



Seniors Offer Powerful Sway over Mental Health on Farms

By Amy Petherick for the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association
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On a multi-generational farm, the most senior members of the farm team have the ability to become one of the most powerful tools in the fight against mental illness.

Of the farmers who gathered at an Ontario Federation of Agriculture workshop on mental health stigma that was offered last November, many in the standing-room-only crowd were over the age of 65. Danielle Stewart, a Consultant for Workplace Safety and Protection Services and the featured speaker of the day, says mental health issues impact farmers of all ages. She encourages senior members of the farm to take a lead in promoting mental health and wellness.

“Farmers of all ages, especially seniors, have a wealth of knowledge”, she shares. “If older, more experienced farmers prioritize mental health and wellness, younger workers are more likely to follow suit.”

Stewart explains that work by Andria Jones-Bitton of the University of Guelph, as well as advocacy being done in the prairies, has raised a lot of awareness around mental health on the farm. Mental health advocacy is not unique to agriculture Stewart explains, rather there are many industries looking to improve the mental health of their employees. Stewart says that agriculture has an advantage in many ways. She explains: “Farmers and producers inherently know their workers, because the farms people work on are both family homes and a workplace; they’re one step ahead of the corporate world in that respect,” she says. “A lot of the work we’re trying to do with organizations really surrounds getting to know your people and humanizing the workplace.”

Stewart says everyone has a personal story about mental health. Mental illness touched her family when she was in high school, which is when she became very passionate about the topic. Not long after, she created a university campaign to get the message out that mental illness doesn’t discriminate based on race, gender, or background. Stigma prevents so many people from discussing mental health, both personally and professionally. It’s critical to promote open communication if you want to start improving mental health in the workplace.

“People are just starting to talk about mental health in the workplace, so they’re still very curious about it and asking where to get started,” she explains. “We need to put a lot of effort and time into anti-stigma education and awareness; regardless of industry or sector. That’s where a lot of workplaces are starting.”

A big piece of being mentally well must include a willingness to be open, honest, and aware about our own health. This is true for young, middle-aged and senior farmers. Stewart says this includes being cognizant of new and changing abilities, the impacts of medication, and other various stressors. She says the questions to ask yourself could include:

“Is my head in the game?”

“Am I distracted by other things, like maybe a doctor’s appointment?”



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“Am I really focused on the task at hand?”

Janet Smith, Program Manager for the Manitoba Farm and Rural Stress Line, agrees with Stewart and says people who have suffered an injury while working on the farm will often describe being mentally distracted at the time of their incident. “We know that when farmers are stressed, it impacts all parts of their lives and that puts them more at risk of injury.” She says farmers who take good care of their physical and mental health will benefit. They are safer, and more productive. When farmers call the Manitoba Farm and Rural Stress Line to ask for help, she says her organization’s objective is to empower farmers to keeping working through whatever they’re experiencing, no matter what their age is.

Stewart reminds senior farmers that acknowledging changes in one’s abilities doesn’t need to be seen as negative. “The aging process is an important and fantastic part of life,” she says. “It’s something to be proud of!”

Stewart hopes that senior workers and young workers alike, will look after both their physical and mental health, if not for themselves, for their families and the farm. After all, the most important asset of any farm, is the farmer.

For more information about Canadian Agricultural Safety Week, visit agsafetyweek.ca.



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