

Mental Health Takes Work

*Equipment breaks down; human beings do, too.
Understand and address mental health issues.*

by Paige Nelson, field editor

“I’ll be frank. This is something that I have never really opened up about,” says Drew DeSutter, a fourth-generation farmer and Angus cow-calf rancher from west-central Illinois, of his bouts with anxiety and depression. His experience changed his perception on mental health, he says.

“As an industry, we’re all in this together,” he says.

DeSutter admits he would look at someone with mental health issues a lot differently now than he would have 10 years ago.

“We all have mental health,” says Adrienne DeSutter, Drew’s wife and ag mental health advocate. “We may not all have a mental health condition, obviously, but we all have mental health, so we all need to be doing things to maintain that and to keep ourselves mentally well.”

Taking the step to reach out for help isn’t easy.

“The single most important barrier to overcome in the community is the stigma associated with discrimination toward persons suffering from mental and behavioral disorders,” reports the World Health Organization.

In the ag community, stigma concerning mental health and mental health conditions has unintentionally influenced behaviors, Adrienne says. The negativity surrounding mental health conditions is harmful to the

“*People don’t choose to be depressed.*”
— *Laura Talley*

tight-knit industry, a fact substantiated by the higher per capita rate of suicide in rural America vs. urban America. In Colorado, the ag industry experiences suicide rates second only to the construction industry.

More than anything, stigma stems from a lack of understanding, describes Laura Talley, a doctor of psychology in Lawrence, Kan.

There is a long history of blaming the person with the mental illness, Talley says. Although, recently people have started to accept this is much more similar to a physical illness.

“People don’t choose to be depressed. It’s not just people that won’t pull themselves up by their bootstraps,” she explains. “It’s people that are in bed and can’t figure out why they can’t get out.”

Mental health professionals and advocates alike say it’s not too late to uproot the stigma and begin to stop its spread.



A LITTLE LOGIC

“Mental illness is not a character flaw. It is caused by the interplay of genetics and biological, social and environmental factors. Seeking and accepting help is a sign of absolute strength. Mental illness is not caused by personal weakness, and it is not cured by personal strength.”

— Melba Sutton

“We take care of our crops. We take care of our livestock. We need to take care of ourselves.”

— Adrienne DeSutter

“If you have bearings to grease on your equipment, you grease them. You don’t let them go until there’s a huge problem and a bearing goes out. You perform maintenance. You treat your sick animal. You need to treat yourself, as well.”

— Drew DeSutter

“If you have high blood pressure, then you take medication, and your blood pressure goes down. It makes you a healthier person. If you’re suffering from anxiety and you take medication to help, you can function a lot better. It’s kind of a no-brainer.”

— Drew DeSutter

“If we start to understand that our mental health impacts ourselves, our farms, just as much as our physical health does, then I think we would start to understand it’s OK to go see a therapist or talk to your doctor or make an effort to improve our mental health,” Adrienne says.

Go to work

“What do you do when a belt breaks?” asks Melba Sutton, a Kansas-licensed, specialist clinical social worker. “You, the farmer, rely on your strengths. You go to work to fix the problem.”

When a mental health struggle or chronic stress is the problem, the answer is the same: Go to work, she says. “Perhaps part of your work today is picking up the phone and saying, ‘I just need to talk to somebody about living my life.’”

Bad days happen — once in a while. Some days you wake up on the wrong side of the bed. Some days the cows get out. Some days the bank forecloses on the farm. Some days we lose a loved one.

On those days, Sutton’s advice is to take time to tell yourself, “Gosh, this earth-school stuff really hurts.”

The key, Adrienne says, is to understand the differences between bad days and chronic bad days.

“We go through moments in our lives where we feel hopeless, especially in farming,” she explains.

That’s OK. It’s normal — as long as those feelings of hopelessness or even worthlessness are held in check, and we know that in a day or in a couple days they will fade and life will normalize.

When those moments of hopelessness or worthlessness occur for multiple days or multiple weeks, it’s time to talk to your doctor or someone else to make sure you’re able to stay in control, Adrienne warns.

“When we aren’t taking care of ourselves, we lose that control, and it’s harder to dig out of that hole.”

Not alone

About two in five rural adults say stress and mental health have become more of a problem in their community in the past five years (41%) and in the past year (36%). Nearly half of rural adults (48%) say they are personally experiencing more mental health challenges than they were a year ago. That’s according to a rural stress poll sponsored by the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) in 2019.

What makes America’s backbone so vulnerable to

Continued on page 46

mental health conditions and chronic stress?


Wars, inflation, reliance on the weather, recession fears, debt, the physicality of the work, family heritage, limited access to healthcare, limited access to broadband, etc., all contribute to 48% of farmers saying they experience more mental health challenges today.

Fixing is work

When equipment breaks down, farmers and ranchers order the parts; they watch YouTube until they know how to install the parts; and they pay the bill at the parts store. The process of reaching out for help, accepting help and making progress is not that different.

“Work is good medicine,” Sutton says.

Farmers and ranchers are naturally talented workers, otherwise they wouldn’t be in an occupation that requires sunup to sundown hours. Apply that same ethic and attitude to healing body and mind, and see your results grow like field corn in July.

If you are experiencing a mental health crisis and/or feeling suicidal, please reach out and talk to someone. Call the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988 or chat online at www.988lifeline.org. 

Editor’s note: Paige Nelson is a freelance writer and a cattlemoan from Rigby, Idaho.

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PHOTO COURTESY DREW DESUTTER

After experiencing anxiety and depression in their own farm family, Drew and Adrienne DeSutter have become outspoken mental-health advocates for the agricultural industry.



PHOTO COURTESY MELBA SUTTON

A licensed clinical social worker, Melba Sutton says maintaining a healthy mental state takes constant effort.

For more insights, read

- “The Rising Rates of Death by Suicide in Agriculture” from the Aug. 9, 2022, edition of the *Angus Beef Bulletin EXTRA* available at <https://bit.ly/3R4YsCs>.
- “Life After Death by Suicide” in the Aug. 23, 2022, edition of the *Angus Beef Bulletin EXTRA* available at <https://bit.ly/3SdQfx3>.

