Farmer mental health: Overcoming the stigma and offering support

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Farmers embody independence, resilience and strength. However, in the face of a mental health crisis, these very attributes can lead to devastating outcomes. A farmer might appear fine on the surface yet be struggling with profound internal turmoil. And discussing a farmer's mental well-being is often met with difficulty.

This situation underscores a critical call to action for all of us to remain vigilant about the mental health of farmers. We must learn to recognize the signs of distress and be prepared to help. Also, if you're the one who needs support, remember it's totally okay to ask for help.

Factors impacting mental health in agriculture

Farmers have the highest rate of suicide than any other occupation in the U.S., according to the Suicide Prevention Resource Center. There are a range of specific factors that contribute to the trend of farmer suicide, including:

- Social isolation
- Advanced age
- Chronic medical conditions
- Farm financial stressors
- Long hours and fatigue
- Weather

“Farmers and ranchers in the U.S. have demanding jobs that are often compounded by economic uncertainty, vulnerability to weather events and isolation,” according to a report from the Rural Health Information Hub. “Rural agricultural communities may also have limited access to healthcare and mental health services, which can make it difficult for farm and ranch families to receive support when they are experiencing extreme stress, anxiety, depression or another mental health crisis.”

Overcoming mental health stigmas

The stigma around mental health, especially within the farming community, often equates weakness, preventing many farmers with depression from seeking help. It's vital to overcome this stigma to create a supportive environment where mental health can be openly addressed without fear.

Overcoming this stigma falls upon the shoulders of family, friends, loved ones and the broader community—and it begins with open and honest communication.

"The most effective tactic is pretty simple: Shut up and listen," according to Ted Matthews, psychologist and director of Minnesota Rural Mental Health. "Think about when you're stressed and want to talk to someone; are you asking someone for advice or just to have them listen to you? Ninety-nine percent of the time, we just want people to listen to us."

Coping and communication tactics

In communicating with a farmer or rancher who you feel could be near his or her "breaking point," Matthews recommends the following:

- **Listen.** Often, the best path to a life-saving resolution starts with listening intently and showing you're doing so. "Communication is a two-way street," he said. "Listen, then think about how you respond."
- **Ask questions.** This is not only a way to show you're listening, but it also helps someone experiencing severe anxiety to open up and become more engaged in a conversation that can yield positive results.
- **Don't jump to conclusions or "dumb down" feelings.** Always keep an open mind when starting a farmer mental health conversation. Also, recognize it's rarely a simple, "black and white" conversation. "There is nothing more complex in this universe than human emotion, so we always like to dumb it down to whether someone is happy or sad, up or down," Matthews said.
- **Encourage self-care.** Farmers can sometimes be their own toughest critics. When a mental health crisis is underway, that can be severely damaging. Encourage them to instead care for themselves. "When I ask farmers what it means to be nice, they rarely ever mention being nice to themselves," Matthews said. "That needs to be a primary thought, but farmers aren't good at that."
- **Avoid compassion fatigue.** It can be easy to neglect one's own mental wellness when helping a fellow farmer, friend or family member with his or her own mental health crisis. Make sure you account for your own mental health as you provide attention and energy to others.

Mental health resources

Are you dealing with anxiety or depression? Are you concerned for the life of a loved one or friend who may be depressed? Call or text 988 or chat here.

Visit AgInsightCenter.com for more resources and expert tips to help you run a successful business and maintain the safety of your operation.

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