

**Episode Title:** What's Your Normal? Conversations About Coping with Stress on the Farm

**Summary:** Lesley Kelly works on her farm in Saskatchewan, Canada with her brother and his family, her husband, and her two boys. She is the co-founder of the Do More Agriculture Foundation, and she runs the blog High Heels and Canola Fields.

We talk with her about her and her family's mental health struggles and how they work to combat the symptoms of living with stress on the farm.

**Expert:** Lesley Kelly

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#### Episode Quote:

*"What we've learned is reaching out is the most courageous thing that you can do for someone or that you can do for yourself."*

– Lesley Kelly, Co-Founder of the Do More Agriculture Foundation

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## Transcript

### 00:10 A. Proctor

Welcome to the FarmSafe Podcast brought to you by the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health. In the blink of an eye an injury can change your life and your farm forever. During each episode, we share firsthand stories and real-life tips for making safer and healthier decisions while on the farm.

### 00:36 A. Proctor

Please tell me a bit about yourself and your role on the farm.

### 00:39 L. Kelly

I'm Lesley Kelly, and I grew up on a grain farm in central Saskatchewan. I didn't think that I would ever be a farmer. My first job outside of university and that was working directly with farmers and that's where my passion for agriculture was reignited because I loved hearing all about farmers and their love of what they do and their stories. My career just has progressed and five years ago, I started a blog using the alias of *High Heels and Canola Fields* that has led me down some paths of podcasting, and then cofounding a charity called Do more agriculture that focuses all on farmer mental health.

### 01:19 A. Proctor

Would you mind explaining a little bit more about the *Do More Foundation*, what led you to start it, what are, what are some of the outreach things that you guys do?

### 01:27 L. Kelly

My friend and fellow farmer from Saskatchewan had received a message through Twitter from someone she had never met, and they were looking for resources for someone or a family whose farmer had died by suicide. And so, she took that back and was looking for resources and then unfortunately, she couldn't find any. So that really struck a chord with her. So, she's she sat on that for a couple days and thought about what she could do. What she decided to do was put it out on Twitter. So, she tweeted that farm stress is real, and we needed to talk about, uh, mental health and agriculture and the tweet, back when things didn't go viral very often, it did.

And my husband and I watched this conversation unfold and thought, you know, we have our stories that no one really knew. And here we were, you know, I was sharing our farm life through our blog, but no one had really known more behind the scenes. So we thought people are saying that we should talk about it. But when I googled, "farmers sharing mental health story" I really couldn't find anything,

My husband and I thought, OK, well, why aren't we sharing? Some of the things we thought could be risky if we share because of the stigma. Could this impact our operating line of credit, what would the bank think, and what would our insurance think? Would people go to our landlords, and would they tell them that we're crazy and insane and our land be gone?

We did a live video sharing our journeys, me living with postpartum depression after a second boy was born, and then my husband living with anxiety, and all those things that we thought could happen. They didn't happen. It was actually the opposite. It was an outpouring of support and stories of people sharing, you know, I've been there. I've gone through that. I didn't know what to do or my spouse went through that, and they didn't know what to say and I didn't know what to do or where to go, and I couldn't find resources. There was a much greater need than what we had originally thought. And there was no dedicated organization across Canada that solely focused on farmer mental health. Myself and three other individuals launched *Do More Ag* in 2018 and have been creating awareness since.

**03:32 A. Proctor**

That's great. What you were talking about with the stigma being so deeply rooted surrounding mental health, I really appreciate your transparency.

What, in your opinion, are the biggest barriers for a farmer to seeking mental health care? And do you think the barriers are the same for men and women?

**03:47 L. Kelly**

Everyone's barriers could be different based on past experiences, how we've been treated in the past.--There's so many other factors, but some barriers are cost. Seeking treatment or support can be costly. In rural areas where the professional, if they come, may only be once a month or once a week or we have to drive into the city to get access. For everyone in the city, a mental health professional is about 1 to 3000, but in rural areas it's 1 to 8000, so we don't have access like they do in urban areas.

If someone's gone to get support, they might have had a negative experience. Maybe that professional might not have known about agriculture, or the lifestyle, or the unique stressors that we have. And in the nature of our work, we work in busy times or busy periods, long days and long hours, so we might not be able to get off a combine or leave the ranch during calving season to drive 4 hours to get treatment. Then if we choose to receive treatment or help or support via the Internet, one of our farms doesn't get Internet. We might not have awareness of what we are currently going through. It was that recognition of hearing it from someone else for me to go, oh, I am going through something. There's so much uncertainty which creates a lot of fear, and that stigma of people wanting to raise their hand and unsure of what could happen. The stigma or the fear of what people might think, am I going to lose friends? What would my family think?

Another barrier could be: it can be hard. It can raise some past emotions or experiences. If that's part of the treatment plan, it could be hard work but also beneficial.

**05:33 A. Proctor**

I really liked what you said about how somebody who may have sought help originally and didn't have a great experience. They're definitely specific stressors that come with agriculture and finding a provider that understands that and can offer support and assistance is important.

**05:47 L. Kelly**

Such a huge deal. Oh, and then differences between like women and men, through my husband, he lived with anxiety for about 10 years before we started to even talk about it. I asked him why didn't you share or why didn't you tell me earlier? And he just said he felt like he was less of a husband or less of a farmer, less of a dad because of what he was going through. It was the stigma that if you do show signs of things that you aren't strong, because now I always tell him that by sharing what he was going through, I look at strength as that is an example of strength now versus the opposite.

And then for women, a potential barrier could be the workload that we have on the farm. I didn't seek help because I feel something, but my role is to be a mom. And that's number one, and I can't put my needs ahead of anyone else because I have to take care of my kids. That was the one job I had, but I had so much guilt because "I'm not doing a very good job." Or I feel I'm not doing a very good job. So, I got on this rollercoaster of guilt, and I should be doing this, but I couldn't just because of what I was going through, so some of those might be gender-based but a lot of those barriers are just a part of us as humans, going through those emotions and feelings.

**07:00 A. Proctor**

What would you like to someone that might be on the fence about reaching out for help?

**07:05 L. Kelly**

Oh, uh, I've been on that fence. My family's been on that fence, and it's a hard fence to be on. Within our family, we try to take down those fences. Knowing that, we all go through some really hard times, but we're not supposed to go through them alone.--

That you have people in your life that care for you and love you and they want what's best for you and that includes you being healthy and happy. What we've learnt is reaching out is the most courageous that you can do for someone, and that you can do for yourself. You do deserve all the care and the love, and support.

Over the five or so years I've been a mental health advocate, we share a lot about, you know, if you're going through a hard time, reach out. And we put a lot of onus on that person who's going through something, who might not know they're going through something or who might not feel that they have the support around them, so we put a lot of onus on that person who's already going through so much and saying, you know, you need to reach out. I also like to think it as, if you see those signs and symptoms, let's reach in and lean in. By doing that, by reaching in, and letting them know that you're there, and you're there for them and you support them, and ask them what you can do to help, can be lifesaving.

**08:18 A. Proctor**

Would you mind elaborating on signs and symptoms to be aware of, either for yourself or for a loved one?

**08:24 L. Kelly**

Signs and symptoms can vary depending on the mental health struggle that someone is going through or the illness that they're living with. So, they do vary. I remember when my husband shared what his anxiety looked and felt like, and he heard a lot of feedback from individuals saying oh well, I live with anxiety, but this is what I go through. And so that was a great teaching moment for us.

It might be the same illness, but it might look and feel different for everyone. So, I like to think of it as, so you have your normal and you know those around you's normal. And if they start to deviate or go outside of their everyday normals, that's where you can start to be more cognizant of what they're going through. I look for three things. That's if someone is (1) having intense feelings and emotions that are outside of their normal, (2) if it's long-lasting-- the mental health community says give or take two weeks, and (3) when those feelings or emotions start to impact their responsibilities. For me, when I went through postpartum, so I'm super extroverted and then I just cut everyone off. I stopped really taking care of myself. I stopped showering, I stopped getting ready for the day, I stopped texting people, I didn't answer any phone calls. I stopped eating and sleeping. My husband was the same. He stopped eating and sleeping.

My husband had high amounts of irritability or frustration that would be outside of his normal like where a wrench would be thrown on the farm, which was quite unusual for him. One of the signs that I saw that I knew something was really wrong was when he got into the tractor, and he had a hard time even starting it. So, what was going on in his mind, the anxiety prevented him from being able to start the tractor and do everyday tasks on the farm. I also got a lot of headaches, tension headaches, so a lot of some physical symptoms that came along with that too. My signs and symptoms were a little bit different than my husband's, but we were definitely outside of our norm.

**10:19 A. Proctor**

Can you explain or at least provide some insight as to why someone can't just "get over" a mental health condition?

**10:26 L. Kelly**

I thought I was a pretty empathetic person and without knowing what my husband was going through, I would try to be his cheerleader. To say think positively and tomorrow will be better or just sleep it off, just work, you know, work through it, put your head down. And then I realized that easier said than done, that by me saying those things were having more of a negative impact cause he's like, I've tried. Those things just weren't what he needed for his self-care or his treatment. We have positive intentions in trying to help someone, but because our mental health goes on a spectrum and every day it might change. Someone living with a mental illness needs more or different things than what someone else's mental health might or what worked for them might not help someone else.

And people living with an illness, they live with that every day. If someone had cancer, you don't just tell them to get over cancer. Just think positively and your cancer will go away. They need other treatment and will go to doctors or other medical professionals to seek an all-inclusive treatment plan to get rid of that cancer. And the same goes with anxiety or depression or another illness where they need a comprehensive treatment plan, and they might have to try different things at different periods of time. But they need those things to help them living with this.

**11:51 A. Proctor**

What is the importance in advocating for mental wellness and stress management for you and your family, especially in agriculture?

**11:58 L. Kelly**

I didn't know much about mental health growing up, we didn't talk about mental health. But then I saw my family go through some really hard times. Like my brother lives with PTSD and my dad when he was battling cancer lived with depression and anxiety. My sister lives with borderline personality disorder. My husband with anxiety, myself with postpartum depression. What I learnt like through seeing my family go to go through some hard times is that we needed to put each other and our mental health as a priority.

We started to learn more about mental health and started to learn more about how we can have those conversations in a caring and supportive way and what that looked like and how do we see someone throwing a wrench or having an off day, how do we start those conversations? How do we help each other? How do we help ourselves? And so, we've done it through, I would say, baby steps over the last 10 years. We use a practice on the farm where we, especially during the busy times, we rate our stress. When my husband is in the tractor and all of a sudden, he feels his anxiety go up and I see him get off the tractor and go for a drive. I know his story, I don't create one in my mind then I know what what he needs and it's like you, you need you to do what you need to do to take care of yourself.

The way we started to refrain mental health was because we live with illnesses. Well, if my husband has such high anxiety because he does suffer from panic attacks, if he isn't able to come out and be on the drill and put the crop in, what are some steps that we need to do. What's our plan B and plan C? Because we have plans B&C if we were to get sick or someone were to get a broken leg, and we feel that mental health should be treated no differently than physical health, so I'm glad that it's a priority for us.

**13:42 A. Proctor**

When you were talking about your husband getting off the tractor and going for a drive to clear his mind, I'm sure that is when you knowing what your normals are and your partner or your, you know, significant other, your loved ones normals that is very helpful for a situation like that where you just understand they're just taking some time for themselves and they're just going to regroup and then they'll be back when they're ready.

**14:04 L. Kelly**

Yeah. We've gone through the exercises of what do I have that stresses me out? What are some moderate ones and then some extreme ones? So, knowing that in ourselves and each other and then what we can do to go through those stressful moments before, during and after. Either that's through breathing or going for a drive. So, before I used to get mad. It's like, why are you leaving? Or it's like, did I do something? Did I say something? So now by knowing his story, I can come in with, you know, more positive intent or try to look for that positive intent from a caring perspective as well.

**14:37 A. Proctor**

And where can people find you online and on social media?

**14:41 L. Kelly**

I go by the alias of High Heels and Canola Fields, so I'm on Instagram and Facebook and Twitter. Or you can check me out on my website at [highheelsandcanolafields.com](http://highheelsandcanolafields.com) and I write to a lot of articles and a lot of resources about mental health, through information or mental health professionals or hotlines or workshops can be found at [do more ag](http://do more ag) and that's [domore.ag](http://domore.ag).

**15:20 A. Proctor**

Thank you, Leslie, for sharing this important information, and for opening up to the ag community about you, your farm, and your family. These conversations are important to help normalize discussions about mental health.

According to the National Survey of Farmer Mental Health, farmers are four times more likely to die by suicide than the general public. 75% of farmers have mid to high stress levels, and 58% of producers demonstrate classic symptoms of anxiety. We have provided information on our web site to help you start the conversation on your farm. Check out resources at Lesley's website, [domore.ag](http://domore.ag). And, just as Leslie said: "Reaching out is the most courageous that you can do for someone, and that you can do for yourself."

#### 16:08 A. Proctor

We want to hear from you. Share your stories about health and safety issues on the farm, about injuries that made you change the way you work, or about the ways you keep yourself and others safe on your farm. Also let us know if there's questions you have or topics that you want to hear about on the air. You can visit our website, [gpcah.org](http://gpcah.org) or email us.

Original music for the FarmSafe podcast was written and performed by Ben Schmidt.

This work was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as part of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health.

## Episode Resources

- [High Heels and Canola Fields Blog](#)
- [SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline \(also available in Spanish\)](#)
- [The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline \(also available in Spanish\)](#)
- [Farm Crisis Center](#)
- [The Do More Agriculture Foundation](#)
- [U.S. Ag Safety and Health Centers Mental Health Projects](#)
- [Farm and Rural Stress Hotline](#)
- [GPCAH Mental Health Resources for Farmers](#)

## Photo

