

MENTAL HEALTH OF NORTH DAKOTA FARM AND RANCH WOMEN: WHAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE?

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Stress and tension are a fact of life. No one escapes the occasional feelings of anxiety, depression and hostility that can result from stress and tension. Only the extent and degree of these negative feelings vary. Likewise, the sources of stress and tension in one's life will vary. Some life styles and occupations are more conducive to stress and tension than others.

Farming and ranching have been identified as occupations conducive to stress and tension. There are tensions and problems that at best may be character building and at worst are sources of deep pain and distress. For instance, income is unpredictable and dependent on factors that are often beyond the control of family members. There are periods when work is intense, with little time off for relaxation and there are other times when time "hangs heavy" on one's hands, depending on the season of the year. Family togetherness may be an attribute to farm and ranch families; too much togetherness can be irritating (Rosenblatt and Titus, 1976).

In addition to occupational sources of tension and stress, gender is also considered to be a factor; females experience depression, anxiety and hostility much more frequently than do men. The reasons for this difference have been argued by many authorities. No consensus of opinion has been reached, but increasingly the role of women in society has been identified as a critical factor.

If farming and ranching are high stress and tension-producing occupations, and if women are more vulnerable than men to poor mental health, then how do farm and ranch women fare on tests of mental health indicators? Does the combination of farm or ranch and female result in even worse mental health? Or are there certain factors in their lives that appear to create high risk situations? On the other hand, are there certain factors that appear to create a positive environment for farm and ranch women's mental health? The results of a study to find answers to these questions are reported in this article.

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The Study

Many notions exist about farm and ranch women, ranging from a romanticized idea of a trouble free life of family strength and togetherness with well-disciplined children to ideas of a depressed, unhappy, overworked group of women who lack the simple luxuries of life. The overall goal of this study was to obtain data that will accurately portray the life of contemporary North Dakota farm and ranch women. Two thousand randomly selected farm and ranch women were mailed a packet of research instruments. Seven hundred and sixty returned the questionnaires. The results reported in this article are based on the 760 completed questionnaires.

The Subjects

The women who participated in this study averaged 44 years of age. The majority were married and had children. Their average annual income was \$48,000. A detailed statistical description of the subjects is available upon request from the author.

The Research Instruments

Several questionnaires were designed specifically for this project to determine the following information:

1. Whether or not the woman was involved in making major decisions on the farm or ranch.
2. The frequency of church attendance.
3. The frequency of visits with friends.
4. The woman's religious preference.
5. The husband's educational level.

The mental health was assessed through the use of standardized tests that are widely used for this purpose. The mental health indicators measured by the tests were anxiety, depression, hostility and perceived control over one's life. The Multiple Affect Adjective Check List (Zuckerman and Lubin, 1965) was used to assess the women's anxiety, depression and hostility levels. The Pearlin Mastery scale (Pearlin and Schooler, 1976) was used to determine the women's perceived amount of control over their own lives.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using percentage, frequency and multiple regression to determine what factors in the women's lives appeared to affect their mental health. Pearson *r* correlations were used to determine relationships between variables. Multiple regression and correlation statistics are available upon request from the author.

The Results

Several factors were found to influence the mental health indicator scores of the women.

Women who were involved in decision making regarding the farm or ranch operation had lower anxiety, depression, and hostility scores than women who were not involved in decision making.

Women who visited friends frequently (at least once a week) had lower anxiety, depression and hostility scores than women who visited friends less frequently.

The education level of the woman's husband was found to affect her anxiety and depression level. The women whose husbands had finished less than eleventh grade in high school had the highest anxiety and depression scores. The women whose husbands had graduated from high school had the middle range of anxiety and depression scores. The lowest anxiety and depression scores were those of the women whose husbands had more than a high school education.

Religious preference made a significant difference in anxiety and depression scores. Catholics had the highest anxiety and depression scores.

The frequency of church attendance made a significant difference in the anxiety scores. Women who reported attending church once a week had lower anxiety scores than women who attended church less frequently.

The amount of control the women felt they had over their own lives was related to their anxiety, depression, and hostility scores. As the amount of perceived control over their own lives increased, their anxiety, depression and hostility levels decreased.

Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the results of this study, a cluster of situations and circumstances in the lives of farm and ranch women appear to affect their mental health, as defined by their anxiety, depression and hostility scores. Perhaps the most interesting of these situations and circumstances is the importance of the husband's level of education. The reason for this finding was not in-

vestigated in this study. Any attempt at explanation is simply conjecture. One might suppose, however, that the husband's education level affects the way he views women's rights and his attitudes toward their family and life in general, indirectly influencing his wife's emotions.

It is not surprising that women who have a voice in decisions about the farm or ranch operation had better mental health (lower anxiety, depression and hostility scores). A previous article regarding this study stated that 93 percent of the women worked in various capacities on the farm or ranch (operating equipment, running errands, caring for livestock) (4). Considering the amount of work done by these women, it is not surprising to find their anxiety, depression and hostility scores higher if they are excluded from decision making.

The difference in anxiety and depression scores between Catholic women and those of other religious denominations cannot be explained by the survey. Any explanation of such a sensitive area should be left to Catholic women themselves. They would have the necessary personal insight and perspective.

The other circumstance of a religious nature that affects the anxiety score is frequent church attendance. Anxiety, as measured by the test used in this study, was defined as feelings of uneasiness and unexplained fear. Belief in God carries with it the qualities of faith and hope in the future. Therefore, it is not surprising that women who attended church every week (assuming they believed in God) had lower anxiety scores; they probably possessed faith and hope that would quiet their uneasiness.

The amount of control a person feels over his/her own life is closely related to their level of self-confidence. The results of this study suggest that it is definitely to a woman's advantage, where mental health is concerned, to have a high level of perceived control over her own life. This factor was related to all three measures of mental health. Control over one's life comes from having the necessary experiences to handle "whatever comes your way." Control and confidence does not result from living a dependent life of helplessness and over-protection.

Summary

The results of this study strongly suggest that farm and ranch women are not a homogeneous group. It is not possible to speak of the mental health of farm and ranch women as if they all had the same level of well-being. Furthermore, it does not appear that living on a farm or ranch determines one's mental health. Rather, there are several circumstances and situations in one's life that appear to influence mental health.

According to this study of 760 randomly selected North Dakota farm and ranch women, active involve-

ment in decision making relative to the farm and ranch operation, at least weekly contact with friends, weekly church attendance, a relatively well-educated husband and perceived control over what happens in one's own life were found to positively influence farm and ranch women's mental health.

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3. Home constructed roman shades may provide similar heat conserving capabilities as a commercially quilted shade for about half the cost.
4. All draperies, including insulation models, provide little protection against heat loss.
5. A sheer casement curtain, shirred to triple fullness across a window may provide similar energy conserving capabilities as an insulated draw drapery. Also, filtered light is admitted to the room.
6. The levelor type, movable blind may not be an effective heat loss barrier, although it is often advertised as "energy conserving."
7. Draperies installed over a movable blind do little to improve heat conserving capabilities.
8. Inexpensive polyethylene films may perform more effectively as heat loss barriers than several more expensive and less convenient window treatments.
9. A combination of casement sheer curtain over a polyethylene film does not necessarily increase heat loss effectiveness over the film used alone, but does increase aesthetic acceptability.
10. A wooden frame shutter with insulated filler appears to provide similar heat loss reduction with a thin (4 mil) polyethylene film.
11. A covered cornice is an ineffective means of attempting to reduce heat loss.

CONCLUSIONS

Window treatments can be used to reduce heating energy requirements in cold climates. All treatments provided some reduction in heat loss, but the effectiveness of commonly used draperies was very low. Shades, shutters, and blinds varied in effectiveness according to fabrication, design and edge sealing. Polyethylene films were moderately effective. A 1-inch polystyrene board provided the greatest reduction in heat loss. Combinations of treatments did not result in savings equal to the sum of their parts.

A cornice at the top of the window was not an effective means of reducing heat loss. Edge seaming of treatments by magnetic strips, taping, tacking, or tracks improved effectiveness.

Window treatment costs do not appear to be related to effectiveness in heat loss reduction. Aesthetic acceptability was related to management ease, light transmittance, and system design. Energy savings ratings do not coincide with aesthetic ratings.

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