

How to Do More for Mental Health in Agriculture

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■ Take Home Messages

- Mental health affects the agriculture industry more prevalently than other industries.
- We need to begin to change the conversation and decrease the stigma surrounding mental health in agriculture.
- We can reduce the stigma by increasing our mental health literacy, learning how to have conversations, and understanding self-care and prevention.

■ Understanding Mental Health

Mental wellness vs. mental stress vs. mental illness. The terms are often used interchangeably, but they have very different meanings. Mental wellness (or mental health) is defined as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community (World Health Organization, 2018). Mental stress is a form of stress that occurs because of how events in one’s external or internal environment are perceived, resulting in the psychological experience of distress and anxiety (Salomon, 2013), whereas mental illness is a health condition involving changes in emotion, thinking or behaviour or a combination of these (American Psychiatric Association, 2020).

It is normal to fluctuate between mental wellness and mental stress, often on a daily basis. We actually need stress in our lives; it helps us operate at peak effectiveness and assists us with problem solving and capacity for building resiliency. We need to ensure though that there is a fluctuation back to mental wellness, for when we do not have a reprieve from the stress we are at increased risk of developing a mental illness. The return to mental wellness can be done through self-care, by setting boundaries, and by increasing our knowledge of mental illness overall.

■ Most Prevalent Types of Mental Illness

- Mood disorders: depression, bipolar disorder, suicide
- Anxiety disorders: anxiety, panic attack, post-traumatic stress disorder
- Substance-related disorders: alcohol, cannabis, opioids

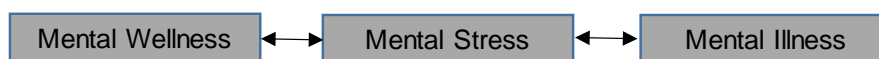
In-depth training on recognizing signs and symptoms of mental illness is most appropriately gained through mental health first aid, but there are other ways to be conscientious about mental health. A prolonged and progressive change in a person’s normal behaviour can be indicative of mental stress. Often, it is a loved one who may recognize this change before the person himself or herself recognizes a decline. Gaining the skills to open a conversation to address this is an important tool in your toolbox. Early recognition of undue stress can go a long way in maintaining our health, and here we will explore the nature and some solutions of being proactive this season.

■ Total Health

When we talk about mental health, we also need to talk about total health. It is important to recognize the pillars to total wellness, which include mental, physical, spiritual and emotional health.

While we are living and working on the farm, our physical health needs are often met, but total health encompasses more than resistance training and elevated heart rates. Not only do mental, emotional and spiritual elements make up three quarters of our total health recipe, but mental stress and illness can have negative effects on our physical health, including headaches, gut health, back pain, adverse cardiovascular consequences and more.

Mental health is the overarching umbrella that encompasses mental wellness, mental stress, and mental illness.



Unlike a physical fracture, in which a bone breaks, mends and is healed, mental health is a constant fluctuation of one's state of mind. It's important to know that every individual floats between mental wellness and mental stress, usually on a daily basis. One in five individuals will fluctuate to mental illness in their lifetime. Achieving a consistent return to mental wellness requires a balance of physical, emotional, spiritual and social attention.

Humans are social creatures and require quality interaction with others to stimulate their social wellness. Whether it's company in the combine, a game of cards in the barn alley waiting to see if #23 needs a calf pull, lunch around the kitchen table, or morning coffee at the local shop, spending some quality time on a social level with family and friends is a great step towards supporting one's mental wellness. Understandably, a lot of farming and ranching is done solo, so making meaningful interactions via technology, versus just scrolling through social reels, can help get us through.

When it comes to emotional wellness, we use the term 'feel your feels.' We have a wide array of natural emotions and it is important to experience and go through them versus stuffing them away. Whether you're feeling sad, mad, happy or glad, resolving to talk to someone or exploring those feelings yourself through reflection, journaling or your own means of exploration can make a big impact on your abilities to put perspective on a situation and help you cope with the stressors the seasons and agriculture overall undoubtedly bring.

Above all, give yourself permission to 'do you.' There are many tips and techniques that people use to manage stress but no one way works for every person. The key is exploration and finding what works for you, even if it's nothing you've ever been told before. Try it, you might like it, but if you don't, keep trying something else. The key is to keep searching for your own solutions, but if you feel that you have and are out of options, reach out. If you need help accessing resources, visit <https://www.domore.ag/> where you can find national, provincial and regional supports to help you through a hard time.

■ Impacts of Sleep Deprivation

Lack of sleep can contribute to physical and mental stress, and illness. Our ability to concentrate the longer we go without sleep can be affected and can cause an increase in accidents, irritability and memory lapse. Our overall stress can also increase from simply not sleeping. There are many times in agriculture that getting more sleep simply isn't an option, but by being aware of the impact lack of sleep can have you can at least be forgiving with yourself, thereby reducing stress in at least one area of your situation.

■ Implementing a Community of Self Care

We can't change the conversation and stigma about mental health in agriculture without going to a grass roots level. At Do More Ag, our vision is to build up families and communities to have preventative wellness strategies; prevention is always an easier road than recovery. Understanding how different we are as human beings—personality differences and differences in resiliency levels—and approaching each other with empathy are the first steps to creating communities more resilient and adept to remaining in a place of wellness.

If you, or someone you know, needs help, you can visit <https://www.domore.ag/resources> for a list of resources by province or <http://211.ca/find-help-211/> for live chat options on mental health. In the event of an emergency situation, please call 911.

American Psychiatric Association. 2020. What is mental illness? <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/what-is-mental-illness>

Salomon, K. 2013. Mental Stress. In: Gellman M.D., and J.R. Turner. (eds) Encyclopedia of Behavioral Medicine. Springer, New York, NY. https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-1-4419-1005-9_261

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