



Connectedness as a Response to Address Farmer Mental Health Challenges

Farming Impacts Mental Health

In Hawai'i, the mental health needs of farmers, especially young farmers, have often been overlooked. The farming community plays a crucial role in ensuring food security and environmental sustainability, yet many face significant emotional and psychological challenges. These challenges threaten not only individual well-being but also the future of our agricultural sector, as farmers may exit the profession due to mental distress. Older farmers also encounter unique mental health issues that necessitate attention, underscoring the importance of creating a supportive environment for all ecosystems.

Seeds of Wellbeing: SOWing Support

The CTAHR-Seeds of Wellbeing (SOW) initiative was launched in response to this critical issue. SOW established an agricultural network and employed a peer and ag navigator model that aims to cultivate connectedness among farmers. According to the 2023 U.S. Surgeon General's report on the loneliness epidemic, fostering connections is essential for addressing mental health challenges.

The SOW program has successfully trained 62 peer mentors to be equipped to support their fellow farmers by providing resources, sharing coping strategies, and promoting overall mental wellness. SOW has also raised public awareness about the various issues/stressors related to farming through the SOW podcast, with more than 50 podcasts reaching 16 countries through more than 5,100 downloads.

Educational resources also include online modules and magazine versions of Cool Mind, Main Thing, a stress management resource, available in seven languages and disseminated to more than 500 famers/allied producers. Our work has been highlighted on various media channels including Honolulu Civil Beat, Hawai'i Public Radio, Honolulu Star-Advertiser, KHON2, and Hawaii News Now.



Impacts and Outcomes

By prioritizing mental health, we are fostering not only resilience among farmers but also building community capacity for connectedness and cohesion. The trained peer mentors have initiated over 100 individual support sessions in the past year, increasing awareness and reducing stigma associated with mental health issues within the farming community.

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When mental health is addressed early, it significantly cuts down on the need for more intensive—and costly—interventions. Most notably, for each suicide that is prevented, this impacts 135 other individuals, resulting in a rippling preventative positive impact in the community (Cerel 2018). Hence, for the sustainability and vitality of Hawai'i agriculture, preventing the premature exit of farmers from the industry save costs on workforce development and ensure farmer's livelihood and ability to feed our communities.

These efforts have garnered attention from the mental health field with SOW receiving the Outstanding Community Mental Health Leader award by the Mental Health America Hawai'i (the oldest mental health organization in Hawaii) in May 2024 and was featured by Safe States Alliance and Hawai'i State Department of Health. SOW is continuing with funding from the Department of Health & Human Services, \$600,000/year over 4-years of noncompetitive renewal.



Reference

Cerel J, MM Brown, M Maple, M Singleton, J van de Venne, M Moore, and C Flaherty. 2019. How Many People Are Exposed to Suicide? Not Six. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 49(2):529-534. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/sltb.12450>



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