

New magazine helping normalize mental health problems among farmers]

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The struggles and stressors that come with being a farmer are often easily hidden, it's a consequence of a job based deeply in isolation.

But, a newly formed working group associated with the Suicide Awareness Council of Wellington-Dufferin is working to bridge the gap and help normalize conversations about mental health in the agricultural sector with the launch of a magazine called GROUNDED.

In the works since June of 2021, GROUNDED was created around the concept 'by farmers for farmers', with the monthly magazine featuring real life stories of hope and resilience along with practical tools and supports from those within the farming community. It was inspired by the popularity of farming magazines.

Heather Glenister, coordinator for the Suicide Awareness Council of Wellington-Dufferin, said the focus on stories written by farmers to help other farmers was a significant part in developing the magazine.

'We know the best sort of suicide prevention is peer to peer,' said Glenister. 'To be able to have real life lived experiences in our project makes what we're doing so much more real. It connects, and resonates with others in the farming community - it's very authentic.'

Some of the personal stories featured in the magazine address topics such as retirement, financial struggle, and being a women farmer.

'What makes this different from other farming magazines is it's getting down to a very basic conversation that somebody would have at their dinner table, and we hope that people can use it as a conversation starter,' said Glenister.

The need to provide resources that help and normalize conversations about mental health in farming is increasing notable, with farmer's at a an elevated risk for suicide in proportion to the general population.

According to a 2016 study from the University of Guelph, which surveyed 1,100 farmers, 45 per cent of respondents had high stress levels, 58 per cent met criteria for anxiety, and 35 per cent met the criteria for depression. The survey also found that 40 per cent were apprehensive to seeking professional help.

Farming stressors such as commodity prices, farm debt, animal health, long hours, and public stigma towards those who farm are all factors that can leave farmers vulnerable to depression, anxiety, substance misuse, and overall poor mental health.

'The farm comes first, it's not a job but a lifestyle. Farmers often don't have the time to seek help, machinery breakdowns or a sick animal can upset well-intentioned plans. Some farmers don't want their peers to know that they are struggling, failure isn't an option. Sometimes there is pressure to maintain a farm that has been in the family for generations. Farmers often suffer in silence,' said a member from the working group.

The Suicide Awareness Council's Farming & Veterinary Suicide Prevention Working Group is also looking to shed light on the high rates of suicide among veterinarians with an event called Taking It All On.

According to the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association, a study in 2020 found that more than a quarter of Canadian veterinarians had thoughts of suicide in the previous 12 months.

"We don't recognize the vicarious trauma and empathetic stress that they experience on a day-to-day basis," said Glenister. "We often see them as just people that take care of our animals whether it be on the farm or at their office."

Taking It All On will be a free virtual lunch and learn hosted by the local Suicide Awareness Council, and is scheduled to take place on Feb. 23. The interactive workshop is aimed at helping veterinarians and their teams learn practical strategies on how to build resilience and support mental wellness.

Glenister said the event already had 70 people registered with attendees from across Ontario as well as out of province.

To sign up for Taking It All On or to find more information about suicide prevention and resources, visit www.sacwd.ca. The first electronic issue of GROUNDED can be found on the Suicide Awareness Council of Wellington-Dufferin website, with hardcopies scheduled for release in April.