asked to identify the positive (N = 14) and negative (N = 11) coping mechanisms they use to handle stressful situations, as identified by clinical psychologists (Dunkley, Lawkowski, Lee, Preacher, 2017).

Results/Findings

The results show that 63% reported to have been diagnosed with depression or have a friend or family member who has been diagnosed with depression. Of the responses, 12% reported to have a family member or a friend who has attempted or committed suicide. Of those who have attempted or committed suicide, less than 1% reported the depression or suicide attempt related to economic stress on a farm including financial issues, crop crises, and family problems.

Of the coping methods considered all were selected by participants; however, of the positive coping mechanisms, the following were identified as the mostly used: alone time (82%), sleeping (72%), listening to music (72%), spending time with pets (65%), hobbies (62%), and physical activity (50%). The participants identified eating unhealthy foods (63%), ignoring hurt feelings (57%), avoiding the problem (33%), denial (27%), excessive working (22%), and excessive alcohol (17%) as the most practiced negative coping mechanisms.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

Additional findings suggest that the majority of the farmers and rural pre-service teachers utilize a positive coping mechanism when experiencing a stressful situation. Unfortunately, every participant identified at least one negative coping mechanism, which increases the threat of risk exposures (Blanco et al., 2018). Preliminary data encourages the need for additional studies and discussion, which could lead to positive facilitation of stress reduction and proper stress management workshops among rural communities, especially for farm families and rural teachers. Teacher educators at this southern university are encouraged to lead discussion and facilitate lessons and workshops on work/life balance and proper stress management.

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