



Canadian Mental
Health Association
Champlain East
Mental health for all

Association canadienne
pour la santé mentale
Champlain Est
La santé mentale pour tous

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Farming and Mental Health

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Headline: New initiative targets farmers struggling with stress, burnout, depression

Canadian grain farmer Sean Stanford hit a low point a few years ago. His crops were poor, bills were piling up and he was struggling to handle his workload. His situation worsened until it caused a health crisis. While lying in bed one day, he felt a crushing weight on his chest and one of his arms. He was sure he was having a heart attack, but a doctor diagnosed him with extreme anxiety. Stanford's experience is not uncommon among Canadian farmers.

Mental illness — stress, anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion and burnout — is more pervasive in farming than in other professions. A 2016 survey of more than 1,100 agricultural producers revealed that 45 percent of them were experiencing high stress, 58 percent of them were suffering from anxiety and 35 percent were depressed. Almost 68 percent of respondents scored lower than people in other industries in terms of resilience.

Experts say many factors contribute to the problem, including unfavourable weather and outbreaks of animal disease, which are more widespread now than in years past.

Farmers also face intense financial pressure, which often includes paying off debt incurred to purchase land and equipment. In addition, they don't have sick leave so they routinely work when they are sick, which leads to physical and mental strain. Furthermore, modern farmers are more socially isolated than their predecessors.

Farmers could use help facing mental health challenges but rarely get it because resources are scarce and hard to access for those who work unpredictable hours in remote areas. To make matters worse, there is a lot of stigma surrounding mental health among farmers, who view themselves as stoic, independent and competent.

To help address the mental health crisis in the farming community, the University of Guelph's Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton brought together a stakeholder working group for mental health in agriculture. That group developed an initiative called In the Know, which the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario Division, will launch in the coming weeks.

It features evidence-based mental health literacy programming, which is designed to improve farmers' knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders. Those who participate in the four-hour sessions will be better able to recognize, manage and prevent mental health problems. The initiative will also help reduce the stigma associated with mental illness in the farming community.

Stanford's experience illustrates the benefits of mental health support. After he was diagnosed with anxiety, he reached out to Do More Agriculture, a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the mental health of those who work in agriculture. That set him on the path to recovery.



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"Farmers are supposed to be the salt of the earth, strong people who don't need help from anybody. They are supposed to carry on no matter what happens to them," he told the CBC a year ago. "But I have come to realize that asking for help is not a bad thing."

The information provided is not a substitute for professional advice. If you need advice, please consult a qualified health care professional. For further information or if you want to access our services at CMHA, please call 1-800-493-8271 or visit our web site at www.cmha-east.on.ca