Battling Stress in Rural Iowa

Iowa farmers are under stress, but with the right tools can weather the tough times

Every morning all across Iowa, farmers meet to share a cup of coffee and talk about the weather. In Shelby County—and increasingly in many other rural communities—farmers are also talking about something else: their mental well-being.

Shelby County is home to Dr. Mike Rosmann, a psychologist, farmer and PFI member. He writes a weekly agricultural behavioral health column, and is one of only a handful of psychologists in the nation to specifically focus on the needs of farmers. “When my neighbors pass around my column, they know I’m one of them,” Mike says. “I became a better psychologist because I was a farmer, and I became a better farmer because I was a psychologist. In order to be effective in providing services, we must understand the culture of farmers, ranchers and all agricultural producers.” Gayle Olson is a PFI board member who serves as assistant to the director at Iowa’s Center for Agricultural Safety and Health, based at the University of Iowa. She highlights just how atypical Mike’s neighbors are in a culture that prides itself on hard work and minding your own business. “These issues are not unique to Iowa,” Gayle says. “An increasing number of farmers all over the world are dealing with stress. Many psychologists don’t understand farmers and farming and how it’s different from any other job. Farmers’ qualities like perseverance, independence, do-it-yourself-ing and working in isolation make them good at their jobs, but also become major barriers to them seeking help. Farmers don’t talk with neighbors about their problems, period.”

Barriers to Getting Help

The realities of farming and life in small rural communities are also often at odds with how mental health services are delivered. “The logistics of getting to an appointment can be difficult for farmers who need to stay close to the farm,” Mike says. “Maybe they could get a telecounselor but don’t have high-speed internet. Perhaps they are experiencing a crisis or high-stress situation but are unable to get in right away for an appointment.” Confidentiality can be an issue as well, Gayle adds. In smaller communities, many people know one another. Seeking help could mean revealing your problem to a neighbor. “In smaller communities there’s more of a stigma,” she says. “It’s harder to access services without all of your neighbors knowing about it. For example, you might know the receptionist at the clinic, or the doctor may have a kid that goes to school with your kid.”

In many cases, mental health services aren’t available at all. Iowa is consistently ranked among the lowest in the nation for access to mental health services—and this is especially true in rural areas. To make matters worse, a diagnosis of depression or anxiety can make it harder for farmers to obtain insurance or afford their premiums. Elected officials are taking notice: In April, Senators Joni Ernst, an Iowa Republican, and Tammy Baldwin, a Wisconsin Democrat, introduced the Farmers First Act, a bipartisan bill that would establish farm crisis hotlines and allow for providers to give up to five counseling sessions without having to file an insurance claim. It would also provide states with competitive grant funds to establish community-based assistance, and to ensure that services are affordable and available when needed. A version of the act was included in the Senate’s version of the farm bill, while a slightly different version was passed in the House. The differences between the two versions will need to be worked out, and the revised bill will have to pass in the House and Senate before the bill becomes law.

Consequences

A lack of mental health services for farmers and agricultural workers is a major problem because stress on the farm is so pervasive. As the farm economy has slumped over the past several years, the financial and emotional pressures facing farmers have only increased. Farm Aid, the non-profit farm advocacy group, reported that calls to its farmer support hotline in 2018 increased 30 percent over the previous year. In what other profession is one’s livelihood dependent on so many factors—extreme weather, pests, disease, equipment failure, commodity pricing—that are completely outside a person’s control? Failure can mean an almost incomprehensible loss. Losing your job is hard enough, but losing the farm that has been in your family for generations is a loss of identity.

It isn’t surprising that one survey of over 1,100 farmers showed 45 percent experienced a high level of stress, 58 percent were struggling with varying levels of anxiety and 35 percent met the clinical definition for depression. The persistent feeling of sadness or loss of interest that characterizes major depression can lead to a range of behavioral and physical symptoms. Farmers experiencing depression may stop caring for themselves and their farm, Mike explains. They may withdraw from usual activities like going to church or meeting with friends, and they may lose their hopeful perspective. He says the symptom most unique to farmers is what he calls the “lump in the throat” phenomenon, where one may feel overwhelming sadness but can’t bring him- or herself to cry or otherwise show emotion.
“You don’t want to underestimate how personally people take failure, even if they’re just in the wrong place at the wrong time. There’s some ingrained strong sense of pride, which can be an asset and a burden. When we’re proud of our crops, that’s a positive. But when the pride keeps people from asking for help, that’s a negative.” – VICT MAIDSEN

At a recent PFI board meeting where members were discussing ag business cycles, Vic Madsen, of Audubon, shared a little bit about his own experience losing a farm. “I erred in the late ’70s thinking the good times would last forever and made the same mistake in the ’80s thinking the bad times would last forever,” Vic says. “The way a person handles the hard times varies with the person. Many do just the wrong thing, like I did, by withdrawing from society. I dropped out of a couple local groups and was basically anti-social. The worst part was that I became so wrapped up in my financial problems that I ignored my young sons and wife. That, and a couple other things I did, were probably signs of depression. We’re over it now and it’s far enough in the past that I can talk about it, but I couldn’t have talked about it five years ago. You don’t want to underestimate how personally people take failure, even if they’re just in the wrong place at the wrong time. There’s some ingrained strong sense of pride, which can be an asset and a burden. When we’re proud of our crops, that’s a positive. But when the pride keeps people from asking for help, that’s a negative.”

Coping With Stress

Fortunately, like so many other issues on the farm, stress management is all about having the right tools. Mike advises farmers to take care of themselves by making healthy choices, spending time with the people who matter most and prioritizing the things that help them unwind, whether it’s taking a day to go fishing or visiting with the grandchildren. “Following good business practices, and being proactive about the things you can control, can put you in a better position to deal with the things you don’t have any control over,” he says. “Farmers need to look at behavioral health as an investment in themselves. It will make them better farmers. There’s evidence of a link between farmers’ mental health and the health of livestock. It makes sense. If we don’t take good care of ourselves, it’s hard for us to manage our workload optimally.”

Perhaps the easiest way to manage stress is to simply reach out to your neighbors. A mental health professional may be ideal when you’re under duress, but you don’t need a degree to offer hope and emotional support. Most people won’t go directly to a professional, but they will talk to their family doctor, pastor or friend – and that can be incredibly therapeutic. Vic says that reaching out to other farmers who understood where he was coming from was key. “For me, the way back to sanity was finding Dick Thompson and PFI. Dick’s message was opposite from the common hard-times response, which was that they – the government, lenders, landlords, input suppliers and just about everyone else – should do something. Dick’s idea was that you can do things to make your farm more stable financially. To me, that difference was like a breath of fresh air.”

Learn More

- You can read any or all of Mike Rosmann’s columns at iowafarmertoday.com.
- The Iowa Concern hotline has stress counselors available 24/7 who can talk online or by phone (800-447-1985). They also provide referrals for behavioral health counseling.