
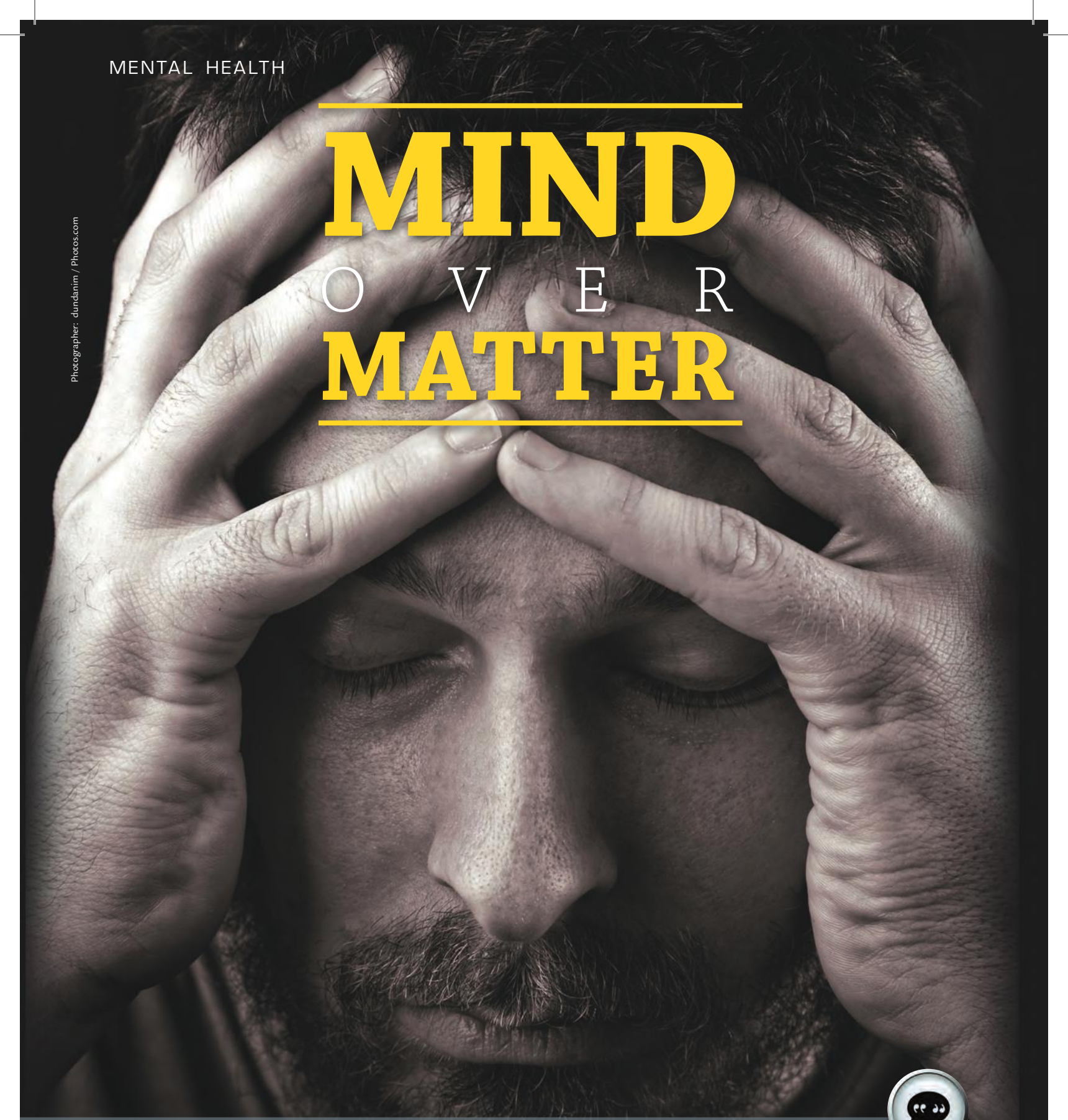


MIND OVER MATTER

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“Stress management is one of the best business management decisions you can make because it impacts our lives as producers. You can’t function well if you’re not managing stress.”

– Janet Smith, Program Manager, Manitoba Farm & Rural Support Services

Ag industry rife with stress that must be addressed

BY HEATHER HUDSON

A 2005 national stress and mental survey of 1,100 Canadian farmers revealed that two-thirds feel stressed on their farms, one in five describe themselves as “very stressed” and almost half say they are “somewhat stressed.”

It’s been eight years, and it’s safe to say the numbers haven’t decreased in that time. Of the many factors that collude to create stress for those in agriculture, the major ones include:

- The decline of the family farm
- Difficulty managing employees
- Higher debt loads
- Changing expectations from society
- Expensive equipment
- Increased government regulations
- Long working hours
- Shrinking margins

It’s no wonder that researchers, like Michael R. Rosmann, Executive Director of AgriWellness, Inc. in Harlan, Iowa, have concluded that the industry is in a class of its own when it comes to mental health.

“A pattern of environmental, cultural and economic factors unique to the agricultural community suggests a higher risk for health disparity among persons engaged in agriculture,” he wrote in his paper, *Behavioral Health Care of the Agricultural Population: A Brief History*.

One would think that folks in agriculture would have superior coping mechanisms for handling stress and anxiety, considering the many places from which it comes. But Dr. Niels Koehncke, Acting Director of the Canadian Centre for Health and Safety in Agriculture, says farmers in



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Gerry Friesen, Conflict Resolution and Stress Management Consultant, Signature Mediation

particular have a tendency to shoulder the weight of the world.

“Producers have a strong tradition of being independent and resourceful. They tend not to externalize and talk about their problems and especially don’t seek help when problems start to manifest themselves in their lives,” he said.

Janet Smith is Program Manager of Manitoba Farm & Rural Support Services, which provides telephone and online counselling and support to farmers and rural and northern Manitobans. She agrees that it’s tricky to get those in the industry to open up, but that it’s crucial they do.

“We all go through stressful periods in our lives – it’s part of the human condition. But stress that is not dealt with tends to build up and escalate to the point where there can be some very serious impacts on physical health, mental health, relationships, even thoughts of suicide,” Smith said.

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So what happens when stress and an unwillingness to talk about it collide? Gerry Friesen can tell you firsthand. The conflict resolution and stress management consultant (and “recovering” hog farmer) experienced a mental health crisis of his own back in 2004.

“I remember clearly when it started: during a farm mediation meeting my heart started beating differently than I was used to. It left me short of breath and puzzled,” Friesen recalled.

He visited his doctor who prescribed medication for anxiety and depression, which made the condition worse for about six weeks before it got better.

“Since then, the journey has continued. I’ve become wiser about how to deal with it and cope with it. I keep looking back and wondering if it was environmental, due to the stressful situation I was in, or something genetic. I suspect it was a little bit of both,” Friesen said.

“As farmers, it’s been ingrained in us that if we have problems, we have to work a little harder. Unfortunately, that doesn’t always work.”

Symptoms of mental health concerns

How do you know if you or someone you care about is at risk of a mental health concern?

Altered behaviour is the first sign of a problem, including:

- Elevated blood pressure
- Headaches
- Mood swings
- Loss of emotional control
- Increased smoking, drinking and/or drug use
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Impaired concentration
- Difficulty making decisions
- Sleep disturbances

“Behaviour that is not normal for that person – whether it’s becoming withdrawn or reclusive or having trouble relaxing or difficulty concentrating on things – is a clear symptom of a problem,” Koehncke said. ▶

What to do about stress

Recognize it

The first step in managing stress is recognizing that it has become a problem, says Friesen.

“I’ve got a wife and kids that will point out to me. ‘Hey, what’s going on? You’re not your normal self.’ Then I take a step back and inventory what’s going on in my life and make changes,” he said.

“As a farmer I would sit back and think about certain issues in my life, whether it was commodity prices or weather, that I had absolutely no control over. I knew that if I could set those aside, my list of stressors would become shorter and more manageable. It’s easier said than done, but think about it: if the hog price is way below cost of production, I can stew about it all I want but it’s not going to change the price. I have to have that mental ability to put that aside and say I’m going to do whatever I can and whatever happens, happens.”

Talk about it

Experts agree that a crucial part of managing stress is talking about it. Friesen says even talking to a friend or neighbour about what’s going on in your life and getting the stress off your chest can be exceedingly helpful.

“Years ago, my brother had a motorcycle accident which put extra pressure on me and the farm. A neighbour came by and said, ‘How are you doing?’ and instead of saying ‘Fine,’ I

took that opportunity to talk for half an hour,” Friesen said.

“He’s not a doctor or a psychologist, he just listened to me and said, ‘Yeah, I hear you.’ I felt so much better, not because he provided answers, but because he heard me out.”

If you’re not comfortable opening up to friends, neighbours or family members, you can try a support line like Manitoba Farm & Rural Support Services. Counsellors are trained to listen and specialize in agriculture.

“Counselling is not about advice giving. Every person is unique and knows themselves best; we’re here to listen and guide, but the solution is in each person’s own hands. Anyone who has been listened to well and non-judgmentally can attest that it’s very powerful,” Smith said.

Seek professional help

If stress, anxiety and depression are deeply rooted, consider getting professional help in the way of a spiritual advisor, a mental health-care professional, your medical doctor or someone who can address one of your stressors, such as a financial or insurance advisor. If you’re not sure who to reach out to, consider calling a support line for a referral.

If you think you might benefit from pharmaceutical help, consult your doctor and be open and honest about all of your symptoms.

Mindfulness

Regular exercise, proper nutrition and getting enough sleep go a long way

to keeping stress in check, as well as taking time to regularly do something you enjoy, such as playing an instrument, reading or participating in sport. But in those manic moments, both Smith and Friesen suggest the practice of mindfulness to quell distress.

“We’re learning more and more about mindfulness-based stress reduction. It can be as simple as deep breathing exercises that serve to calm the limbic and nervous systems to create more calm and balance in one’s mind,” Smith said.

“I know in the farming population there’s a lot of skepticism about these things, but you can do this anywhere. You can be in a tractor and practice ten deep breaths and just see the effect it has on calming yourself.”

Friesen says he regularly practices mindfulness and has even been known to put himself right where he needs to be in difficult moments.

“I would wake up at two or three in the morning and anxiety would hit with a vengeance,” he said. “I’m an avid golfer so I picked a golf course in my mind and started playing that golf course. It usually takes two or three holes and I’m gone.”

For more information about mental health and agriculture and to find resources for your province’s rural support services, visit www.ruralsupport.ca and look for the links under Resource Centre. ♦

Tips for agri-retailers

Agri-retailers are often considered front-line workers when it comes to mental health in the ag industry. Their close relationships with their customers mean they’re in a unique position to notice when a farmer is exhibiting troubling or out-of-character behaviour.

If you’re not sure how to go about approaching someone, consider getting advice from a rural support line like Smith’s.

“We do training for co-ops, dealerships, suppliers and other agriculture professionals to help them recognize signs of distress in others and teach them how to make a sensitive referral to an organization like ours,” Smith said. “People are often worried about stepping on toes, but saying something might make all the difference.”

This also means managing your own industry stress. Not only might you be managing financial, employee

or other pressures in your business, you’re also absorbing the stress of customers.

Smith says retailers can use the same stress management strategies and to remember that support is available for you, too.

“Our service is there for agri-retailers to talk about their stress or about dealing with farmers who are showing signs of stress. They can call and get advice anytime,” she said.