

Farming Identity, Masculinity, and Health: Implications for Support Services

Understanding Farming Identity and Masculinity

In Ireland, farming is not just an occupation, it is an identity deeply woven into family, tradition, land, and community. Farmers often see themselves as custodians of the land, providers for their families, and guardians of a way of life passed down through generations (Hammersley et al., 2021). This identity is shaped by powerful narratives of independence, stoicism, and self-reliance—core tenets of what scholars describe as “hegemonic farming masculinity” (Connell, 1995; Courtenay, 2000).

These masculine norms are embedded in how many male farmers understand and perform their roles. Farmers are often expected to work long hours in harsh conditions, endure physical hardship without complaint, and remain strong in the face of adversity (Hammersley et al., 2021). Expressions of vulnerability or emotional distress can be seen as weakness, conflicting with the ideal of the “good farmer” who is self-sufficient, competent, and resilient (Burton et al., 2008).

Impact on Help-Seeking and Health Behaviour

These identity constructs have profound implications for health and wellbeing. Research shows that Irish farmers experience poorer health outcomes compared to other occupational groups, particularly in terms of cardiovascular disease, cancer, and mental health (Smyth et al., 2013; Richardson, 2018). Farming’s solitary nature, the unpredictability of weather and income, high workload, and shifting regulatory environments add to this burden.

Yet, despite these stressors, help-seeking remains low. Studies have found that many farmers delay or avoid seeking medical help, particularly for mental health issues (Roy et al., 2017). Fear of stigma, concern over appearing weak, and a preference for problem-solving independently are key barriers. The reluctance is often amplified by rural isolation and the lack of privacy in tight-knit communities where “everyone knows everyone” (Hammersley et al., 2021).

In this context, emotional wellbeing becomes a silent struggle. The ideal of stoicism discourages open conversation, while farmers internalize stress, leading to risks of burnout, depression, and even suicide (Kennedy et al., 2020).

Addressing the Challenge: Engage and On Feirm Ground 2

Recognising these challenges, the Men’s Development Network (MDN) has worked through the HSE-funded ENGAGE programme to build a gender-sensitive, evidence-informed training initiative called *On Feirm Ground 2* (OFG2). This programme equips agricultural professionals and service providers to better engage with farmers on issues of health and wellbeing.



OFG2 is built on the understanding that farming identity and masculinity shape how farmers interact with support systems. Instead of trying to change the farmer, OFG2 supports frontline workers to meet farmers where they are. Facilitators are trained to recognise masculine norms, communicate in ways that respect farmers' autonomy, and gently challenge unhelpful beliefs that block help-seeking.

For example, OFG2 encourages conversations that focus on productivity and farm safety as entry points to broader discussions about health. It uses peer-led learning and real-life case examples to create safe spaces for dialogue. Participants are shown how to spot signs of distress and how to signpost farmers to appropriate services without stigma.

Conclusion

Farming masculinity can be both a source of pride and a barrier to health. Effective engagement requires cultural insight, empathy, and practical tools. Through initiatives like *On Feirm Ground 2*, MDN is helping to create a more supportive environment for Irish farmers, one where strength includes knowing when and how to ask for help.

References

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