

Iowa Farmer Today

Tips to cope with stress

By Kim McMichael

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Safety
Watch



The month of October can mean a busy calendar.

Whether you're attending football games, enjoying the outdoors before the biting cold of winter or in the swing of harvest season, it can seem like there isn't enough time in the day to complete all the items on your to-do list.

October also includes World Mental Health Day on Oct. 10, which serves as a reminder to all busy farmers to take a minute and check in on their mental health.

The objective of World Mental Health Day is to “raise awareness of mental health issues around the world and to mobilize efforts in support of mental health.”

This goal is especially crucial to the agricultural community. Farmers and ranchers are considered a high-risk population, with suicide rates consistently above those of the general population.

Likewise, agricultural workers face exposures related to increased suicide risk, including economic fluctuation, social isolation and potential chronic pain.

Agricultural communities face additional barriers when seeking mental health treatment. One barrier is the shortage of mental healthcare professionals in rural and low-income communities.

As a result, agricultural communities have limited options for providers within a reasonable distance that are accepting new patients.

Additionally, there is no set schedule in agricultural work, and daily tasks are dependent on conditions outside of the farmer's control, like weather and mechanical breakdowns. This can make it difficult for farmers to attend regular appointments with a counselor.

The barrier that impacts everyone when discussing mental health is the stigma. It can be difficult to admit that you are struggling with depression, anxiety or suicidal ideation.

In the case of a farmer, the lack of anonymity in smaller communities amplifies their desire to handle problems on their own.

Often, people think that strength means managing stress alone. I believe being vulnerable enough to have difficult discussions with loved ones is a tremendous act of bravery.

While tight-knit rural communities may cause a farmer to hesitate to share with a friend or loved one, these small communities often come together to help their own in times of need. One of the greatest suicide prevention tools we have is our connection to peers, community members and family.

While we may not be able to eliminate stressors for those we care about, we can offer support and understanding.

When someone is experiencing chronic stress, depression or suicidal intent, they may not realize it. One way to help is to be familiar with the warning signs of someone who may be at risk. These include decreased interest in activities or events, decline in the appearance of the farmstead, increase in farm incidents, changes in routine or social activities, or an increase in illness or chronic conditions.

#BeThe1To, the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline's message for National Suicide Prevention Month, offers five actionable steps to help with discussions of stress and mental health concerns.

First, "Ask" them. This can be as simple as asking the struggling person how they are. Show them that you are there to listen and support them in their time of need, without judgment.

Second, "Be There." Whether this is in person or over the phone, it is important to show them that they have people to turn to when things are tough.

Research suggests that acknowledging and talking about suicide may reduce suicidal thoughts.

Third, "Help Keep Them Safe." Ask the person if they have a plan and make lethal items or places less available or deadly.

Fourth, "Help Them Connect." Connect the person with a trusted family member, friend, spiritual advisor or mental health professional, or the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

Finally, "Follow Up." Stay in touch with this person after the crisis has passed.

It is just as important to check in on your own mental health. We've all heard the phrase "You can't pour from an empty cup."

Offering help to others that you don't offer yourself is not an effective way to reduce the stigma.

Make sure you check in regularly on your own signs of stress. Behavioral signs to look out for include poor concentration, uncertainty or trouble making decisions, irritability, negative thinking, wanting to withdraw from people or activities and increased smoking/drinking.

Physical signs include poor or disturbed sleep, changes in appetite, stomach or gastrointestinal problems, chest pain and poor hygiene.

If you are experiencing any of these signs, do not try to carry the weight alone. Talk to someone you trust about how you are feeling whether that be a family member, clergy or mental health counselor.

It is important to remember that stress is a part of life for everyone, especially those in the agricultural community, and it is not a sign of weakness to reach out to your community in times of need. While conversations surrounding mental health can be difficult, understanding the power one conversation can have is vital.

For more information about stress resources available to farmers visit tinyurl.com/57r78ns6.

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