**Financial and Mental Health**

Darren Wilcox-North Dakota Farm Management Education Program Instructor, Lake Region State College

“That is not how my dad did it” was a common phrase I heard as grain originator when presenting some new options for marketing grain to my producers. I was surprised by how many were stuck in their ways on how to do things just as their dad and grandpa did it. Please hear me, I am not saying the “old ways” of how our elders did things were wrong, sometimes we need to update to modern practices and a changing economy. As producers, the one thing we need to update and get with the times would probably surprise you… No, it’s not marketing or buying a different flavor of equipment as our grandpa did. It’s how we manage our mental health.

As we all know production agriculture is one the most stressful, mentally challenging occupations there is. You can easily fit in the phrase “it’s us against the world”. Mental health has reached a critical stage with post pandemic impacts, which have been enhanced by natural disasters, extreme weather events, financial pressures due to fluctuating commodity prices, labor shortages, trade disruptions and other factors over the past several years. Given these ongoing challenges, it’s no surprise that more farmers and farm families are experiencing stress and mental health concerns. We are all professionals when it come to the financial, agronomic, and livestock enterprises of the farm and ranch, but are we on top of taking care of the one thing that really matters? YOU.

**The stigma in rural communities is really upsetting, as it keeps us isolated and out of touch. We don’t want to talk about the issues we are dealing with or struggles we are having because that might be a sign of weakness or embarrassment. What happens is we shut out friends and family and don’t realize others may be going through the same thing. All this does is put up a wall for people that may really need help and limiting their willingness to find the help.** Here are a few warning signs to help identify someone who may be at risk.

1. Persistent worry and fear
2. Apprehension and uneasiness
3. Avoidance of others
4. Lack of interest or pleasure  
   in activities
5. Problems sleeping
6. Substance misuse
7. Unexplained changes in physical appearance or behavior

If you notice one or more of these signs in a someone you know, share you’ve seen change in their habits. Don’t wait for them to ask for help. If they’re willing to reach out, encourage them. Try not to compare their challenges to someone else’s or minimize what they’re going through. **What matters most is showing genuine care and empathy, and listening without judging the person for the position they are in.**

As a community, we need to make it okay to talk about stress and other mental health issues going on that are really tough for people to talk about. Remember it’s okay to be not okay and seek help. If you or someone you know is having trouble managing stress or depression, please reach out to someone and talk about the issues you are dealing with. Talk with someone you feel comfortable with. Your banker or agronomist will be glad to listen or stay a little longer after church to speak to your clergy. Most importantly, speak with your family to make sure the ones who care about you the most, know what going on.

We need to end this stigma in our industry as we cannot continue to manage our mental health as our dad or grandpa did years ago. With everyone advocating and bringing awareness and priority to mental health, it will show farm families it is ok to talk about tough things and will make the industry stronger. Because with everything, “We Are Stronger Together”.

To learn more about farm succession planning and other financial questions about farms and ranches, visit with an instructor near you. The North Dakota Farm Management Education Program provides lifelong learning opportunities in economic and financial management for persons involved in the farming and ranching business. Visit [ndfarmmanagement.com](http://www.ndfarmmanagement.com), Facebook @NDFarmManagementEducation, or contact Craig Kleven, State Supervisor for Agricultural Education, at crkleven@nd.gov or 701-328-3162 for more information. The ND Farm Management Education Program is sponsored by the North Dakota Department of Career and Technical Education.