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'Fall Feel Good' connects farmers with help

By Brandi Janssen

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Guthrie County farmer Jim Calvert receives a resource bag as part of the annual Fall Feel Good project.

Photo courtesy Guthrie County Iowa State University Extension

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In rural communities, neighbors are known to help each other out when needed, especially with the obvious work of planting and harvest. But sometimes it's hard to know how to best help someone when it comes to managing stress and mental health.



In 2020, Krista Downing, the program coordinator for Iowa State University Extension and Outreach in Guthrie County, sat down with the rest of the office's staff to figure out this very problem. The group agreed that they needed to do something to reach out to farmers about stress management. They considered hosting a meal or reaching out to farmers through grain co-ops, but eventually decided that they wanted to reach farmers directly on their farms.

The group settled on distributing resource bags that included items from the Iowa Concern Hotline. Downing says they asked themselves, "What other mental health items could help?" "So, we put in fidget spinners, coloring pages, stress balls, trail mix with nuts to promote brain health," she says.

Next, they had to figure out how to reach as many people as possible in Guthrie County. The group decided to put names of the farmers they knew into a hat and randomly draw five. Then, they called those five and asked them to nominate others who would benefit from receiving the bags. This has become an annual event in Guthrie County called Fall Feel Good.

Downing says, "The first year, those five nominated two others, and for the most part it was easy for people to come up with names."

They called the nominated farmers in advance to let them know that they would be dropping by with some gifts. They have reached 100 farmers with materials each year since 2020.

They quickly discovered that they had filled an important need in their county. Downing recalls that everyone was very welcoming.

"There were a few people, you could tell, really needed to talk," she says. "One person looked through it and he sat there and talked for an hour."

She went on to recount how this farmer's mom had passed away and "he said it was so nice to talk with someone because it had been a rough year for him. It brought a smile to his face."

Downing says that they make a point of re-visiting farmers who have experienced challenges or let them know that the interactions with the Extension staff have been especially helpful.

"We go back to him, and others, each year to see if things are going OK," she says.

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The connections that Downing and her team made with their local farm community have made a difference for many farmers. But, to let others know about the project, the team used another strategy: TikTok

“A few years ago, our summer intern got us on TikTok,” Downing says. “For us, it’s a way to show the county what we and Extension do — that we get out into the community and make these connections and partnerships with people.”

She goes on to say that the process of making and editing the video is really fun.

“It breaks up your day a bit!” she says.

The team enjoys finding good content — “taking a video of the combine or someone dancing with the bags. It shows the community what we have to offer.”

Downing believes that the strategy of meeting farmers where they are is important.

“Nobody is going to come to a program that says ‘Come learn about mental health and stress relief.’ I grew up in ag, and I wouldn’t be able to find a farmer who wants to come sit in an hour-long program,” she says.

But, she says, providing resources and giving people an opportunity to talk can be powerful. Now that the project has been going on for a few years, she says, “I have been in a few different people’s homes and trucks and they have the magnets on the fridge or in the console or something, so the resources aren’t getting thrown away.”

Downing puts about 700 miles on her car each year during Fall Feel Good.

“We meet the farmers wherever they are, even in the middle of a field. Sometimes we get to a field and we follow the fence line all the way to the other side to deliver the bags to them,” she says.

Farm work has always been community work, with neighbors chipping in during the season to get everything done. Sometimes the help that’s needed is simply an hour or so to talk and a few items that let people know you are thinking of them.

The Fall Feel Good project is a good example of neighbors quietly helping neighbors with the things that matter most. You can follow @isueguthrie on TikTok to learn more about their work.

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