

BUSINESS

Farm stress contributes to farmer suicides, expert says

By Jonathan Knutson / Agweek Staff Writer on Apr 9, 2018 at 8:30 a.m.

Concern about farmer suicide is growing, and agriculturalists and people living in rural communities have a vital role in addressing the problem, a farm stress expert says.

"Be a good neighbor. Be aware of how your neighbors are doing — physically, mentally and socially. And if they show any warning signs, help connect them with the resources that can help," said Sean Brotherson, North Dakota State University Extension Service family science specialist. His areas of interest include family stress and rural life.

Farming overall is notoriously stressful, and farmers traditionally have higher suicide rates than most other occupations. People working in farming, fishing and forestry were 3.4 times more likely than other American workers to die by suicide on the job, according to a 2016 study by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Some ag officials think the true number of farm suicides could be even higher than reported, because some farmers may disguise suicides as farming or hunting accidents. Farmers and ranchers often work long hours in isolated settings, contributing to the risk of suicide. Their frequent dedication to maintaining a multi-generation farming operation and their access to dangerous chemicals and other potential tools for suicide add further to the risk, Brotherson said.

Every farmer's suicide is different, with "multiple complex factors involved," Brotherson said. But a common thread is "a feeling of powerlessness or hopelessness, or that you can't take concrete steps for a specific outcome."



Sean Brotherson, North Dakota State University Extension service family science specialist. (Forum photo)

Ongoing drought in parts of the Upper Midwest, as well as the weak farm economy, contribute to feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness and increase the threat of suicide, he said.

Overall farm solvency remains much stronger than it was in the 1980s, when the weak farm economy contributed to a wave of farmer suicides. So some in agriculture weren't expecting the current upturn in farmer suicides to happen this quickly or to this extent.

Brotherson said the 21st century ag economy is much different than it was 30 years, skewing comparisons. For example, many farms today are much bigger and their operators can fall into a deeper financial hole than farmers in the 1980s.

There's also evidence that overall U.S. suicide rates are increasing. "So maybe this (rising farmer suicide) is part of a larger trend," Brotherson said.

Watch for warning signs

Whatever the case, residents of rural communities can help farmers and ranchers at risk of suicide.

"Talk with them. Look for potential signs that they're under high levels of stress or depression or anxiety," Brotherson said. Warning signs include "avoiding other people or activities they normally enjoy and dwelling on the negative — be sensitive to those things."

And if there are warning signs, "Connect them with a resource that can help, such as a health provider. And if the circumstances warrant, go with them (to visit that resource)," he said.

Receiving proper help, in time, can do a great deal of good, Brotherson said.

"These things are all very possible to diagnose clearly and (then) to support people quickly," Brotherson said.

Many state agencies and extension services offer written material and other resources to help farmers and ranchers. One source is Brotherson's "Farming and Ranching in Tough Times," www.ag.ndsu.edu/publications/kids-family/farming-and-ranching-in-tough-t... (<http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/publications/kids-family/farming-and-ranching-in-tough-times/fs1804.pdf>).

NEED HELP?

The North Dakota State University Extension service offers these suggestions for farmers with extreme stress or depression:

- Call 9-1-1 for an emergency.
- Call 2-1-1 for listening support, suicidal thoughts, mental health issues, crisis and referral.
- Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).
- Reach out to a loved one; talk about how you are feeling.
- Talk to friends, clergy or medical provider.

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