

Episode Title: Support for Farmers' Mental Health and Well-Being

Topic: Mental Health Among Farmers and How to Provide Support

Episode Summary: Did you know May is National Mental Health Awareness Month? We have a few voices on today's episode to discuss farmers' mental health. First, you'll hear from Kentucky farmer Quint Pottinger, owner of Affinity Farms. Then, Emily Krekelberg, Minnesota extension educator and dairy farmer, followed by Tammy Jacobs, Iowa State University Extension outreach and coordinator for the Iowa Concern hotline. In combination, this episode pulls together advice on how to support other farmers and what signs to look for if you or someone you love is struggling.

Expert: Emily Krekelberg, Minnesota Extension

Episode Quote:

"Sometimes it can just be that you just have this feeling, you know that something's not right, trust that even if you don't see any signs... sometimes people who are struggling are really good at covering up the signs."

– Emily Krekelberg, Extension Educator and Dairy Farmer

Transcript

00:10 E Presnall

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 first-hand stories and real-life tips for making safer and healthier decisions while on the farm.

00:32 E Presnall

In observance of Mental Health Awareness Month in May, today's episode will highlight how farming communities can foster understanding and compassion around mental health. There is no doubt that the farming profession is unique. It combines the independent nature and risk of being a small business owner with the fundamental challenges of managing that business under a global system of supply and demand.

00:58 E Presnall

Quint Pottinger, of Affinity Farms, shares his experience and perspective on the mental health crisis among farmers on the panel discussion, "Silo Film and Farm Life."

01:08 Q Pottinger, Affinity Farms

We've been on this this land since 1780-1786, started building on 1780. But my family was never one to pass down the farm. It was always we founded the area, find a, find a way to give back to the community. Build what you what you must. And then over time, if you wanted to farm, then you just bought a piece of the families farm and you started on your own. And probably after World War 2, my grandfather bought his piece of ground from his father. It changed a little bit because agriculture grew to the point where the capital needs to put out a crop to be economically viable were enormous, almost to the point where community banks were starting to really think about how they worked with growers, because now we had to shift and look at farmers more than just a plot of land with a little bit of food here and a little bit of food there. And we've got them peppered all over the country that they're fewer, they have to aggregate the resources and some of these lenders weren't in the position to be able to, to lend and we saw prices go up in the 70s. Everything crashed. And I think that really was the beginning of what is the modern farm mental health issue.

Then we have the second crisis, which is because there's so few of us, we're alone. We spend a lot of our days alone and if you don't have a really good personal connection at home or things are stressful for another reason that are personal that aren't necessarily farm related, as hard as that is to say, cause the farm is very personal. That way is on you and then there's always this idea that we're at the mercy of the other. I mean that's it. And we could have a great crop and a hailstorm come in or a windstorm like happened. And

I will aster come in in July and just wipe it all out gone. And then you think back now and you look at those guys that had all that damage, well, they missed out on this big market run that we have. And so now they're looking forward saying, well, I have an insurance claim. I don't have any extra cash to put in the farm that was already hurting and so too is. I think that's the second thing you just have these other things outside of your day-to-day that really weighs on you.

And the third thing I think that. And this is really what hurts people in our industry the most is that we don't, we feel like we have to be the Patriarch. We have to be the one person that holds it together. We can't show that we're struggling. We can't show weakness because the banker might see and say, oh, hey, there's cracks here or the land owner might say, I don't know, those guys aren't looking so well. We may have to find a different landlord or God forbid you. There's something happening within the organization and employees leave. And now all of a sudden you have to work an extra 20 hours and a 24 hour day and you have to figure how to get that done. And so this idea that we can't talk to one another about it has compounded the issue and I don't see it getting better.

I think that the mechanism in agriculture, I've got to change a little bit. I don't think it has to. We re imagined a real redone I think it just we have to reframe how we go about the business and understanding that we can't hold ourselves to the standards of ag business anymore. We can't hold ourselves to the standards of agriculture food production anymore. We have to hold ourselves to the standard of Community civilization development because this basis, that's what agriculture is. And if we can, as a group of people, find that community again within the people, that may not be directly involved in AG but are in our community, there can be a lot of healing that takes place.

Jim and I talked a lot about that on our day on the farm. We had a lot. We had a really deep conversation about faith and what it means to be human and be real and be connected with somebody just because they are who they are, be able to look somebody in the eye and say, man, I see where you are and I don't know how to help you, but I'm here to help you. I think farmers need that probably more now than they ever have.

05:11 E Presnall

We welcome Emily Krekelberg, extension educator and dairy farmer, back this week to talk through some of the ways in which we can identify that a farmer may be struggling with stress or anxiety and what we can do as a friend, family member, or as a community to provide support to our farmers.

05:30 E Krekelberg

It's a lot of the things we think of. The unpredictability of farming, working with things like the weather, the government, outside buyers, all of those things that farmers don't have control over. The less control we perceive we have, the more stressed or threatened we typically feel. So those types of things.

I also want to speak to this kind of this underlying fear that's really present in a lot of farmers, whether they realize it or not, about the continuation of the farm. So there's a lot of kind of unspoken pressure on farmers too to maintain or improve what they have. And that's kind of always present. Another big one that I think is underrated is the stress of working with family. It can be really difficult when your personal and professional relationships are the same people you know. You live where you work and you work where you live and it can be really difficult sometimes to manage those boundaries, and that can cause a lot of additional stress as well. And then there's just things like machinery breakdown and, you know, crop loss from weather and livestock disease. It's really important to remember that each individual person has a very different threshold for stress and certain things that just make them more stressed.

Also being considerate and cognizant of the fact that you know everybody's kind of on a different path with stress and stress looks different in every single person and what stresses us out is different in every single person.

07:01 E Presnall

I want to talk through some of the signs that a farmer might be struggling with their mental health. What are some things that family, friends, hired help, community members can kind of look for?

07:16 E Krekelberg

There are some common things we can look for. But what I remind people, and that's part of what makes these mental health conversations so tricky, is it's going to look different in everyone. We need to be mindful that we're not projecting ourselves onto that

person. with most people, we're familiar with them. So, we have a baseline for them. So there's physical things to look for, grooming, hygiene, those types of things. You can also look for behavioral signs. Do they mention that they're not sleeping at all or sleeping all the time, not eating at all, or eating all the time? Isolation. They're really finding every excuse to not spend time around you or any people at all. This is also where we might see things like substance misuse, so that could be alcohol, drugs, tobacco, et cetera. Exhibiting behaviors that may be unhealthy coping mechanisms. Also, behaviors like mood swings, extreme anger, extreme sadness, perhaps even just numbness, no emotion at all.

We are all experts in the human experience, and we all were born with some sort of instinct. Sometimes it can just be that you just have this feeling that something's not right, trust that, even if you don't see any signs. I will say sometimes people who are struggling are really good at covering up the signs.

08:48 E Presnall

I think the big thing with farmers who may be struggling is how we approach it. What the next steps are that people take may be different if they are noticing kind of signs that someone who is farming is struggling. What would you recommend?

09:05 E Krekelberg

You take a step back and, you know, as you think about how you want to approach this person, really being mindful of how you show up to that conversation. The first thing I want to say is if you're going to have this conversation like this, you need to leave your fixer hat at the door. I think a lot of us, especially in agriculture, we are naturally fixers. We want to go to people and say, hey, tell me your problems, but then I'm going to tell you every way to fix them and especially with, you know, stress, mental distress, mental load, whatever you want to say. For people that can be really overwhelming or can be incredibly unhelpful because they've probably spent more than enough time already thinking about all the ways to fix it and how they can't. I think of it this way, like the impression you want to put them under is solely a concern for them. And you also don't want to approach them in a way that's going to be really confrontational or accusatory or combative.

10:13 E Presnall

Everyone just wants to feel like they have someone that they can kind of just talk to and they'll listen, and they actually are empathetic. Honestly, I want to say don't open that door if you're not going to be there as someone who's willing to be empathetic and actually listen because that that can be hurtful too.

10:33 E Krekelberg

We have the choice on if we're going to engage and how we're going to engage. It's important to also think about where we are at personally. Because you want to be a person that that person feels like they can approach. 'Cause yeah, a big thing in helping people with stress is making sure we aren't putting ourselves in that same position.

10:54 E Presnall

Think about what you would want if you were stressed or anxious. I mean, how would you want someone else to show up?

11:02 E Presnall

Mental health is part of our overall health and is just as important as taking care of your physical health. We want our farmers to be able to prioritize both.

11:14 Tammy, Iowa Concern Hotline

Hi, I'm Tammy and I am with Iowa State University Extension outreach and we're at the Farm Progress show sharing information about stress management. So, we have all kinds of tools and tricks that we utilize to help folks to decrease the stress in their lives. We have certain techniques such as stress balls. Bendy sticks. And then we have some publications on farm stress. Ways to notice the farm stress and what some of those resources are that can help somebody who's currently experiencing some stress going on. One of the resources that we utilize is the Iowa concern hotline, which is a hotline that's out there to help lowans and beyond, if they need somebody to talk about stress, if they need money to talk about financial concerns. We have an attorney to provide some legal

education. And then in our publications, we've got some different tools and tricks, different things that people can utilize to help daily to reduce that stress.

We also talked about a couple of training opportunities that we have available. We have a program called QPR which is question, persuade and refer, which helps lowans to know what some of those signs and symptoms are of somebody who's experiencing stress and potentially thinking about suicide. We also do mental health first aid for adults and youth just to help the general population know about how to recognize those signs and symptoms, how to ask that difficult, challenging question and then what some of the local resources are that are available. We also work with the farmer, rancher, and stress network, which is a 13 state, North Central region on Farm stress resources that are available in all thirteen of those states. And the Iowa concern or concern line is one of those resources that's available to persons that are in those states as well.

If you have any questions, you can always reach out to us at 1-800-447-1985. Th e Iowa concern hotline.

13:03 E Presnall

The Iowa Concern Hotline is dedicated to providing mental health support to farmers. Again, the phone number for the hotline is 1-800-447-1985, the last four digits symbolizing a year during one of Iowa's largest farming crises.

The Great Plains Center offers presentations to download for anyone who would like to assist others in understanding the challenges faced by farmers. This was first created and put to use in 2019 to improve crisis volunteers' ability to interact with farmers experiencing stress. In 2022, more resources and slides were introduced. There are notes on how to discuss the content on each slide.

13:50 E Presnall

In recognition of Mental Health Awareness Month, think back to a time when you experienced stress on your farm — perhaps waking up to an unexpected frost, a vital piece of equipment breaking down during harvest, a sick animal, flooding during the rainy season, or crop failure. When we think about it, we can usually identify a time when we felt stressed. But we may not always recognize or understand how stress impacts us, our farm operation, and our relationships with family members and the community. Reflect on your occupation's greatest sources of stress and identify ways that you can manage the items that you do have control over, such as replacing worn parts during the off-season or setting some long-term goals. Before key seasons, discuss who can be available to run for parts or care for livestock. Set priorities about what has to be done today and what can wait. It is OK to say "No," especially to those commitments you do not have time for.

14:50 E Presnall

Listen in on the FarmSafe podcast to join in on the conversation about keeping safe on the farm.

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, or email us.

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Episode Resources

- **Ag Worker Mental Health Training:** <https://gpcah.public-health.uiowa.edu/mentalhealth/>
- **RHIhub:** <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/farmer-mental-health>
- **Iowa Concern Hotline Online** or Call 1-800-447-1985

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