

Wellbeing and Productive Farming

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■ Take Home Messages

- ▶ YOU are a major asset to your operation.
- ▶ The ability to be an asset is impacted by your wellbeing, which includes physical and mental health.
- ▶ Cattle cannot feed themselves and the tractor cannot fuel itself; make self-maintenance a priority by fuelling and hydrating your body to help sustain productivity.
- ▶ Negatively impacted wellbeing increases risk of farm injury and rates of illness and decreases decision-making ability and productivity.
- ▶ Visible warning signs of decreasing producer health include farm and animal health deterioration.
- ▶ Simple self-maintenance, which includes getting some sleep, drinking water, and eating throughout the day, helps to improve and maintain wellbeing.

■ Introduction

A theme I often run into while speaking on the importance of mental health in agriculture is producers (male and female) who dismiss the topic and ask, “What does mental health have to do with farming?” My response is always the same, “How do you feel about having the money to pay your bills?”

Your wellbeing affects your productivity, which affects your bottom line. As an agriculture producer myself, I know how much that bottom line matters. As a researcher, a rural mental healthcare provider, and a suicide intervention responder, I know the extent to which wellbeing impacts one’s ability to function physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Perhaps producers walk away from or avoid talking about mental health and wellbeing because, up until recently, it was not commonly talked about. As a population, we are well versed at talking about the weather, input costs, the expense of machinery and feed, and livestock genetics. All those things are part of our cultural language. For many of us, we grew up listening to our parents or neighbours speaking about agriculture, which one could argue is quite similar to learning a first language — of course we are comfortable speaking about agriculture related topics. However, what are the chances you heard conversations about health and wellbeing during your childhood or young adulthood? Did you ever hear your parents or neighbours conversing about health, aside from “Did you hear the neighbour broke their leg” or “So and so had a heart attack”?

Another theme I occasionally observe at agricultural events is producers making a quick exit as mental health related presentations are introduced. Perhaps producers walk away because they have previous exposure to ineffective and possibly harmful talks about mental health. I have heard a variety of mental health presentations that ranged from boring as hell, had nothing to do with agriculture, were incredibly triggering without de-escalation, or made me feel worse about myself rather than better. No fun! Those

presentations — where we are inadvertently made to feel worse — are not fun, so why would people willingly expose themselves to that further?! Believe me, I get it; we have enough on our plate.

Perhaps a primary reason behind producers walking away from health-related topics is attributable to avoidance. They may not be in the space to hear it, for example, “I can’t deal with this right now.” Some producers may not be in a place to take on additional workload, and let’s be real, working on oneself does require a little time and energy. During high production seasons on the farm, calving for example, I am very hesitant to take on additional projects or tasks because of lack of time and energy and other life commitments. My thesis research supports this idea, given that every producer reported waiting for down time before participating in an online therapy program for agriculture producers (Beck, 2022; www.onlinetherapyuser.ca). Other researchers have found that individual producers may not be ready or willing to take a good look at themselves because they report managing fine on their own, they have concerns about making their situation worse, they have no idea how to go about getting help, or they are concerned about stigma (Gregoire, 2002; Canadian Agricultural Safety Association, 2005; Hagen et al., 2021).

In my opinion, the players in the agriculture industry have come a long way in promoting mental health awareness. Different levels of government are advocating for agricultural mental health, through Committee hearings on a federal level (Finnigan, 2019) to mental health presentations hosted by provincial and municipal governments. National agricultural associations and events are creating opportunities for mental health conversations, as are provincial livestock and breed associations. Universities, researchers, and funding agencies are dedicating major resources to agricultural mental health research, advocacy, and outcomes. To list all of the agencies, associations, institutions, and individuals actively trying to make a difference in agricultural mental health, the list would take pages, and for that I am immensely grateful.



Here is the kicker in all of this though: we can research, advocate, throw money at, and talk about mental health until the cows come home, but it is up to you, the individual, to choose to have an open mind and hopefully gain some awareness of your state of health and wellbeing, and then look at the impact you have on your farm operation or business. My goal in these proceedings is to be real with you as to what health and wellbeing mean as an agriculture producer, to provide the warning signs of decreasing health, and to provide you with doable strategies for improving overall health, wellbeing, and productivity. Please be forewarned, my light-hearted and straight forward approach and expressive language use in conversing about mental health may be surprising to some viewers.

■ What is Wellbeing?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines wellbeing as “the state of being well or doing well in life; happy, healthy, or prosperous condition; moral or physical welfare (of a person or community).” This definition applies well to the agriculture population. We are a large community; we care about the welfare of our family, friends, community, and employees; we work long and hard to be prosperous (fingers crossed!); and when farming is going right, we are bound to feel a sense of pride and joy.

From a producer and mental health care provider point of view, the above definition requires some ‘beefing up’ to meet the needs of an agriculture producer’s lifestyle. Wellbeing as it applies to producers also means that we have the ability to live where we work and work where we live.

Think about that for a moment — in what other industry do you work with a co-worker who possibly frustrates the hell out of you or argues with you all day long, and then you go to bed with them at night or sit down to a full family holiday meal with them?

There are days when it is not easy, especially in the case of multigenerational farming operations. Wellbeing includes having the ability to care for our livestock regardless of how tired we are or how cold it is outside and having the ability to forward think, to problem solve, and to communicate effectively. For example, we need to know long before the snow arrives whether or not we have enough feed and bedding for our herd to get us through winter.

Just to be clear, wellbeing is not an all or nothing type of thing, which is the same for our physical and mental health. It moves along a continuum. Each person has different levels of healthy as much as we have different levels of unhealthy. We can think of it similar to that of cows' milk production. Each of your cows produces an average amount of milk daily, some naturally produce more or less than others. They each have their 'normal'. All of your cows contribute to you meeting your quota; therefore, they are assets to your farm operation. One day you notice that Holly 102C's ears are droopy and her milk production has been down the last couple of days. She has mastitis in one quarter. So, you treat her and keep milking her, but the milk cannot go into your tank. She is currently at a different level of healthy. She is still an asset to your operation but less of an asset when it comes to helping you meet quota. With a little care and additional maintenance, Holly makes a full recovery, and she is back to contributing productively to your operation. If you were to ignore poor Holly's mastitis, what would happen? Her health would deteriorate further, she would stop producing milk and start costing you money due to her lack of productivity and cost to feed. A cow's health can fluctuate, and when her health fluctuates so does her productivity. Humans are the same.

■ Are You an Asset?

If you had a heart attack tonight, would your farm operation continue running as is tomorrow? Despite the wonders of automation, cows cannot feed themselves, feed doesn't magically harvest itself, and machinery cannot pump its own fuel. You are the number one asset to your operation, and so are the people who work with you.

Have you ever taken a moment to think about the many roles that you and the people whom you farm with fulfill? The work does not get done without the people power, and keep in mind, just like our cows, there are times when we humans are less of an asset. Take a look at the list below (Figure 1); have you ever thought about the roles you play in your operation, or the amount of knowledge you use on a daily basis?

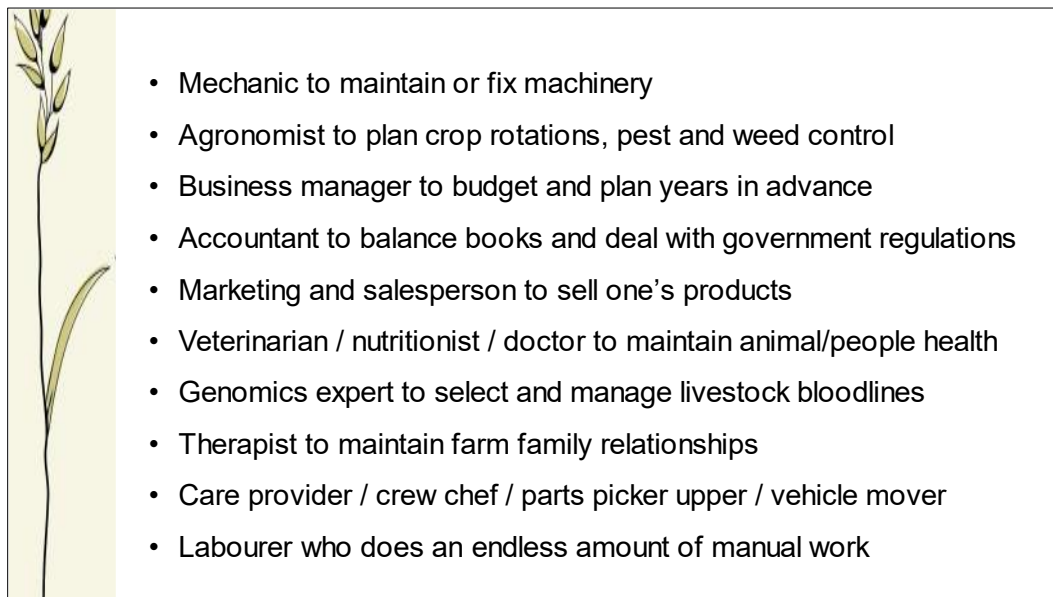


Figure 1: The roles of farmers in their operations.

■ What Affects Wellbeing?

If you were to go fencing for the day, would you just hop in your truck or tractor and drive off without fueling up or loading fence posts, wire, staples, or even a hammer? Probably not (if you responded 'yes', we need to chat), because it would be a total waste of your time. You wouldn't get any work done.

We do maintenance on our equipment or machinery on a regular basis: fuel, grease, tires, oil. Most of the producers I know plan ahead to make sure they have the supplies they need to do a good day's work, which is called being proactive. The skill of being proactive in farming helps to increase our work efficiency, which also increases our productivity.

How often do you head out for the day without fueling yourself? Many people leave for work for the day with just a cup of coffee in their belly (guilty) and running on little sleep (yup, guilty of this too). One could say it is common sense and good farming practice to maintain machinery and be proactive yet it is quite common that we forget to do our own self-maintenance.

Self-Maintenance

Self-maintenance is the term I prefer to use instead of saying 'self-care'. I've heard many people in agriculture voice that self-care is frivolous or even selfish, that it has to include a holiday, warm bubble bath, a spa day, or a weekend getaway. As agriculture producers, trying to meet those expectations of 'self-care' is unrealistic and sets us up for failure.

Basic self-maintenance has more of a long term impact on our health and wellbeing than does a one-time holiday. Self-maintenance includes getting adequate sleep, drinking water to hydrate your brain and body, balanced nutrition to fuel yourself, moving your body, disconnecting from the workload and the stress, and adding positive activities into your life that are separate from your farm or business.

Diminished Self-Maintenance

For many agriculture producers, our health and wellbeing takes last place on the priority list of things to do. During high production seasons, we work incredibly long hours and perhaps deprive ourselves of sleep. I know some producers who work for the day without taking breaks, and they eat one meal per day, basically when they come in at night.

If we were to avoid doing basic maintenance on our machinery, like fueling up or tire maintenance, that machinery would leave us stranded and cost us in productivity. Our body is very similar; if we are not sleeping, eating, or hydrating, our body has to work harder to be productive, similar to the tractor in the picture with the tire that fell off (Figure 2). A little maintenance and this tractor will be back doing its job. The combine on fire, however, may be a different story.



Figure 2: Your body, like your machinery, needs to be properly maintained to be productive.

There are times when we push ourselves too hard for too long. If there is a lot of work and as many problems, we tend to do put our noses to the ground and work harder. Perhaps we go without sleep and reach for caffeine, energy drinks, or drugs to keep on going. Perhaps we put off eating or we reach for convenience foods that provide little fuel to sustain our body. It is typically during these same times that stress can be overwhelming.



Everyone deals with stress differently. Some people try to cope by working harder. Some people try to cope by using substances like alcohol or recreational drugs. Some people cope by inadvertently lashing out at the people around them. In our family, we call this ‘shit-flinging’ or manure spreading, when someone who is having a bad day unleashes the emotions, anger, and frustration out onto those around them – the people who are typically trying to help solve the problem.

These ways of coping — not sleeping, not eating, not drinking water, or relying on caffeine, drugs, alcohol, and allowing the stress to impact those around us — all negatively impact our wellbeing and the wellbeing of our family and co-workers (Fraser et al., 2005; Yazd et al., 2019).

Contextual Factors

Contextual factors are characteristics within our environment that influence our behaviour. Nearly every aspect of an agriculture producer’s life is inextricably linked with their work life, which has mental health implications for producers and their family members. Many producers live on their farm and have little to no separation between their workday and their personal life (Fraser et al., 2005; Yazd et al., 2019).

Producers take little to no personal time and are less likely to retire than people in other occupations (Gregoire, 2002; Brew et al., 2016; Fullerton, 2016). Working with family on the farm also poses a challenge for separating work life from personal time and has been identified as a key stressor for Canadian producers (Sturgeon and Morrissett, 2010; Finnigan, 2019). In 2016, 97% of farms in Canada were family farm operations (Statistics Canada, 2016), with some Canadian farms having up to four generations actively working on or involved in farm decision making (Fullerton, 2016). Conflicts and relationship strain often arise when the oldest generation and the adult siblings are partners in a family farm, and all hold differing

priorities for farm growth and expenditures or have differing beliefs regarding work ethic and work hours (Fraser et al., 2005; Rudolphi et al., 2020).

During seasons of high productivity, producers are under pressure to accomplish a large amount of work within a short period of time (LaBrash et al., 2008; Lilley et al., 2012). Long work hours equate to diminished sleep hours, and periods of high productivity are often accompanied by increased stressors and worries.



Producers report experiencing daily worries and sleeplessness regarding debt and cash flow, which contribute to impaired sleep quality (LaBrash et al., 2008). Fatigue impairs cognitive functions such as multi-tasking, attention and awareness, decision making, and risk taking (Lilley et al., 2012). Research findings further highlight that diminished sleep duration and poor sleep quality are associated with increased rates of anxiety and depression (Hawes et al., 2019; LaBrash et al., 2008).

Occupational Hazards

In addition to the self-maintenance and contextual factors, our wellbeing, physical and mental health can be impacted by occupational hazards. Simply by the nature of the lifestyle we lead in the agriculture industry, producers are exposed to potential injury from:

- mechanical forces or equipment (please turn off the P.T.O, watch out for the grapple)
- livestock
- needle, medication, or vaccination exposure
- environmental exposure (we look after the herd in all kinds of weather)
- chemical exposure (anti-parasitics, pesticides, herbicides)
- biological exposure (rodent feces, dust, mold)

(Gregoire, 2002; Brew et al., 2016; Donham and Thelin, 2016).

▪ The Impacts of Challenged Wellbeing

Signs of Decreasing Mental Health

Anxiety is our body's natural response to stress and people experience it differently. For some, anxiety may feel like an upset stomach and for others it may feel like a heart attack.

Low mood or feeling down is a natural response to upsetting or sad events in our daily life. It is also normal to experience periods of low mood or worry, which are natural reactions to dealing with constant stress.

If you find yourself feeling down or hopeless more often than not, you may be dealing with depression. Men, women, and children experience depression differently. Psychiatric symptoms can occur when a person is experiencing challenges to their mental health (Canadian Mental Health Association; <https://cmha.ca/>).

There are people who have experienced health and wellbeing difficulties for such a long time that it has become their 'normal' state of being. I'm sure you can think of someone (e.g., friend, neighbour, family member) who is a total jackass, and no one likes to deal with them.

Are they a jackass because that's who they are, and it is part of their personality or are they a person experiencing long term, unchecked mental health and wellbeing difficulties?

Quite often it is easier for us to spot the warning signs of decreasing mental health in others more so than in ourselves. Many warning signs are outwardly visible (Figure 3).

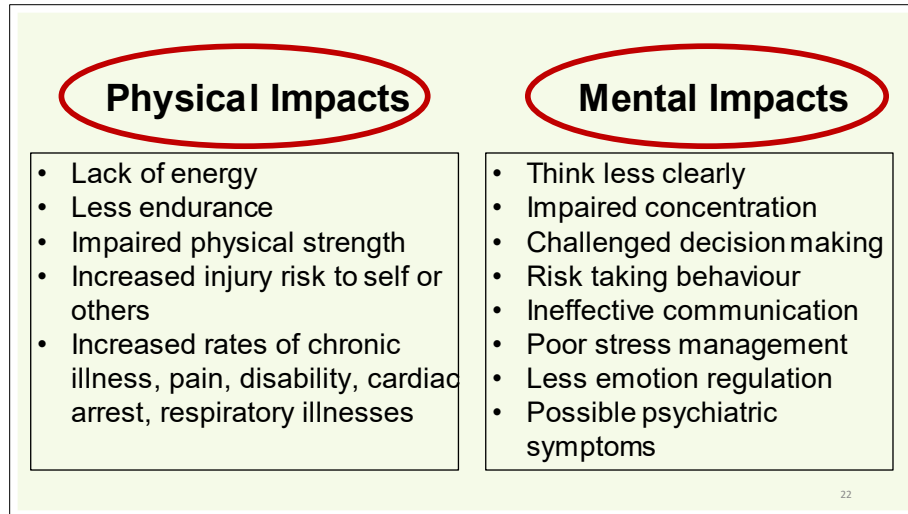


Figure 3: Warning signs of challenged wellbeing.

Here are a few warning signs that you may recognize experiencing yourself or that you recognize from observing others:

Changes to routine: sleep, hygiene, diet, substance use

- ▶ For people experiencing psychiatric symptoms, they may be sleeping odd hours of the day, requiring more sleep than usual, or having difficulty sleeping and waking because thoughts keep turning over in their mind (called rumination).
- ▶ If you know someone who was always clean shaven and well-kept and then you see them in town with dirty clothes, straggly hair and unshaven, they may be experiencing challenges to their mental health.
- ▶ Changes to diet can occur in either direction: a person may find it difficult to eat and experience weight loss, or a person who may normally be a healthy, mindful eater may reach for convenience or comfort foods and binge eat.
- ▶ If you know someone who was a social drinker and you see them with alcohol in the cab of the tractor in the morning, they may be experiencing challenged mental health.
- ▶ Some people experiencing difficulties will try to self-medicate in order to cope by taking recreational drugs, increasing alcohol intake, or taking prescription medications not as prescribed.

Changes to energy levels

- ▶ If you know someone who has always been fairly even keeled and suddenly they have periods where they are very high energy or very low energy, they may be experiencing challenged mental health.
- ▶ Decreases in motivation and difficulty finding the determination and energy to get the work done can be psychiatric symptoms.

Emotions are off

- Sometimes people describe themselves as feeling numb, like their emotions are turned off.
- People may have emotional reactions that don't seem to fit the situation (e.g., laughing at a funeral).
- Difficulties with emotion regulation may be signs of challenged mental health (e.g., yelling over insignificant things, uncontrollable crying).

Difficulty concentrating or with memory recall

Withdraw, isolate, or stop communicating with others

Engage in risky behaviour

- This may include using substances and operating machinery or engaging in unsafe farm practices

Uncharacteristic judgment or decision-making

- Suddenly making a large purchase (e.g., buying a second combine during a drought) or snap business decisions with long term implications (e.g., deciding to sell the cowherd during the night and the cattle liner loads in the morning)

Deterioration of farm or animal health

▪ **Tips for Improving Wellbeing**

Do the self-maintenance! Do the self-maintenance! Do the self-maintenance!

Make yourself a priority, even if it is for ten minutes in the morning for you to drink a glass of water, eat breakfast, and fill a water bottle and grab snacks to fuel yourself for the day. As agriculture producers, we may not be able to control some factors that contribute to challenged health and wellbeing, like the weather or government regulations. However, in our first world country, we do have control over whether or not we drink a glass of water in the morning and eat something.

Please get some sleep. Yes, there are times in the farming year, calving for example, when getting adequate sleep is difficult. During high production seasons, it is imperative that we nap when we can. No one wins a medal for running on empty, and fatigue can be dangerous and costly. Try to eat meals during the day and not wait to eat one big meal at the end of the day, which makes it more difficult for your body to sleep.

There may be times when agriculture producers are quite sedentary due to operating machinery. Moving your body, even by walking to the barn instead of taking the truck or quad, is beneficial to get the blood flowing and the heart rate elevated.

Work on learning how to disconnect from the workload and disengage from the stress. These are important skills to learn. For many agriculture producers, their entire world is the farm operation. It is difficult to maintain a balanced perspective when one's entire purview consists of the farm.

Think of it as a mountain; if one is standing right at the base of the mountain, which is the cliff face, then one's entire field of vision is filled with an insurmountable problem; it is impossible to see a solution. Drive a little way away from that cliff face (the problem), and you may gain an entirely new perspective which allows you to find solutions.

Another reason for disconnecting from the workload and the stress is to create opportunity for adding more to your self-identity than the farm. One of many reasons why the potential of losing the farm or retiring is so stressful is because producers are left wondering, "Who am I now?"

I'm sorry to be the person dropping this truth bomb on you, but one day we all retire from farming, whether it be to go enjoy life or it be in a body bag, but you will retire. Adding positive activities to your life now, that are separate from your farm or business, are beneficial to your health and wellbeing. Those positive activities allow you to explore and grow as a person, to develop a well-rounded self-identity, to disconnect from the work and stress, and who knows, you may even enjoy yourself!

Communicate with your family or business partners and make a plan in the event of illness. Hopefully you can also talk about and develop a business plan. Research findings have identified that having a business plan and plans in place in event of illness reduces stress for all business partners (Wilton Consulting Group, 2020).

Learn your triggers and patterns of coping. Many people experience cyclical mental health challenges. For example, people may find their mental health automatically deteriorates in the winter and then improves in the spring or summer.

While volunteering as a suicide intervention responder, it became very apparent to me that people experience increased challenges to their mental health and wellbeing during certain periods of the farming year. For example, some people's mental health and wellbeing deteriorates during calving season year after year, which makes sense because the calving season comes with increased workload, increased stress load, and decreased sleep quality and quantity.

For other people, it may not be the time of year that triggers mental health challenges, it may be something else, for example, farming with family. If you can start paying attention to how you are doing and learn to recognize what upsets you or causes you frustration, then you can possibly prepare ahead of time and develop some coping strategies. Some producers have told me that just knowing they'll probably experience mental health challenges during a certain period of time helped them to maintain perspective and to know that it would not last forever, which helped them to get through it.

Please recognize the stress you choose to add. Do you have a to-do list that has unchecked items on it from a month or years ago? These perpetual lists that rarely get accomplished do very little aside from making you feel worse about yourself. Instead, create a ta-da list; the only items that are placed on this list are items that can realistically be done in the morning. Then at lunch, you cross off the tasks you finished and create yourself a new list. Be realistic with your expectations and set yourself up for success.

Additionally, are you taking on stress that may not even belong to you? There are times when we inadvertently create challenges for our health and wellbeing by comparing ourselves, our accomplishments, and our life to that of our neighbours. I call this toxic comparison.

If you find yourself wondering why the neighbours can afford that shiny new tractor or a house at the lake and you can't, or how they can manage taking vacations and you can't, how is this helpful to you? It's not helpful, and in fact, it has the potential to be very harmful to your state of health and wellbeing. It wastes your time and energy. Toxic comparison can be lethal. No two farming situations are alike, and we have no idea what happens behind someone else's closed doors. Keep in mind, the stuff people choose to share, whether it be in person or on social media, is the glossy parts of their life and is rarely a reflection of their true reality.

Mind your own business and manage your own stress instead of adding the stress from toxic comparison. The only time it is fruitful for you to mind other people's business is if you would like to learn new management practices or new skills from them for your own growth and development.

The last thing I encourage you to do is learn, for your own health and wellbeing, how to accept help. As agriculture producers, we have a lot on our plate. We deal with prolonged periods of stress, we push our bodies to the limit, and most producers try to carry the burden on their own. Learning how to accept help is an acquired skill.

If by now you have recognized that you are experiencing challenged mental health, please be proactive and take steps to do something about it. There is help available (see resources below). Please talk to a trusted person or a professional. Many producers report having concerns with experiencing stigma if they go get help for their mental health. Speaking as a producer and a mental health care provider, the biggest stigma that we deal with is the stigma we place on ourselves with the talk in our own head.

If you have a sick cow, do you give her medication to nurse her back to health or do you prefer to watch her slowly deteriorate, struggle, suffer, and die? That may seem like a ridiculous question. Yet for many of us, that's what we do to ourselves instead of taking the steps to get some help. You are worth it. Please remember, you and the people you work with are the number one asset on your farm operation.

▪ Resources:

Canada-Wide Services and Resources:



The Government of Canada, the United Way, and provincial partners have teamed up to fund 211, which is available in every Canadian province and territory. Similar to 911, which is for emergencies, 211 is for mental health and wellbeing supports.

You can call or text to 211, literally all you need to dial is 211, and a worker will help you to identify the support you need and help you to find supports in an area near you.

There is great information on each provincial website. <https://bc211.ca>; <https://ab.211.ca>; <https://sk.211.ca>; <https://mb.211.ca>

Online Therapy Unit: <https://www.onlinetherapyuser.ca/>

Canadian Mental Health Association: <https://cmha.ca/>

The Canada Suicide Prevention Service Call: 1-833-456-4566 (Available 24/7/365); Text: 45645 (Available 4pm - midnight ET); <https://www.crisisservicescanada.ca>

Agricultural Health and Safety Network: <https://cchsa-ccssma.usask.ca/aghealth>

Do More Agriculture Foundation: www.domore.ag

Centre for Addition and Mental Health: www.camh.ca

National Farmers Union: <https://www.nfu.ca/help/>

Farm Credit Canada: <https://www.fcc-fac.ca/en/community/wellness.html>

British Columbia Resources:

The B.C. Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries provide numerous resources in the following pdf: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/farming-natural-resources-and-industry/agriculture-and-seafood/business-and-market-development/emergency-preparedness/flood-2021/mental_health_resources_for_agriculture_sector.pdf

Alberta Resources:

Agricultural Service Boards: <https://agriculturalserviceboards.com>

Alberta Farm Mental Health Network: <https://www.agknow.ca/>

Alberta Mental Health & Suicide Prevention Resources: <https://www.farms.com> (this website lists many mental health services in AB)

Centre for Suicide Prevention : <https://www.suicideinfo.ca/resource/>

CORE Alberta: <https://corealberta.ca/resources/mental-health-resources-farmers>

Saskatchewan Resources:

Saskatchewan Farm Stress Line: www.farmstressline.ca; 1-800-667-4442

SaskAgMatters Network: www.saskagmatters.ca

Online Therapy Unit: www.onlinetherapyuser.ca

Manitoba Resources:

Manitoba Farm Stress Line: <https://supportline.ca/>

Call toll free: 1-866-367-3276; <https://www.tmsd.mb.ca>

Manitoba Farmer Wellness Program: <https://manitobafarmerwellness.ca/>

Shared Health Manitoba: <https://sharedhealthmb.ca>

Klinik Community Health: <https://klinik.mb.ca/2018/01/mental-health-farm/>

Ontario Resources:

Agriculture Wellness Ontario: <https://AgricultureWellnessOntario.ca>; 1-866-267-6255

Ontario Mental Health Line: www.connexontarios.ca; 1-866-531-2600

The Farmers/ Toolbox: www.thefarmerstoolbox.com

Quebec Resources:

Au Coeur des familles agricoles : <https://acfareseaux.qc.ca/>

Suicide Prevention Centre of Quebec : <https://www.cpsquebec.ca/en/formations-population/>

1-866-277-3553 (bilingual)

Prince Edward Island Resources:

Farmers Talk: www.farmerstalk.ca; 1-800-218-2885

EACH OTHER: a great resource that we often overlook is our fellow agriculture producers

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