



WRASAP

Western Regional Agricultural
Stress Assistance Program

SUMMER 2022

WRASAP PARTNER HIGHLIGHT: Ty Aller, Utah State University



We're catching up with Dr. Ty Aller, researcher at the Institute for Disability Research, Policy, and Practice. You may recognize him for his "Mental Health Minutes" at the end of USU Extension's podcast **AgWellness**; he's also the curriculum developer of two recently released online mental health training programs. Several WRASAP members participated in the pilot phase of **Mental Health Awareness & Advocacy for Ag**, a course geared towards gatekeepers for producers and their families such as ag agents, ag lenders, farm bureau members, and more. Stated goals include identifying mental health issues, locating appropriate

resources in the community, and learning how to communicate in a way that's both empathetic and effective in the referral process. The **Ag Wellness** course is geared toward agricultural producers and their families. It works participants through skills taught in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and teaches how to use these skills to mitigate the unique stressors of agricultural life. It is between 1-5 hours long, self-paced, and can be re-visited as often as needed. Both programs are now live and available at the [Utah State University Extension's mental health page](#)

So how did the idea of these new curricula come about?

Ty: I had the experience of losing a friend to suicide which spurred an interest in prevention. As a Masters student going into my PhD program (at Utah State University), I was looking for research that would relate to that interest. I was also in the student government and represented the

state as student regent for a year. Our whole initiative was student mental health. Some of the policy we passed enabled creation of mental health courses to educate folks on the basics. I had intended on focusing on K through 12 initially as there was no real curriculum for that age group. My goal was to develop something that was flexible, could be scaled up quickly and that could be adapted to different audiences and needs while remaining scientifically rigorous. Once developed, grant funding through WRASAP allowed us to apply the program to producers and their service providers. There are unique barriers in resources for rural communities so there was a desire to create an open access format to address some of them. There was also a concerted effort to reduce the completion time. You can now get through it in about three to four hours: when I initially led the course on campus, it was a sixteen-week series. We've trained almost 2,000 people over the past four years and used a continuous improvement process to adapt to quantitative and qualitative feedback and results.

What did you glean from the pilot study some of the WRASAP folks participated in?

Ty: I think the thing that we consistently recognized is that folks really care about is having content relate to their personal story, which coming from a logistical standpoint is somewhat challenging. People adapt narratives to match their geographical area and culture. For instance, rural northern Utah is very different from rural Southern Utah. Northern Utah folks almost feel like they're Idahoans while Southern Utah has a large percentage of the state's tribes and crops. As a result, these groups talk about the world differently and they approach resources differently as well. Recognizing that, we tried not to get so caught up in the content but rather drive the process by empowering folks to personalize the content.

Can you share some challenges you've encountered and perhaps some strategies you've adopted?

Ty: It's not the Field of Dreams. We built it and they didn't come. I do a lot of online programming and what I've found is unless you have a group of tech savvy people that are interested in using tech, it's hard to get online programs to flourish. Also, time restraints, especially when folks wear a lot of hats, pose a considerable barrier. I typically find that by identifying folks who want to do this as part of their job, training them and letting them carry to their communities, there's more buy in, like crisis intervention teams within police departments; officers self-select if they have a real commitment to the work.

It really comes down to: how do you start a movement? It feels very much like grassroots political efforts in my mind. My undergraduate degree was in political science and I worked on a lot of local political campaigns. You

have to go out and do the footwork to get people to buy into your messaging and vision. That takes a lot of time and energy, especially when the content is stigmatized. How do you do that tactfully? It takes years. That's why I think extension is so successful- they have relationships with these folks so you're "people first and resources second". I don't fully see the foundation and framework at the scale we'd like to achieve yet, but the building blocks are coming together. Messaging is optimized when it's consistent, repeated and dispersed through diverse channels like schools, local governments, health departments...

Components of both Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) are recognizable in Farm Stress programming. They seem to be particularly applicable to producer culture as they translate into actionable, practical strategies focused on the present rather than the past.

Ty: ACT therapy is very much based on evaluating how humans operate as a whole. Some of the initial ACT studies were based on hundreds of other studies across all therapies and across all demographics. Researchers looked back at that body of research to reveal what seems to be working. Then they took those and put them in one little package; it's arguably more effective than the original CBT, the "parent" from which ACT emerged. The foundation for ACT essentially says this is how human beings across cultures, across ethnic groups, seem to operate based on how language works. For instance, one of my other roles involves working for the USU's Research Center for Alzheimer's. I work with caregivers in rural areas supporting their loved ones. After participating in existing ACT programming, they may say something like, "Wow, this thing was made for us". Then I talk with folks with MS and Crohn's Disease, two chronic autoimmune diseases, and they say "Wow, this intervention seems to work so well for me, it gets me!". It just seems to work for the human condition. Pain is a natural part of being human; suffering is a choice.

Culturally, the application of ACT with rural folks such as agricultural producers, I love that context because they seem to get it. There are a lot of things beyond their control that they have to be willing to experience, that you have to keep doing until you find what's useful, that gives you the life you want. If you ever stop doing the work, you miss out; if you commit to the work and building the skills, and love what you do (as we know, most farmers deeply love it, although they'll often gripe and tell you how ***** it is, they'll also say "I wouldn't do anything else"), your life is much more gratifying. The cool thing is that these skills are experiential. Farmers aren't typically inclined to just sit back and read about it, at least on average. We don't want to teach it to you, we want you to experience it. They can feel it, then they can use it.

Radical acceptance is a really useful construct. It's the willingness to experience, or accept, while also making active change to improve our situation. What that might look like is hay prices right now. They're outrageously high right now in Utah mostly due to water shortages. That's a scary, painful experience that we can't do a lot about so that's the piece of being willing to experience or accept. This is our current situation AND (not "but" or "or") we can find ways to start being more flexible to adapt crops, to range cattle differently, to do the things that we've always had to do to survive. I think sometimes we can get out of touch with the fragility of life. Producers have to understand that because they're in a risky vocation AND they still get sucked into the idea that they're guaranteed something. I don't really think we're guaranteed anything. I think we need to keep working for it every day and that's a very meaningful, rewarding process.

On one hand, access to counseling is better than ever with telehealth and voucher programs, etc. Yet this shortage of counselors exists. Any thoughts about how this unfolds?

This plays into our conversation about ACT. Partly it's a matter of accepting the situation; that sometimes gets contorted into "pull up your bootstraps" but that's not what we're trying to communicate. I think what we try to do is hold a very compassionate stance, "yes, it is painful AND it is part of existence". The more we can find ways to deliver that message to people effectively while offering the skills to help do that gracefully, the more success everyone has within these communities. Because of that, I don't have a specific solution. i.e. if we do this, we'll see x amount of increase. The way I approach it is from several fronts. Try to provide intervention AND prevention AND education simultaneously. Extension agents offer components and community member who share this passion offer them as well so more people have the keys. They're the ones on the front line doing the hard work. The part that frustrates me is when the expertise we have causes us to miss what people actually need sometimes. I think you need both- expertise and community. It's not an either/or. I don't think we should have gate kept information.

Any takeaways you'd like to share?

I don't think that our programs, not ours specifically but programs as a whole, haven't quite captured producers' voices in terms of what they need or where we can meet them yet. That's what we're hopeful we can start doing. We've taken a concerted, purposeful first step and we're also very aware that we haven't the time we'd like to learn, so it's that radical acceptance piece again. We're accepting that it's not everything we'd like it to be AND we won't reach everyone we want to AND we have to take those first steps. Now we need to keep growing. That's the fun, the process, right? You gotta keep pluggin'.

Alison Brennan kindly offered the following regarding the Western Regional Mental Health Network:

Addressing mental health within the Western region is a critical need. For example, the prevalence of depression in both adults and adolescents is higher in the Western region compared to the U.S. overall. In the Western region, Extension works in the areas of diet/nutrition and mental health, but no research or educational efforts are focused on the intersection. Thus, the WRMHN was formed.

- Goal: Improve mental health outcomes across the lifespan through addressing diet quality and healthy food access.
- Increase awareness of relationships between food access, diet quality, and mental health.
- Conduct research and educational programming to improve mental health outcomes through addressing diet quality and healthy food access.
- Develop resources that states can add to their portfolio of mental health efforts either as a stand-alone piece or additive to ongoing efforts.
- Increase collaboration regionally and enhance fund development efforts.

The **steering committee** was established in November 2021 and includes the following members:

- **Amanda Marney**, Associate Director of Extension, University of Wyoming
- **Carrie Ashe**, Associate Director of Extension, Montana State University
- **Alison Brennan**, Assistant Professor and Extension Mental Health Specialist, Department of Health and Human Development, Montana State University
- **Annie Lindsay**, Professor and State Specialist, Extension, Department of Nutrition, University of Nevada, Reno
- **Cassandra Nguyen**, Research Assistant Professor, Department of Medical Education and Clinical Sciences, Washington State University
- **Martine Perrigue**, Assistant Professor, Department of Nutrition and Exercise Physiology, Washington State University
- **Grace Shearrer**, Assistant Professor of Human Nutrition and Food, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Wyoming

To date, the **activities of the steering committee** have included:

- **Conducting a preliminary literature review focused on diet quality, food access and mental health.** Ultimately, 81 relevant articles were identified. Most were broadly focused on mental health, without specific pathologies identified. Notable gaps exist in understanding connections among nutrition issues and mental health: only three articles focused on food access or food security, and only two articles reported on dietary interventions.
- **Developing a conceptual framework** identifying significant constructs and areas of concern within diet and mental health, as well as overlap among the two, at community, family, and individual levels.
- **Submitting a Letter of Intent to USDA NIFA for an AFRI Conference Grant** under the priority area "Diet, Nutrition, and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases". We received the green light to move forward with preparation of the full proposal.

The purpose of the conference will be to engage with representatives from each Extension system in the Western Region and establish the regional network, which will focus on 1) exploring intersections between diet, food insecurity, and mental health and 2) subsequently developing Extension interventions/programs to address needs.

We are beginning to curate a list of people who may be interested in presenting at or attending the conference and joining the network. We are looking for researchers, practitioners, and community leaders within and outside of the Western region who have expertise related to food systems, food insecurity, nutrition/diet, and mental health. That could be experience facilitating local food systems initiatives; a formal program of research exploring connections among food access, nutrition, and mental health; people with knowledge and experience with nutritional support strategies to promote mental health and/or recovery; etc. **Please contact Amanda Marney to express your interest in the WRMHN! amarney@uwyo.edu**

BEST WISHES, KARA ERICKSON!

Kara Erickson has spent the past few years as part of the WRASAP baseline team under Michelle Grocke's direction. As she departs Montana State University with a freshly minted MS in Counseling, she shares her impressions with us.

Can you provide a a brief overview of your history and current situation for us?

Sure! I grew up on the Big Island in Hawaii. My home was in Waimea, also known as Paniolo country which means "Hawaiian cowboy". My family is still there. I received my bachelors Degree in English from Cal Poly. As for now, I just graduated with masters in Counseling from Montana State University and acquired a counseling position at a clinic in Bozeman for eating disorders. We work with a lot of rural populations all across Montana so we've started an online platform to connect with them. I hadn't really anticipated working with eating disorders; there's a lot of trauma there. I realized during my internship there how passionate I am about working with survivors of trauma. I loved the staff and clients so much that I decided to stay on afterwards.



What drew you towards working on the WRASAP project with Dr. Grocke during your studies?

I loved growing up in a rural area but I saw how much need there was for mental health support. Working on the project has enlightened me even more to how much support we need in Montana, - how lacking we are. I did a lot of interviews to acquire producer data for WRASAP's baseline study, with Michelle and our baseline data collection team. So getting to interview people, a lot of it was really sad and hard to hear and a lot of it was really inspiring too, just how hard farmers and ranchers work not just in Montana but across the country and the territories. Its horrendous, what people are going through now. We take food for granted so much, myself included. You go to the store and anything you need is there and you don't really think about how many people had to sweat over what you're buying and what they're going through in their lives and how little support they have.

There are a lot of positives too. People are really banding together and helping each other. In some areas it seems like there is a lot of community engagement, a lot of spiritual support. And I think people are becoming more and more open to the idea of seeking help especially in mental health. That was cool too, the willingness to talk to me because I understand the issues, the stigma. Quite a few friends' families farm in Hawaii but it's a different culture in that respect than Montana. In Hawaii, the culture is more accepting of seeking help; its more acceptable to talk about your feelings.

How are you feeling about our ability to directly engage with western farmers and producers after your experience with WRASAP?

What would be amazing is if we had qualified people from those communities who facilitated trainings. There's such a strength to these rural communities that having people from those communities, really sharing their experience, and helping with these trainings would be the best. Even during our baseline interviews, quite a few people said something to the effect of "Yeah, there's nothing that can be done. You can't just come in and help people that don't want to be helped" and that's true. But is there a way to use the community and the respect that people have for each other to build programming and to facilitate sharing of issues and feelings instead of having an outside person come in and dictate what a culture should do. Hotlines too. If there are people on the hotlines who grew up in rural spaces and understand what it's like to live there, what issues people in those areas really have, the message goes a long way. Since it's somebody people trust, word of mouth recommendations are a big deal.

Any parting words as you start this new phase of your life?

I loved working on the project; it's definitely inspired me to continue with serving rural communities. I really loved working with the team. Michele was amazing, the whole baseline data team was so passionate. We all fed off of the passion. There's so many involved. That was one of the things that at first overwhelmed me. A lot of states, a lot of territories, a lot of people. And then all the other FRSAN groups are involved to varying degrees. Even Guam- people from all different walks of life have come together with a common goal to serve people that really need support. That's been awesome, and so much knowledge being shared! At a point in history where so many are divided, it's been really cool to see people coming together in this way. They might have different beliefs and come from different places but share a passion about serving others.

PBS DOCUMENTARY "THE COWBOY CODE"

Wyoming PBS is in the midst of broadcasting a six part documentary series titled "A State of Mind: Confronting Our Mental Health Crisis". A group of WRASAP members recently viewed the first installment, "[The Cowboy Code](#)". Alison Brennan offered the following takeaways and relevant resources from the participants.

Julie Jesmer, WSU Skagit Extension — Her recent QPR training experience: drinking as a strategy for managing stress was mentioned as a personal problem by someone who works in the field of addiction prevention (shows how common it is and how people still do it even when they know it is potentially harmful)

Chad Reznicek, Colorado State University AgrAbility—The universality of the messages; viewing the need for help as a character defect is pretty rampant; stages of change, anchors that are holding you back; relationship-building is key and serves as a bridge to having conversations about substance use

Karim Martinez, New Mexico State University Extension—[New Mexico 5 Actions Program](#)

Clinton Wilson, AgWell —The concept of mini changes. [Farm Strong \(New Zealand\)](#)

WILDFIRE AND DROUGHT RESOURCES FOR FARMERS AND RANCHERS

As summer, hallmarked by its dry winds and heat, descends, Western farmers and ranchers are girding themselves for potentially record breaking drought and wildfires. Farm Aid has developed these two resource guides to direct them to appropriate organizations quickly in the event of such disasters. Please share them widely within your networks; both documents are live, meaning that updates will appear in real time. Finally, if you're aware of pertinent resources not listed, please share them with either lori.mercer@wsu.edu or rachel.vanboven@wsu.edu.

[Resources for Farmers and Ranchers Facing Wildfire](#)

[Resources for Farmers and Ranchers Facing Drought](#)

Visit WRASAP Clearinghouse

If you know of any resources or organizations serving farmers, ranchers, and/or agricultural workers that would be a good addition to the clearinghouse, email info@farmstress.us

WRASAP BASELINE DATA COLLECTION TEAM UPDATE

Michelle Grocke has kindly provided an update below. Feel free to reach out to her with questions at michelle.grocke@montana.edu.

The WRASAP team is currently collecting data from all farm and ranch workers (full-time, seasonal and migrant) to better understand their stressors, the stress management and mental wellness topics they are most interested in learning about, and the ways in which they would most like to receive that information.

Please help the WRASAP team by disseminating this online survey to farm and ranch workers in your area: https://montana.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_24E4aVA0ViZFAgK

If you would prefer to print and hand out paper copies of this survey, please visit this section of the WRASAP website to learn more: <https://farmstress.us/ag-worker-survey/>

If a trusted liaison or advocate of local agricultural workers could be enlisted, we'd expect participation to be much more favorable.

WRASAP partners, collaborators and stakeholders are invited to apply for funding through the Small Grants Program. The goal of the program is to support strategies which address agricultural stress in the Western Region. Small Grants are offered four times per year in the fall, winter, spring and summer. The WRASAP Small Grant Program **Q1 submission deadline is March 31st; Q2 deadline is June 30th; Q3 deadline is September 30th; Q4 deadline is December 31st.**

Apply for up to \$10,000 to address farm stress and suicide prevention in your area. Funding opportunities are available for translation, outreach, and professional development.

[Learn more](#) about the WRASAP Small Grant Program, eligibility, and how to apply.

UPCOMING EVENTS

QPR GATEKEEPER TRAINING

AUG 4, 2022 | SEPT 1, 2022 | OCT 6, 2022 | NOV 3, 2022

3:00PM - 4:30PM PST

[HTTPS://TINYURL.COM/QPRTRAINING2022](https://tinyurl.com/qprtraining2022)



Stressors unique to the agricultural community have led to increased mental health challenges in agricultural producers and workers, contributing to increased rates of suicide in rural areas. In an effort to address the rising rate of suicide, QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer) training gives laypeople and professionals the tools to recognize the warning signs of suicide crisis and how to question, persuade, and refer someone to lifesaving services.

During the 90-minute QPR trainings, program staff provide insight to the unique challenges farmers and ranchers experience, walk participants through the steps of implementing QPR training, and provide referral resources.

Benefits of becoming a QPR Gatekeeper include:

- Confidence when talking to someone in crisis.
- Recognizing the warning signs of suicide.
- Becoming familiar with national and local resources
- Knowing how to offer hope and save a life.



WRASAP Network Quarterly Meeting

Join us for the Western Region Agricultural Stress Assistance Program (WRASAP) Network Quarterly Meeting

Thursday, August 18, 2022 1:00PM PST | 2:00PM MST | 3:00PM CST | 4:00PM EST

This is a 90 minute networking event.

High levels of stress are present in agricultural communities. Unstable finances, the pressure of multigenerational farm lineage, injury, chronic illness, harsh weather conditions, and more recently stressors associated with COVID-19 are among the challenges producers face daily. The WRASAP network of partners believes that the unique needs of agricultural communities must be addressed. This is done through communication and collaboration with partners across the Western region to offer education, support in navigating resources, and funding opportunities for agricultural communities.

Mauricio Guerrero-Villanueva is a Graduate Student Researcher with the California AgrAbility Program. In this presentation, *Community Talks: Building and Developing Mental Health Garden Outreach Events*, Mauricio will describe a series of in-person, virtual, and hybrid community talks held in California's agricultural communities. The goal of the talks was to hold spaces for community members and leaders (*Promotores*) to gather and discuss the importance of mental health and gardening. The events were an opportunity to hear from community members about mental health concerns, the extent to which appropriate services exist, and what they would like to see at a mental health and gardening event. This session will highlight the gardening events and partners coming together to support farmer and farmworker mental health.

Intended Audience: WRASAP lead agencies; WRASAP collaborating organizations; any agency/health provider/program providing services to producers (agricultural farmers, ranchers, workers, business owners, and non-industrial private forest owners and managers) and their families in Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming.

Register [here](#) to join this free webinar. The last day to register is Monday, August 15, 2022; all registrants will receive connection information upon registration submission.

Network Quarterly Meeting



August 18, 2022

1:00PM PT | 4:00PM ET

Register by Friday

August 15, 2022

Featured Presentation

Mauricio Guerrero-Villanueva, California AgrAbility Program

Community Talks: Building and Developing

Mental Health Garden Outreach Events

<https://tinyurl.com/WRASAPQrtlyMtg81822>



The WRASAP Network Quarterly Meeting is a space for stakeholders in the western region to build connections and collaboration to assist farmers, ranchers, and other agriculture-related workers in times of stress. We believe in working together to cultivate behavioral/mental health awareness and rural resilience for all agricultural producers, their families, and communities.



WRASAP

Western Regional Agricultural
Stress Assistance Program

This meeting is open to the public. Webpage: farmstress.us

USDA-NIFA Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network, agreement number: 2020-70028-32731 proposal number: 2020-07631

The Western Regional Agricultural Stress Assistance Program (WRASAP) is a 13 state/four territory, ten agency collaborative supported by the USDA Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network (FRSAN), under agreement number: 2020-70028-32731 proposal number: 2020-0763. WRASAP strives to support the mission of the larger FRSAN framework: "Establish a network that connects individuals who are engaged in farming, ranching, and other agriculture-related occupations to stress assistance programs. The establishment of a network that assists farmers and ranchers in time of stress can offer a conduit to improving behavioral health awareness, literacy, and outcomes for agricultural producers, workers and their families."

Prevailing Goals:

- Grow WRASAP network throughout the Western Region; invite new stakeholders, align with existing networks, and develop best practices for building state networks.

- Expand clearinghouse of resources initiated in FY2019 WRASAP to the entire Western Region and make the resource more publicly available.
- Educate internal and external partners on program activities and how to access resources.
- Provide a range of services and targeted outreach for farmers or people working with farmers to address stressors and behavioral health.

The Western Regional Agricultural Stress Assistance Program is an equal access/equal opportunity program.

Website: farmstress.us

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