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Original Article**The Silent Crisis in Indian Agriculture: Importance of Farmers' Mental Health****Sruthik D Kulkundi^{1*}, Vikash kumar², Paritosh Kumar³ and Rakesh Choudhary⁴**¹MSc. Research Scholar, Dairy Extension Division, ICAR- National Dairy Research Institute, Karnal²MSc. Research Scholar, Dairy Extension Division, ICAR- National Dairy Research Institute, Karnal³Senior Research Fellow, Joint Directorate of Extension Education, ICAR- Indian Veterinary Research Institute (IVRI), Bareilly⁴Teaching Associate, Department of Dairy Trade and Dairy Business Management, College of Dairy and Food Technology, Bassi, Jaipur*Corresponding author: sruthikkulkundi@gmail.com

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"Farmer mental health in India is like the roots of a crop—while everyone focuses on the visible harvest above the ground, the hidden roots that sustain it are often ignored. But when the roots weaken, the entire crop eventually suffers."

ABSTRACT

Farmers form the backbone of India's food security and rural economy, yet their mental health remains one of the most neglected dimensions of agricultural sustainability. Increasing exposure to climate variability, financial instability, rising input costs, indebtedness, and market uncertainties has placed significant psychological pressure on farming communities. These stressors have contributed to growing mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, chronic stress, and in severe cases, farmer suicides, which continue to reflect the human cost of agrarian distress. This article examines the major farm-related and socio-economic factors influencing farmer mental health and highlights the direct relationship between psychological well-being and agricultural productivity, decision-making, and food security. It also reviews existing government initiatives such as PM-KISAN, PMFBY, NMHP, DMHP, and Tele-MANAS, while identifying critical gaps, particularly the lack of farmer-specific mental health support systems and awareness programmes. The paper argues that addressing farmer mental health requires an integrated approach combining financial risk reduction, accessible rural mental healthcare, awareness initiatives, and policy-level interventions. Strengthening farmer mental well-being is not only a social and public health necessity but also a strategic investment in agricultural resilience, rural stability, and the long-term sustainability of India's food systems

Keywords: Farmer mental health, Agrarian distress, Farmer suicides, Agricultural productivity, Rural healthcare, Mental health policy, India

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture remains the backbone of the Indian economy, supporting nearly 58% of the population for their livelihood and contributing significantly to national food security and rural development (Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare, 2021). Despite its critical role, one of the most overlooked issues in Indian agriculture is the mental health of farmers. Farmers face numerous challenges such as climate uncertainty, frequent crop failures, financial instability, rising input costs, volatile market prices, and increasing social pressures, all of which place considerable strain on their psychological well-being (Gururaj et al., 2016; World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). These combined stressors make farmers one of the most vulnerable occupational groups to mental health disorders. Mental health is not only essential for the personal well-being of farmers but also plays a crucial role in agricultural productivity, influencing decision-making capacity, adoption of improved technologies, and the long-term sustainability of farming systems (Bharati et al., 2022)

Understanding Mental Health

Mental health refers to a state of well-being in which individuals are able to cope with normal life stresses, work productively, and contribute meaningfully to their communities (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). It encompasses emotional stability, psychological resilience, and the ability to maintain healthy social functioning. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, mental well-being is closely linked to the fulfilment of basic human needs such as food security, safety, social belonging, and self-esteem (Maslow, 1968). When these fundamental needs are threatened—as is often the case in agriculture due to income uncertainty, environmental risks, and financial instability—farmers become increasingly vulnerable to psychological distress, anxiety, and depression. This highlights the strong connection between economic stability and mental health, particularly in vulnerable occupational groups such as farmers

Mental Health: A Growing Public Health Concern

Mental health disorders are among the leading causes of disability worldwide, with approximately 970 million people affected globally, particularly by depression and anxiety (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). These conditions also create a significant economic burden, with depression and anxiety alone leading to the loss of nearly 12 billion workdays annually and costing the global economy about \$1 trillion in lost productivity (WHO, 2021). In India, mental health disorders affect nearly 10.6% of the adult population, with an estimated 150 million people requiring mental healthcare services (Gururaj et al., 2016). Despite this high burden, a major treatment gap exists, with nearly 70–80% of affected individuals not receiving adequate care due to stigma, lack of awareness, and limited healthcare infrastructure (NIMHANS, 2016). Government reports also highlight shortages of trained mental health professionals, although efforts are being made to improve access through digital platforms and community-based services (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2024). In response, India has strengthened its mental health policy framework through initiatives such as the National Mental Health Programme (NMHP), the District Mental Health Programme (DMHP), and the Tele-MANAS tele-mental health helpline, which aim to expand counselling and treatment services across more than 700 districts (PIB, 2024). However, despite these improvements, access to mental healthcare remains limited in rural areas, particularly among farming communities, highlighting the need for more targeted mental health interventions

Common Mental Health Disorders Among Farmers

Farmers commonly experience several mental health disorders including:

Depression: Characterised by persistent sadness and loss of interest, often associated with financial stress and crop failures (Nayak et al., 2021).

Anxiety disorders: Caused by uncertainty regarding weather, pest outbreaks, and income stability (Singh et al., 2020).

Chronic stress: Continuous exposure to occupational and financial stress leads to burnout (Jha & Saha, 2023).

Substance abuse: Some farmers resort to alcohol or drugs as coping mechanisms, which worsens mental health outcomes (Rai et al., 2020).

Farm and Non-Farm Factors Affecting Farmers' Mental Health

| Farm-related factors | Non-farm related factors |
|---|--|
| Crop failure due to droughts, floods and climate variability (Farmers' Suicides in India, 2024) | Family stress and social responsibilities (Dongre & Deshmukh, 2012) |
| High indebtedness due to farm investments (Behere & Behere, 2008) | Alcoholism and coping behaviours (Dongre & Deshmukh, 2012) |
| Rising cost of cultivation inputs (Dongre & Deshmukh, 2012) | Lack of alternative income sources (TISS Report, 2005) |
| Low returns from agricultural produce (Dongre & Deshmukh, 2012) | Lack of counselling and mental health services (Saraswat et al., 2021) |
| Small and marginal landholdings (University of Cambridge study, 2014) | Mental health stigma in rural communities (Kumar et al., 2021) |
| Risks associated with cash crop cultivation (University of Cambridge study, 2014) | Lack of mental health awareness (Rao & Reddy, 2021) |
| Dependence on private money lenders (Dongre & Deshmukh, 2012) | Poor access to rural healthcare facilities (Bansal et al., 2022) |
| Lack of agricultural support systems (TISS Report, 2005) | Policy gaps and inadequate farmer safety nets (Farmers' Suicides in India, 2024) |

The evidence suggests that farmer distress is caused by both agricultural production risks and broader socio-economic challenges. Studies indicate that financial indebtedness, crop failures, and lack of institutional support are among the strongest contributors to farmer vulnerability, while social stress, healthcare access issues, and lack of awareness further aggravate mental health risks (Behere & Behere, 2008; Dongre & Deshmukh, 2012; Farmers' Suicides in India, 2024).

Farmer Suicides: A Growing Indicator of Agrarian Distress in India

"Farmer suicides are not just statistics; they represent the human cost of agricultural distress."

Farmer suicides represent one of the most serious consequences of agrarian distress and poor mental health in India. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2023), over 10,000 farmers and agricultural labourers die by suicide annually, highlighting the severity of challenges such as financial indebtedness, crop failures, unstable market prices, and lack of institutional support. Research has identified debt burden and economic decline as major contributors, with studies showing that indebtedness was present in a large proportion of farmer suicide cases (Behere & Behere, 2008). In addition to financial stress, psychological factors such as chronic stress, depression, and social pressures further increase the vulnerability of farmers. The inability to recover from repeated crop losses and financial setbacks often leads to feelings of hopelessness and distress, demonstrating that farmer suicides reflect not only economic hardship but also serious mental health concerns (WHO, 2021). Statistical trends further highlight the magnitude of the problem. NCRB data shows that 13,755 farmers died by suicide in 2012, accounting for about 11.2% of total suicides, while 15,963 farmer suicides were reported in 2010 and 14,027 in 2011, indicating persistent agrarian distress (NCRB, 2010; NCRB, 2013). Between 1995 and 2013, nearly 296,438 farmers died by suicide, demonstrating the long-term nature of the crisis (Farmers' Suicides in India, 2024). The burden is also geographically concentrated, with five states—Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, and Kerala—accounting for nearly 76% of farmer suicides, and Maharashtra alone reporting 3,786 cases in 2012, nearly one-fourth of the national total. Studies further indicate that the farmer suicide rate (12.9 per 100,000 farmers) exceeded the general suicide rate (10.6 per 100,000 population), highlighting the higher vulnerability of farming communities (Patel et al., 2012).

These statistics clearly demonstrate that farmer suicides are not only a social tragedy but also a critical agricultural and public health issue, requiring a holistic approach that combines financial security measures, agricultural risk reduction strategies, improved mental healthcare access, and targeted farmer support systems.

Impact of Mental Health on Farmers' Well-being and Agricultural Productivity

Mental health plays a critical role in determining agricultural productivity and farmers' overall well-being. Poor psychological health can significantly affect farmers' **concentration, decision-making ability, and adoption of modern agricultural technologies**, which are essential for improving farm efficiency and sustainability (Bharati et al., 2022). Chronic stress among farmers can also lead to **physical health impacts** such as fatigue, headaches, and sleep disturbances, along with **psychological impacts** including anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and low self-esteem. These conditions further result in **cognitive impacts**, such as poor memory and reduced ability to make effective farm management decisions (Wheeler et al., 2019).

The major consequences of poor mental health include **reduced work efficiency, poor crop management, decreased agricultural productivity, and lower quality produce**. Farmers experiencing mental distress often show **loss of motivation and reduced interest in farming activities**, which negatively affects their ability to adopt improved farming practices (Bharati et al., 2022). Mental health disorders also lead to **absenteeism and presenteeism**, resulting in reduce

farm income and lower agricultural output (Reddy et al., 2020). At a broader level, these impacts can affect **rural livelihoods, agricultural sustainability, and national food security**. Studies also indicate that improving farmer mental health can produce economic benefits, with every dollar invested in mental healthcare generating nearly four dollars in improved productivity (WHO, 2021).

Government Initiatives Supporting Farmers' Welfare

| Scheme (Full Name) | Key Features |
|--|---|
| Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) | Provides ₹6,000 annual income support to small and marginal farmers through Direct Benefit Transfer (PIB, 2023) |
| Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) | Crop insurance scheme protecting farmers against losses due to natural calamities, pests and diseases (PIB, 2023) |
| National Mental Health Programme (NMHP) | National programme to improve access to mental healthcare and integrate mental health into primary healthcare (PIB, 2024) |
| District Mental Health Programme (DMHP) | District-level mental health services including counselling, treatment and awareness programmes (PIB, 2024) |
| Tele Mental Health Assistance and Networking Across States (Tele-MANAS) | 24x7 national tele-mental health helpline providing counselling support (PIB, 2024) |

Shortcomings in Addressing Farmers' Mental Health

Despite these initiatives, several important gaps remain in addressing farmer mental health issues:

1. Lack of a dedicated farmer mental health helpline

Despite India having a large population dependent on agriculture, there is no national helpline specifically focused on farmers' mental health challenges.

2. Limited awareness programmes in rural areas

Many farmers are unaware of available mental health services due to lack of targeted awareness campaigns.

3. Generalised mental health programmes

Existing mental health programmes are not specifically tailored to address agriculture-related stress such as crop failure, debt burden, and climate risks.

4. Social stigma surrounding mental health

Mental health issues are often considered taboo in rural communities, preventing farmers from seeking help.

5. Limited rural counselling infrastructure

There is a shortage of trained mental health professionals and counselling services in rural

agricultural regions.

6. Lack of integration with agricultural extension services

Mental health support is rarely integrated into agricultural advisory systems, which could otherwise help identify distressed farmers early.

7. Need for preventive mental health strategies

Current schemes mainly address financial distress but do not sufficiently focus on preventive mental health care and psychological resilience among farmers

The Way Forward

Addressing farmer mental health requires a comprehensive approach including:

- Expanding rural mental health services
- Increasing mental health awareness
- Strengthening financial safety nets
- Promoting farmer support groups
- Establish a national farmer mental health helpline
- Train agricultural extension officers in mental health awareness
- Reducing stigma through education and community outreach remains essential.

CONCLUSION

Farmers are central to India's food security and rural economy, yet their mental health challenges remain largely under-recognised and insufficiently addressed. Improving farmer mental health is essential not only for individual well-being but also for agricultural sustainability, rural livelihoods, and national development. Measures such as ensuring financial security through stable income support, improving access to rural healthcare services, strengthening counselling support, and promoting mental health awareness can significantly reduce farmer distress. At the same time, there is an urgent need for farmer-focused interventions such as dedicated mental health helplines, targeted awareness programmes, and better integration of mental health support within agricultural extension systems. Supporting farmers' mental health is therefore not just a social responsibility but an investment in the resilience of Indian agriculture, because protecting the well-being of farmers ultimately means protecting the future of India's food security.

"Just as healthy soil is essential for healthy crops, good mental health is essential for healthy farmers. Yet while agricultural policies focus on improving soil and crop productivity, the psychological well-being of farmers often remains overlooked.

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