

It's Time to Talk

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South Dakota

2023

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I certify that all materials presented here are of my own creation and that any work adopted from other sources is duly cited and referenced as such.

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Abstract

Farmers have always faced great challenges in nearly every aspect of their work. The struggles producers encounter on the farm affect their mental health in severe ways, but the stigma and lack of information on mental health prevents them from seeking treatment. Moreover, producers are among the 160 million people in areas lacking mental health professionals (Counts, 2023), limiting one's ability to attain care if he or she seeks support. Due to insufficient health care, farmers are at a high-risk for opioid or alcohol misuse as they self-medicate (Eschbach et al., 2021). Suicide rates among farmers have continued to increase throughout the decades and can be attributed to numerous factors. Isolation, recent economic instability, and unpredictable weather are such components affecting mental illness and suicide rates. To combat the mental health crisis among producers, tools like "Changing Our Mental and Emotional Trajectory" are being employed to educate rural communities on behavioral health (Nargi, 2022). Peer-to-peer outreach is one the most effective resources to help farmers. Those in mental crisis present numerous signs, which communities need to be aware of, including the deterioration of physical appearance and more (Murphree, 2019). To save lives, we need to advocate for our farmers' mental wellness and take steps to minimize the stigma surrounding treatment.

Key Words: mental health, suicide prevention, production agriculture

It's Time to Talk

On the morning of June 13th, 2019, farmer Chris Dkyshorn of Platte, South Dakota texted his wife, saying, “What am I supposed to do. I am failing and feel like I’m gonna lose everything...”. It was his final text. Chris retrieved his deer rifle from the utility room, went outside, and shot himself. His wife and three children were left behind to struggle to make ends meet and manage the farm (Gowen, 2019). It is the saddest truth to know Chris’s story is one among countless others. Like a weed, suicidal thoughts start as seeds and if not treated, overtake their domain until nothing can survive. A 2020 Center for Disease Control study found those in agriculture commit suicide at nearly three times the rate of the national average (Peterson, 2020). Today, reports on a range of issues facing agriculture are prevalent, but the health of agriculturalists hardly makes headlines. Agriculturists face high amounts of stress, with production agriculture carrying the biggest burden. Misunderstood and stigmatized, the mental health of farmers is not receiving the support it needs. Indeed, the epidemic of mental health crisis among farmers has quietly plagued the agriculture industry for decades, but now it is time to talk.

Foremost, ‘mental health’ has become a bit of a buzzword, but what is it really? Comprised of emotional, psychological, and social well-being, the overall wellness of how one thinks, feels, and acts is defined as mental health (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2023). Nearly every aspect of life influences it, so we must recognize that mental health is health. Managing stress, caring for relationships, and making choices all leave their mark on the state of one’s mental well-being. Mental health is something that everyone has, and something everyone must take care of.

Every day on the family farm, my father encounters many physical and mental challenges. My family's livelihood depends on the operation, so I am aware of the pressure he is under. Dad is my provider, my role model, and my teacher. My life would never be the same if he chose to end his. It is important to understand suicide is not a solitary event; it stems from a million different sources and rises over time like the pressure of a great geyser. Additionally, suicide does not affect the life of only one person. The pains faced by one affect many. What are the factors pushing farmers to end their lives?

To start, it would be a massive understatement to say that times are tough. Daily stress is difficult to handle itself, but the stress upon a farmer is tenfold. Facing the same struggles as the general population, such as relationships, finances, food security and more, the agriculture industry presents specific tribulations. The farming profession is a unique one, as it combines the independence and risks of owning a small business with the inherent challenges of operating within the global structure of supply and demand (The American Psychological Association, 2020). The two percent of the population that feeds the 100 (The Livestock Project, 2022), experiences pressure from every angle. Working long hours alone, just one element of the job, leads to extended periods of social isolation and loneliness. On top of that, in such a physically challenging field, accidents are likely and can derail farmers' lives and that of their families. Moreover, unpredictable stressors that farmers deal with, including weather and markets, can lead to coping mechanisms like substance abuse. Studies show that 74% of farm workers are impacted by opioid misuse (Eschbach et al., 2021), while 33% of farmers struggle with alcohol abuse. (Dixon & Chartier, 2016). In conjunction, 20 conducted studies show that the mental health issues faced by farmers are worse than the general population (Yazd et al., 2019). Concurrently, generational trauma is also a factor, especially as suicide among farmers has been

a mounting cause of death since the farm crisis of the 1980s. Bankruptcy and decreased land values in the 80s led many farmers to commit suicide, and farmers today are still reeling from the effects. This can be seen in the Midwest, where 3rd and 4th generation farming operations are common. Carrying generational trauma and facing recent inflation and economic instability, today's farmer is at a high risk for mental illness. As a farmer from a family of farmers who manages anxiety and depression myself, I understand the unique challenges farming puts upon mental health. Mental illness is a battle of its own, but farming amplifies it greatly. With the mountain of stresses farmers face, it is no wonder many are overwhelmed. How do we save our farmers from the sinkhole?

Although the mental health crisis of farmers acts as a formidable wall to the advancement of agriculture, there is hope. The huge push seen in recent years to prioritize mental health must be translated to production agriculturalists. Resources specific for farmers include the Farm Aid Hotline, the Farm and Rural Stress Hotline, and the Farm Crisis Hotline (South Dakota Farmers Union, 2019). Building relationships with farmers in the area and supporting them during the busy seasons are ways to relieve stress and minimize their isolation. Offering services such as home-cooked meals and childcare are not cure-alls, but they do help. Producers themselves must also take time to care for their health and support each other. Around 160 million people, especially rural farmers, live in an area with a shortage of mental health providers (Counts, 2023), so the most accessible and effective way to reach farmers is through their close relationships. The peer-to-peer efforts are already underway. A program called "Changing Our Mental and Emotional Trajectory" (COMET) trains rural communities to repurpose the observational skills farmers already possess to notice when a fellow producer is "off". COMET encourages participants to initiate difficult conversations before a crisis occurs (University of

Wisconsin-Madison, 2017). The Wisconsin Women in Conservation is one such group utilizing COMET and offering the courses to their 38,000 female producers (Nargi, 2022). With similar intent, Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI) is approaching farmers with the tools necessary to solve the underlying issues provoking mental stress, such as crop loss or bankruptcy. After assessing a farmer's situation, RAFI directs them to available options and connects the farmer to resources (Nargi, 2022). RAFI reminds farmers what they might have forgotten: all hope is not lost. The health of an individual affects the health of a community; caring for each other builds everyone up.

Certainly, small steps lead to great change, but to make a dent in the scary world of mental illness and suicide, everyone needs to listen and look for the signs of crisis. A few common initial signs include withdrawal from social situations, increased farm accidents, deterioration of personal appearance, and increased substance usage. If a farmer increases their life insurance, gives away possessions, or starts saying goodbyes, immediate intervention is necessary (Murphree, 2019). Easily overlooked statements such as "I don't want to be a burden," or "things have been hard," cannot be ignored. When we do not listen, people die. Yet, the unfortunate truth is you may never spot the signs. The prerogative of farmers is to have pride in their work and connect the success of the farm to their self-worth. A hard time on the farm feels like a personal failure, which is internalized as shame. Producers are the core of the entire nation, and they operate on ideals of self-sufficiency and resilience. Rarely will farmers directly ask for help; instead, they resolve to suffer in silence. Farmers believe the narrative that seeking help equals weakness when truly it is a sign of strength to recognize and accept that help is needed.

Now that we have started this conversation about mental health, we need to break down the stigma that surrounds it, especially in production agriculture. As we look toward the future,

challenges in production agriculture are not going to disappear. Problems will continue to arise, but there is hope. We must all do our part to be cognizant of those who need our help. Facilitate the space to talk and be part of the progress. Our strongest community members need to be cared for too. If you or someone you know needs support, the number for the National Suicide Hotline is 988 and the number for the Farm Aid Hotline is 1-800-FARM-AID (Farm Aid, n.d.). As the Farm Bureau (n.d.) says, “A healthy farm is nothing without a healthy you.”

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