



Making a difference: PhD candidate a champion for farmers' mental health

By Erin Kelly for the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association

Ten years ago, Briana Hagen never imagined she'd be involved in agriculture, let alone be a passionate advocate for the mental health of farmers.

But that's exactly where Briana finds herself as she wraps up her PhD with the Department of Population Medicine at the University of Guelph.

"If I look back to 10 or 15 years ago when I thought I wanted to be a doctor, things definitely took a turn, and I am so glad that they did."

However, Briana admits that not having a farming background made her initially hesitant to get involved with agriculture-specific research. It was her PhD advisor, Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton, who encouraged Briana to get involved with the farming community.

"Andria convinced me to meet with some farmers and talk to them about life. I did that, and I never looked back," she laughs. "I was engaged immediately; the community was so willing to teach me about the agriculture part if I was willing to work with them on the mental health pieces. It went together quite nicely."

That engagement is also what has driven Briana's passion for making a difference when it comes to the mental health of farmers.

"My passion comes directly from the agricultural community's passion," she explains. "It's easy to get fired up and want to be an advocate and work hard when a community is so engaged in the issue."

Certainly, when it comes to mental health in farming, there's a lot to advocate for. A national survey on farmer mental health, conducted by Dr. Jones-Bitton and her





research team found that producers face increased levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and a higher risk of burnout compared to the general population. What’s more, farmers also have lower resilience levels than the general population.

Following that survey, Briana’s PhD work has looked into what makes farmers vulnerable to mental health complications. She points to a series of in-depth, one-on-one interviews with farmers that provided valuable insight into factors affecting their mental wellness.

“I think the biggest thing that came through is how ... there aren’t supports available for farmers in those situations,” says Briana. “I do think we should keep building awareness [about mental health], but I also think it is time to move forward and start developing programs that are for farmers and developed with farmers.”

So that’s exactly what she did. Using findings from surveys, interviews, and other research, Briana and Dr. Jones-Bitton, in collaboration with stakeholders, developed ‘In the Know’ – a mental health literacy training program designed specifically for farmers.

In the Know, which consists of a four-hour in-person session, uses farming context to educate participants on mental health matters, including how to recognize when they or someone else is struggling, ways to cope with stress, and helping others find support. The program finished its pilot run in 2019 and will soon be available across the country.

“It feels really good to know that, hopefully, we did something that is sustainable and that we took the necessary time to create something that will make a difference.”

While Briana’s work as PhD candidate is almost over, her work advocating for mental health in agriculture is just ramping up. In fact, Briana is in the process of obtaining funding to expand the research program in the coming years.

“As we learn more about mental health, people are making decisions to leave agriculture because of how hard it is [on their mental well-being],” she says. “We need to do something about that ... and I hope we can leverage the research work we are doing to get solid, permanent funding for farmer mental health nationally.

“Because you can’t keep a healthy farm without keeping a healthy mind.”





Canadian Agricultural Safety Week (CASW) is a public campaign held annually during the third week of March that focuses on the importance of safe agriculture. The 2020 campaign, Safe & Strong Farms: Grow an AgSafe Canada, takes place March 15-21. CASW is presented by Farm Credit Canada. For more information, visit agsafetyweek.ca.



PARTENARIAT
CANADIEN pour
L'AGRICULTURE



CASA | ACSA
Canadian Agricultural Safety Association
Association canadienne de sécurité agricole



Canada