

GA RRT: Mental Health in Farm and Foodservice Workers

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Background

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shutdowns resulted in job losses and instabilities throughout the world. While unemployment levels were high in all sectors, the agriculture and hospitality industry were among the hardest hit. About two-thirds of restaurant employees lost their jobs during the pandemic (National Restaurant Association). Now, employment is slowly increasing, but is far below the levels before mid-March 2020 (NRA). Farms are closely tied to the service industry, with some farms primarily or solely providing food to restaurants. This has resulted in losses in the agriculture industry as well (Environmental and Resource Economics). Changes in distribution patterns, buying habits, and supply chains have all resulted in losses in the agriculture industry during the pandemic. There was precedence for necessary action in mental health from the State of Georgia's experiences with Hurricane Michael in 2018. In that time, Georgia saw \$2.5 billion in losses (Georgia Department of Agriculture). A survey conducted following the hurricane showed that about half of adults in rural communities were experiencing more mental health challenges than they were a year ago (GDA). This information exacerbates already higher rates of unaddressed mental health issues in the agricultural community (Safety and Health at Work). "Our efforts to support workers in agriculture, food and hospitality sectors is a critical response to the unique challenges we are all currently facing," said Georgia Agriculture Commissioner Gary Black. "From devastating hurricanes to this year's global pandemic, our communities are experiencing unprecedented stressors that can have broad and extensive consequences." These known stressors in the agriculture and restaurant industry joined forces shortly after the lockdowns began, in April 2020. They formed Helping Our Service Professionals (HOSP-GA), an initiative created to support coordination and recovery efforts for all food industry workers. The committee hopes to bring light to the mental health issues in Georgia with resources and support efforts that can easily be transferred and replicated within other jurisdictions.



Figure 2. Example of survey informational flyer with scannable QR code

| | Female: 58.1% (266) | Male: 27.1% (124) | Rather Not Say: 0.02% (1) | Not Sure: 0.007% (3) |
|-------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Gender (t=404) | | | | |
| Age (t=404) | 20-34: 14% (58) | 35-49: 37% (148) | 50-64: 39% (159) | 65+: 0.09(36) |
| State (t=458) | Georgia: 59% (271) | Michigan: 14% (64) | Ohio: 12% (55) | Other: 15% (68) |
| Industry (t=422) | Agriculture: 30% (127) | Food: 16% (69) | Healthcare: 24% (101) | Government: 0.06% (24) |
| | Education: 0.05% (21) | Social Services: 0.04% (18) | Hospitality: 0.007% (3) | Other: 14% (57) |

Discussion & Significance

The survey asked respondents to assess their mental health before and after COVID-19. Before the pandemic, the average stress levels were 4.62 on a scale of 1-10. In the two weeks prior to the survey, after the pandemic, respondents reported average stress levels of 6.05 (Figure 5). Social media influenced the stress of participants. Most respondents reported that social media had at least some effect on their stress levels (Figure 6). The respondents were also asked about the top contributors to their stress. Many respondents reported fear of exposing their family to the virus (199), physical health (122), and family issues not related to the pandemic (120). Respondents reported signs and symptoms related to mental distress. The most common was difficulty concentrating (182), followed by forgetfulness (162) (Figure 3). Additionally, participants reported feeling changes to their physical state. The most common was fatigue (191) and headaches (152) (Figure 4). We found in our results that our target population—food industry workers—were not well represented (statistics here). This could be due to a few reasons. We sent this survey during harvest time, when farmers can be very busy. There also could be a strong desire from other workers to share their experiences with mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Deliverables

- The HOSP-GA Committee has created:
- Video presentation on food insecurity in Georgia
 - Articles in the GDA's Market Bulletin
 - Bookmarks and expandable business cards on mental health resources (Figure 1)
 - Social media campaign on the GDA's Twitter and Facebook pages
 - Press release on World Mental Health Day
 - Electronic survey to assess mental health and helpful resources

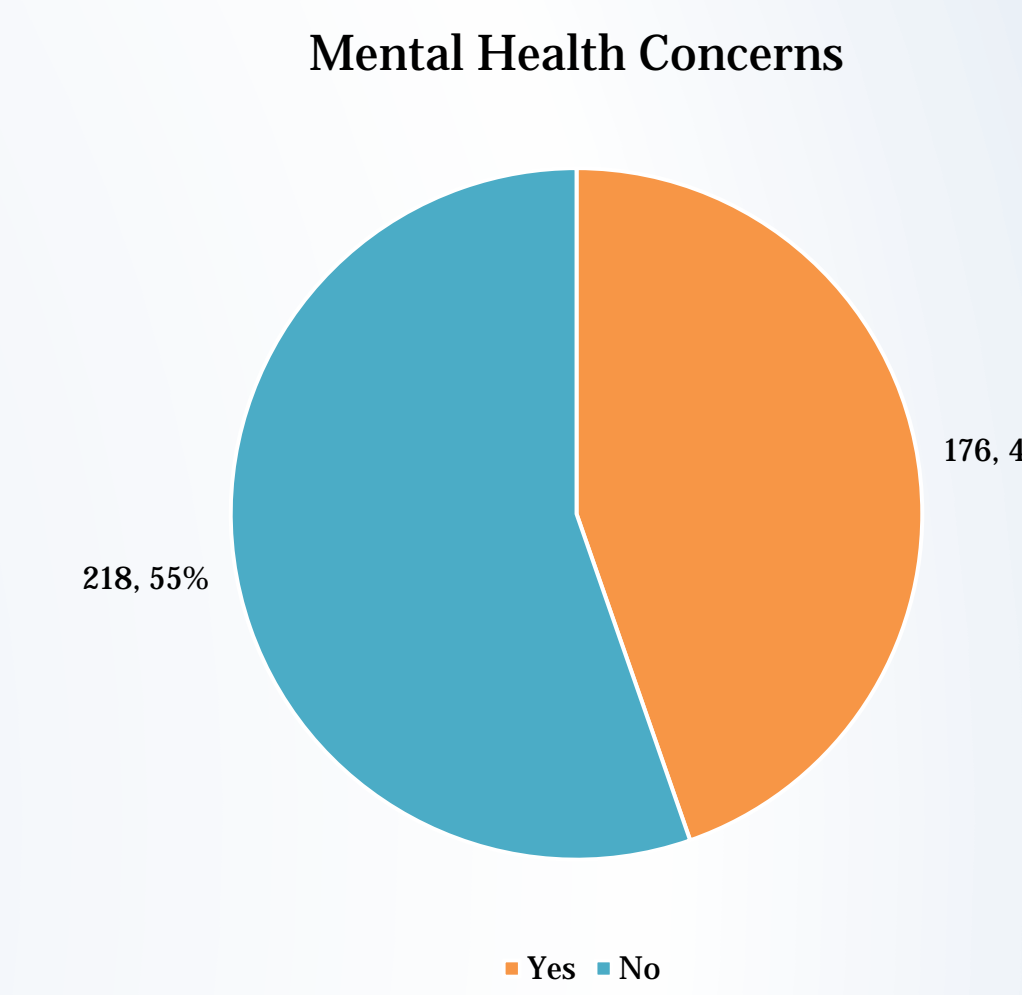


Figure 5. Mental Health Concerns of Respondents after the COVID-19 pandemic

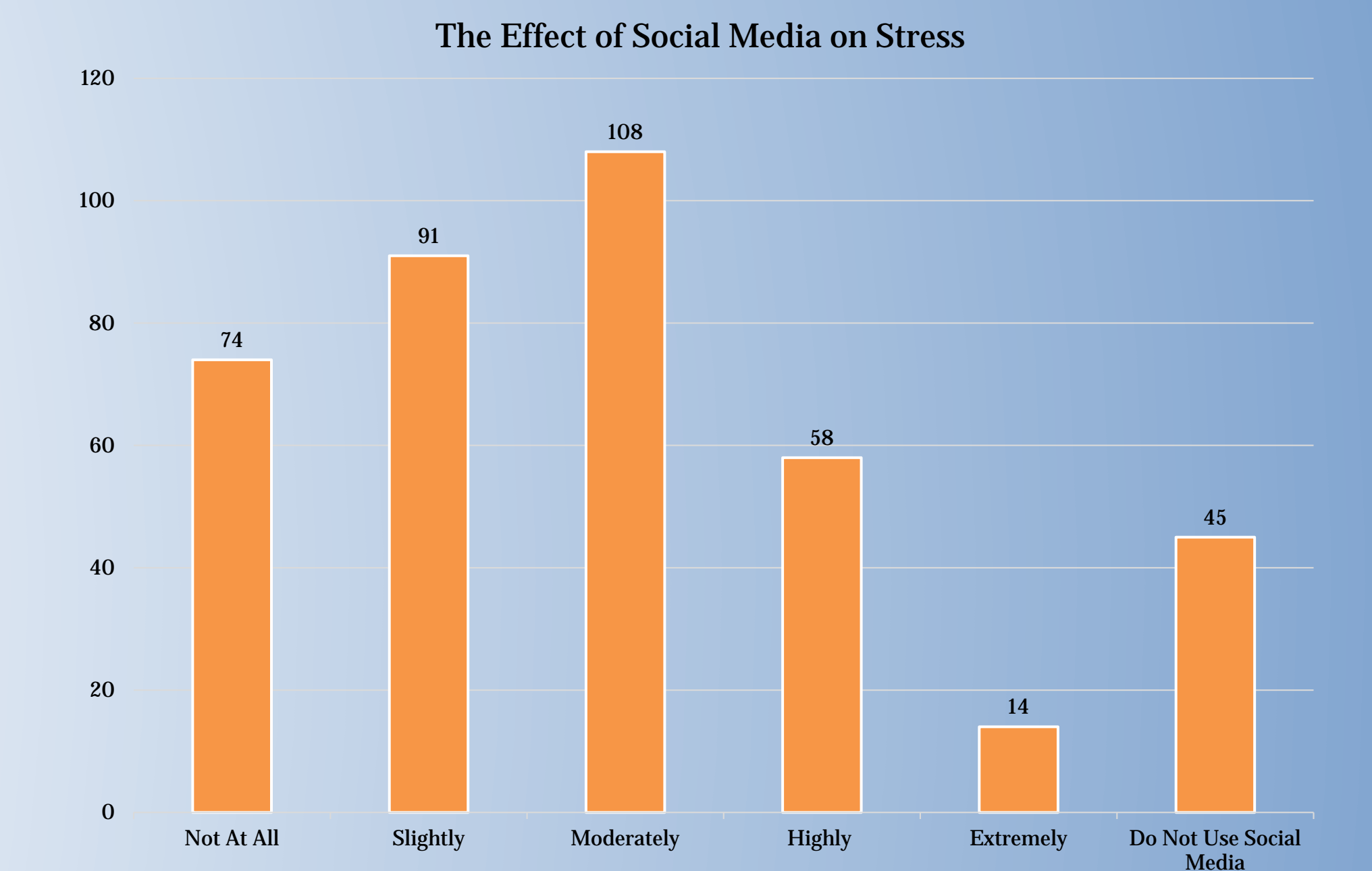


Figure 6. Effect of Social Media on the stress of survey respondents

Methods

Quantitative data collection includes many steps to ensure an adequate population. These aspects include the following:

- Sampling: Surveys were shared over various networks throughout the state and nationally. Examples:
 - Georgia Department of Agriculture
 - Georgia Department of Public Health RRT Programs, nationwide
 - Georgia Environmental Health Association
 - Association of Food & Drug Officials (and several of its regional affiliates)
 - Georgia Food Safety & Defense Task Force
- Distribution: Survey links were sent over email and through scannable QR codes.
- Sample Period: The survey was open from September 4, 2020 to September 28, 2020.
- Sample Size: 430 people completed the survey.

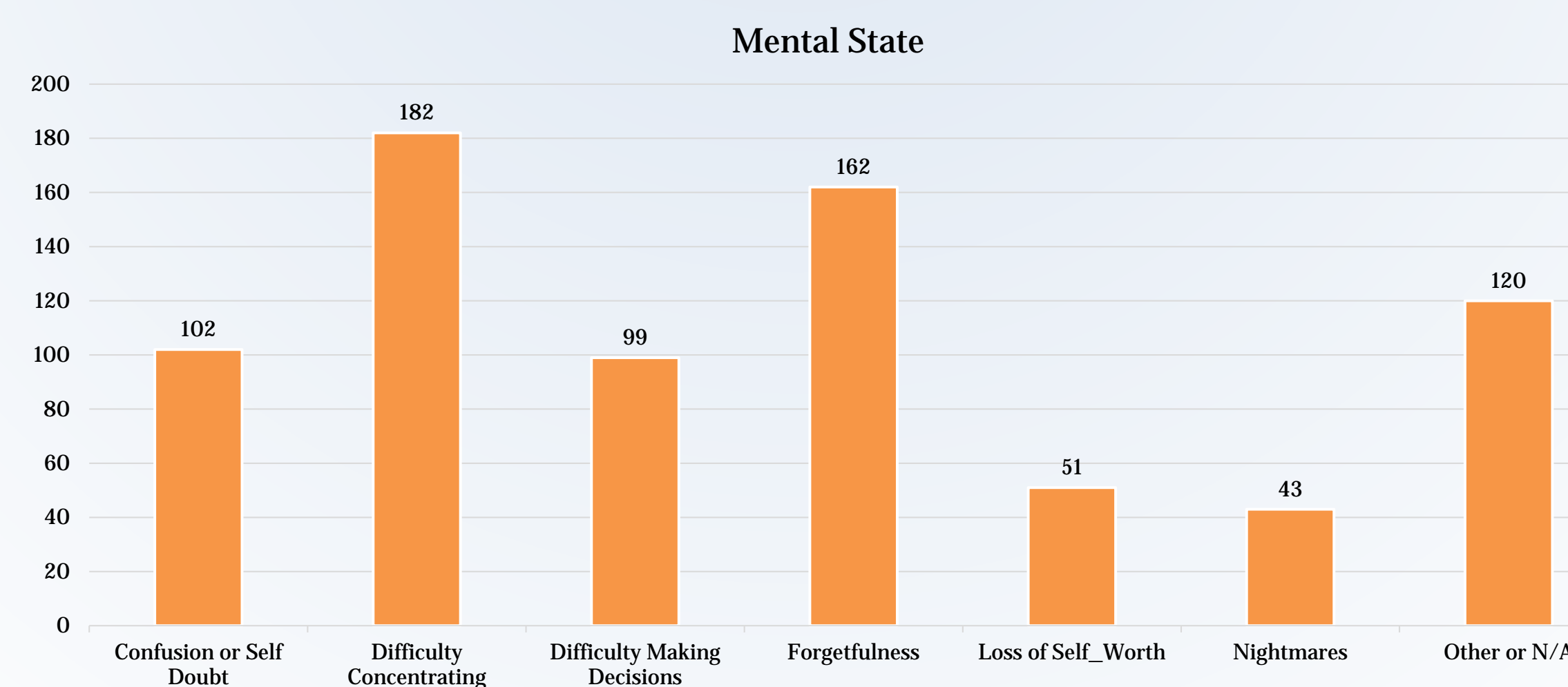


Figure 3. Mental Health State of survey respondents

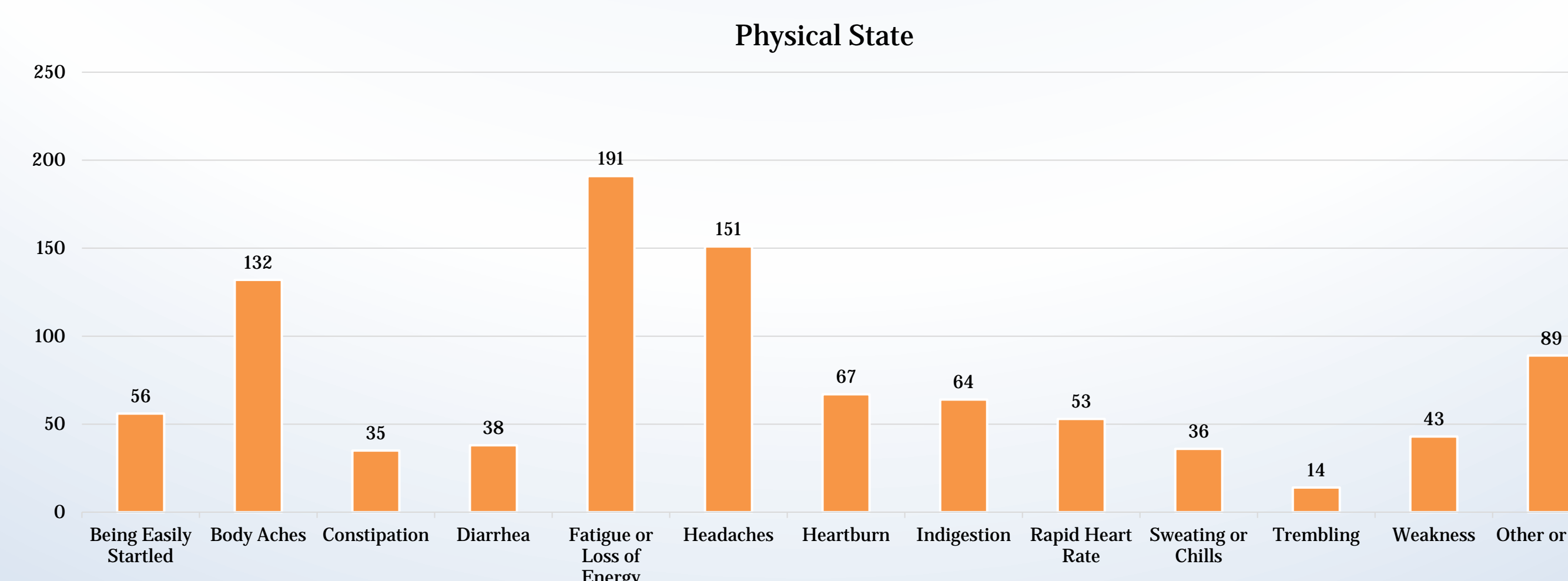
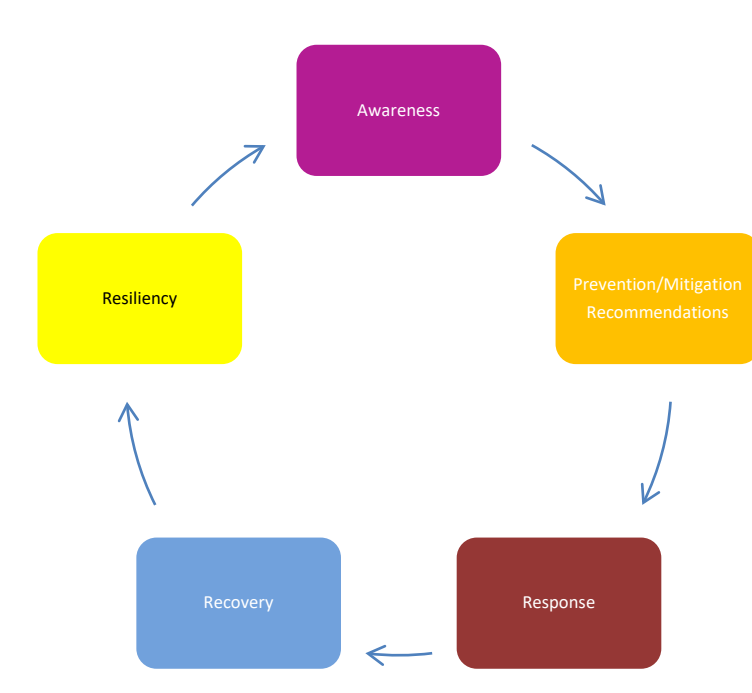


Figure 4. Physical Health State of survey respondents

Future Actions

- There were two main intentions for the mental health survey.
- Raise awareness for mental health in the agricultural and hospitality sector
 - Share the results with GDA's networks
 - Talk about mental health in the agricultural community
 - Develop effective resources and materials for mental health
 - Update the GDA's website with results
 - Refine coping mechanisms to better fit the lifestyles of participants
 - Develop agriculture-specific mental health resources



There were 187 participants from states outside of Georgia who participated. This survey has the potential to be replicated in other RRT states.

- Communication materials and press releases can be found on the GDA's website.
- Mental health education posts can be found on the GDA's Facebook and Twitter accounts.
- The survey instrument is in Survey Monkey and can be opened again.

The Georgia RRT is dedicated to helping the lives of its farmers and food producers, in all aspects. This project will help the GA RRT to better serve the state.

A formal report with expanded survey results will be available in the spring of 2020.

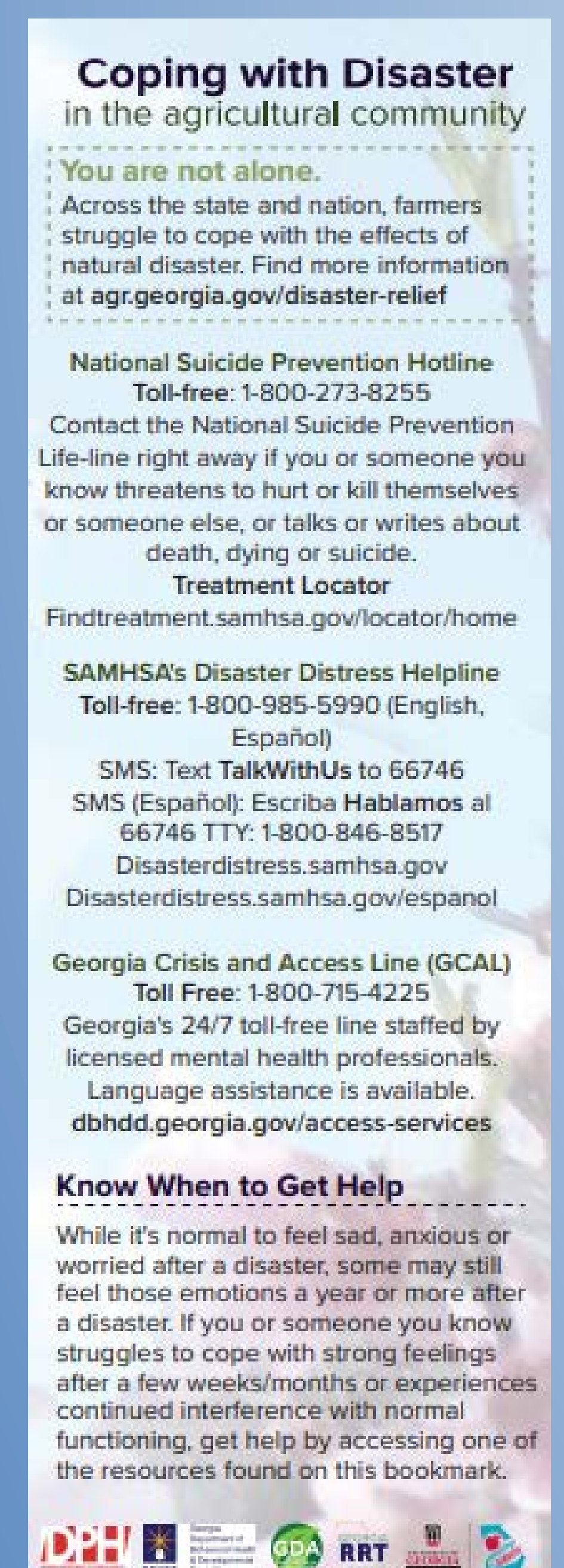


Figure 1. Example of mental health campaign materials: bookmark front and back

Acknowledgements

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