

H O P E

*More and more farmers and ranchers struggle with poor mental health.
What can be done?*

by Katrina Huffstutler



for the

Hopeless

It might be the agricultural industry's biggest problem nobody talks about. It's more damaging than any drought, policy or outbreak. It's farmer/rancher suicide, and it happens more often than you think.

According to recent research by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, those who work in farming, fishing and forestry occupations are 3.4 times more likely than workers in general to commit workplace suicide.

While that figure is alarming, perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise. After all, not many occupations see the same level of stress, uncertainty and isolation as those involved in agriculture.

Knesha Rose-Davison, health communications director for the AgriSafe Network, says while farmers and ranchers may suffer from depression, bipolar disorder, dementia, schizophrenia and anxiety disorders, they also experience unique occupational stressors.

"Agricultural occupations are often vulnerable to circumstances that are out of their control — such as unpredictable weather patterns, falling market prices or labor shortages — which can be

overwhelmingly stressful," Rose-Davison says. "The physical demands of agricultural occupations are taxing and can lead to chronic illness/pain that can be difficult to treat both in terms of physical access to healthcare and the rest days needed to recover fully."

Similarly, the difficulty of maintaining a work-life balance can be an exacerbating factor, she adds. After all, most farmers and ranchers live where they work, and their workdays are much longer than 9-to-5.

Geographic isolation can contribute to poor mental health, too, and Ted Matthews, director of Minnesota Rural Mental Health, says it's a myth that farmers are natural-born introverts.

"Have you ever gone into a restaurant where it was mostly farmers that go there?" Matthews asks. "It's deafening. Everybody's talking to each other."

But those conversations generally only scratch the surface, and often it's no better at home.

Matthews says while there are always exceptions, the way most men and women communicate adds to the problem.

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Symptoms of Poor Mental Health

Persistent worry and fear

Apprehension and uneasiness

Avoidance of others

Feeling sad

Difficulty concentrating

Lack of interest or pleasure in activities

Problems sleeping

Significant weight change or changes in appetite

Low energy

Slow or fidgety body movements

Substance misuse

Frequent thoughts of **death or suicide**

Unexplained changes in physical appearance
Or behavior

Source: AgriSafe

Ways to improve Mental Health

Exercise

Get enough rest

Do breathing exercises

Talk about your worries

More resources

agrisafe.org

[AgriSafe on Facebook @agrisafenetwork](https://www.facebook.com/agrisafenetwork)

[AgriSafe on Twitter @agrisafenetwork](https://twitter.com/agrisafenetwork)

domore.ag (Canada)

farmcounseling.org

According to Mental Health America, taking a mental health screening is one of the quickest and easiest ways to determine whether you are experiencing symptoms of a mental health crisis. Visit screening.mentalhealthamerica.net/screening-tools.

“Often, when men feel a lot of stress, they tend to stop talking,” he explains. “And when women feel a lot of stress, they want to talk a lot more. So, one of the problems is, as he’s pulling back, she’s pushing forward. And as she’s pushing forward, it’s irritating him. He feels like he’s being pushed and pressured and she’s feeling like we just need to talk about this. She’s saying, ‘If you talk to me, I would feel a lot better.’ And he’s saying, ‘Talking about it makes me feel worse.’”

Beating the stigma

When you think mental health, stop thinking mental illness.

That sentence is highlighted on Matthews’ website, farmcounseling.org, and it’s a big part of what he preaches.

“What happens,” he says, “when you’re talking about farmers and ranchers, they always say the same thing: ‘Well, it’s bad and I’m stressed, but it’s not that bad. I can handle it.’ My response to that is, ‘Yeah, you can, but why would you if there’s an easier way?’”

“If they were looking at different management practices, they would say, ‘If there’s an easier way to do this, I will.’ It should be the same with mental health. Why not work on some things that will make you happier and life easier?”

He says the reason they don’t is so many people have this notion that it must be a certain level of bad to warrant working on.

“It’s like, ‘I’m not crazy, so why would I call anyone for help?’”

Natalie Roy, executive director of the AgriSafe Network, agrees.

“The stigma is real, even outside of agriculture, and there’s been talk about how we should shift the way we talk about these things,” she says.

And in small towns, even those who want help may be hesitant to get it for fear their truck is seen in the parking lot and others know that they are there.

“If you see someone deviating from their normal over a prolonged period of time, it may be time to start a conversation with them. A conversation can start with something like, ‘I’ve noticed you haven’t been yourself lately, is everything OK? Do you want to talk about anything?’ Sometimes when someone does share, we as a support network don’t know what to say. A great place to start is, ‘Thank you so much for telling me.’”

—Kim Keller, *executive director and founder of The Do More Ag Foundation*

“There’s no question we have a mental health professional shortage in rural America, but even if we had enough, I’m not sure that alone would take care of the problem,” Roy says.

“People will still think therapy or counseling isn’t for them. That’s why we really need to think outside of the box when it comes to identifying people who touch the lives of farmers.”

It might be a primary care doctor who has been in the community forever, she says. It’s important he or she knows about screening for depression and anxiety, and the tools available to perform them. Additionally, community leaders need to know what to do if they recognize someone is suicidal.

“For example, I know farm lenders right now who are really scared,” Roy says. “They’re denying loans, and they don’t know if after they do, those customers feel helpless because they’ve just been told their entire livelihood is not viable anymore.”

She says the AgriSafe Network, which is a non-profit offering training to help rural healthcare professionals better serve agricultural workers, will be ramping up its efforts in 2019, not just for the medical professionals, but all community leaders.

“We want to make sure more people have some base knowledge to understand what to do when these things happen,” she says. “Unless we improve the social support system at the community level, we’re not going to be able to have that safety net.”

Matthews agrees all sorts of occupations can help. Maybe it’s a therapist, but maybe it’s a clergy member or the sheriff’s department. He says it’s important

for everyone to be able to identify who those people are in their own communities, in case they ever are concerned someone they know may be suicidal.


“And then you need to talk to them beforehand,” Matthews says. “Ask, ‘If I think somebody is suicidal, should I come to you? What do you think? How do you feel about that? What would you want me to do in that situation?’”

Then, if you feel someone you know is in danger of harming themselves, it’s easier to help.

“You don’t need some master plan,” Matthews says. “You just have to know who to call.”

He says so often, when people don’t know what to do, they do nothing.

“But doing something is always better than doing nothing,” Matthews says. “Let’s say you think someone you know is suicidal. And you contact your clergy person or the sheriff’s department or whoever, but it turns out you were wrong.

“So, you’re a little bit embarrassed. Big deal. But if you were right, you may have just saved a life. And you’ve improved the lives of all of their loved ones, as far as how their lives will be from then on. Being wrong is not a big deal, especially when you think of the alternative.” 

Editor’s note: Katrina Huffstutler is a freelance writer from Electra, Texas.