



## Farm Safety, Health, and Wellness Resource: Mental Health Case Studies

### The Montel Family: An Intergenerational Farm

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These case studies are tools to help extension agents and other health care professionals identify common stressors among the farming community. Our case studies aim to bring awareness to problems Virginia farmers face and to promote appropriate problem-solving in coping with mental health issues. We hope the farming community will utilize these tools to build their knowledge about mental health and the mental health resources available to them. Our goal is to educate farmers, farm families, and extension professionals about farm stress and mental health resources in order to improve mental health within the farming community. We have incorporated discussion questions throughout the case studies to allow readers to practice applying their knowledge of stressors, symptoms, appropriate referrals and treatment strategies.

### Instructions

Read the case study thoroughly. When you get to a superscript in the passage, refer to the corresponding discussion questions located on the right side of the page. Take a few minutes to think about the question and answer it thoughtfully. We suggest you write down your answers and/or discuss them with peers. After you feel that each question has been appropriately addressed, continue reading the case study until you reach another superscript and repeat the processes explained above. For further reflection on the questions, you may refer to our discussion at the end of the case study. The discussion is oriented to address key topics and is by no means an exhaustive list of all the possible answers.



## The Montel Family: An Intergenerational Farm

In 1974, Jack Montel purchased a row crop farm in Hanover County, Virginia. He had worked on a farm all his life and wanted nothing more than to own his own farm. Jack was a Black man, which made the purchase very controversial during this time. Jack worked endlessly to expand the acreage for the farm and gain the respect of local farmers and consumers. After about a decade of running the farm and building its reputation, Jack died and the farm passed down to his adult son Bo. Bo had worked on his father's farm his whole life and, since inheriting the farm, has made it a point to uphold the farm's good reputation in the community. Now that Bo is older, he believes it is time to pass this prized possession to his son Carl. Carl is a 27-year-old who has helped his dad with the farm since he was a young boy. He knows all the ins and outs of the family farm and how hard his family has worked to maintain the farm's good reputation over the years despite difficult circumstances related to racism and bigotry.<sup>1</sup>

Carl has been in charge of the farm for a few months now. He is beginning to feel the stresses of being a farm owner. Recently the county has been in a drought which has resulted in lower-than-usual production for the Montel Farm. With the corn and soy harvesting periods coming to an end, Carl realizes he hasn't made the profit that some of his neighboring farmers have made this season due to some of his production management choices, as well as to soil properties and other factors that are beyond his control.<sup>2</sup>

### 1 Discussion:

1. What internal and external stressors or pressures might Carl be experiencing?
2. What are some emotions Carl may be experiencing?
3. What are some ways Carl could cope with these feelings or manage these stressors to ensure the best outcome for the farm, himself, and his family?

### Discussion2:

4. How does Carl feel right now? What resources could be utilized to address how Carl is feeling?
5. What personal, social, and financial assets or resources might Carl draw upon for help and support?
6. What options could Carl consider to help himself cope with the guilt and stress of having made less profit than nearby farms?

Although Carl is anxious about how to proceed with the next year's crop, he won't ask his father Bo for advice. Carl does not want to burden his family members with the stresses of farm operations or be judged by his father for not being as profitable as his neighbors. As a result, he harbors all of his stress, anxiety and worry to himself. Carl has also found it is easier to avoid the topic of the farm with his family if he distances himself from them. Carl has stopped going to his parents' house for weekly family dinners and always hurries off the phone when someone calls him.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Discussion:

7. What are some concerning behaviors that Carl is demonstrating?
8. If you visited the Montel farm as a service provider, what questions might you ask Carl to gain insight and information in to his state of mind? What resources might you direct him to?

## **Discussion**

The discussion section is oriented to address key topics and is by no means an exhaustive list of all the possible answers or issues. It is intended to encourage individual and group reflection and guide discussion.

### **The Montel Family: An Intergenerational Farm**

#### **Stressors**

Carl undoubtedly experiences the stressors and pressures that all farmers face in managing the farm in a changing climate and unpredictable economy. These stressors and pressures are aggravated during periods of drought and economic insecurity due to underperformance of crops. For Carl, the legacy, reputation and pride associated with his family's multi-generational farm and his father's continued emotional and physical proximity to the farm likely add to the typical stresses that any farmer faces. Carl is probably grateful to his father for passing the farm along to him and entrusting him with the responsibility of running the farm. It's also possible that he harbors some resentment at this new responsibility and the pressure associated with farm management. He may also feel jealous of his neighbors' success despite the drought, especially if their successes are due to soil conditions or other factors that are beyond Carl's control.

#### **Implications**

Carl feels eager to impress his father and produce a crop that is consistent with the farm's reputation. He likely worries that as a new principal operator, he may fall short of his goals and the expectations of his father. The drought and associated underperformance of the crops have made this worry more immediate and acute. He is likely disappointed in himself for making management choices that have resulted in lower production than neighboring farms achieved. The underperformance of his crops may also make Carl feel doubtful and less confident in his ability to run the farm. Doubt and lack of confidence may contribute to poor decision-making, as second-guessing and hesitation can cloud judgement and stall important decisions, potentially making a precarious mental health or financial situation worse. Further, declining self-confidence and mental health may make the stakes feel higher and the options feel narrower. Carl needs to be connected with the assets and resources available to him to ease the stress and pressure that may feel overwhelming.

#### **Indicators of declining mental health**

Due to the stress and pressure he feels, Carl exhibits several indicators of declining mental health. These include his reluctance to rely on his family and support network, his unwillingness to reach out for help, and his increasing social isolation. These indicate all-or-nothing thinking on Carl's part where reaching out and asking for support could be experienced as failure. Carl's all-or-nothing thinking is resulting in him keeping the stress and pressures he feels to himself, whereas if he were to reach out for support, his family and social network would likely be glad to help him shoulder these burdens, explore new strategies and options that Carl hasn't considered due to clouded judgement. Social connection would likely help Carl move forward.

## Strategies

Though Carl may feel isolated, alone, and with few options, there are several personal, social and financial assets and resources available to Carl that could support him during this time. An agricultural service provider could be instrumental in helping him identify and access these assets and resources. First, Carl has a lifetime of experience working on the farm and his knowledge and confidence are key personal assets that may be wielded to help him change his own outlook and incorporate strategic decision-making on the farm to improve farm viability. In reframing his thinking, he may also improve his mental health. An extension agent specializing in crop production, farm business management, or farm transfer may be able to offer guidance to Carl in this process.

Next, Carl has family close by, and, having grown up on the farm he now manages, it is likely that Carl has a large social network close by and that those comprising this network are rooting for Carl's success. He may also have a local faith community that he could rely on for support. Reaching out to family members and friends for support is a powerful way to reframe thinking and reverse negative thought patterns, get reassurance and support in making difficult decisions, rebuild confidence, and, in so doing, improve mental health. A service provider could encourage Carl to rely on these resources, and may also refer Carl to the broader agricultural community for support. This could include a suggestion that he reach out to other local farmers or that he engage in online forums to discuss his experience and gain insight.

An occupational therapist, counselor, psychologist or psychiatrist may also be able to offer support to Carl. An extension agent could suggest that Carl discuss the stress and pressure he feels with his primary care physician who can make an appropriate referral.

Last, there are a few financial resources available to Carl. Even if he does not take advantage of them at this time, knowledge of their existence may help Carl see the safety net that exists for him, lessening the perception of high stakes and the associated all-or-nothing thinking. Family members, his social network, the local agricultural community, as well as non-profit organizations that support new farmers or farmers of color all hope to see Carl succeed and may be able to provide loans or fundraising support to help ensure the legacy of the Montel Farm and ease the pressure Carl is feeling. Additionally, an extension agent could refer Carl to an FSA loan officer who could help Carl discuss his options and think creatively to make sure the farm continues to be viable.

## **Resources for Additional Assistance**

1. **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-TALK (8255)  
Available 24/7 to anyone in emotional distress or at risk for suicide
2. **Crisis Text Line:** Text "CONNECT" to 741741  
Available 24/7 to provide crisis intervention via mobile messaging
3. **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI):** [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)  
NAMI provides free classes and webinars for individuals who have family members experiencing a mental illness. The organization also provides support groups for individuals who may be struggling with negative thoughts, actions, or specific diagnoses. Information on diagnoses, symptoms, medications, and treatments are available on the website, as well.
4. **Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services:**  
[www.dbhds.virginia.gov](http://www.dbhds.virginia.gov)
5. **Mental Health America (MHA):** [www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/searchMHA](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/searchMHA)  
MHA provides information on diagnoses, symptoms, treatments, payment help, and referrals. Users can find their local MHA office through the website. Also, screenings are available via the website to use with individuals and then decide on appropriate referrals for future assistance.
6. **Virginia AgrAbility:** [www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/AEE/AEE-150/AEE-150.html](http://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/AEE/AEE-150/AEE-150.html)  
Virginia AgrAbility's website provides a PDF document discussing what stress is and the other diagnoses it can lead to, how to recognize these, why mental health is important, and additional resources on where to turn.

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