

IMPROVING MENTAL H



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If you had asked Brandon five years ago whether he'd make a life on the farm, he would have said you were crazy. He was having the time of his life at a university out of province and had his sights set on a business career. After graduation, he got a job with a Canadian corporation and enjoyed plenty of perks such as free tickets to sporting events and big-budget promotions.

"I was on top of the world," he says. "Then the stress started."

As an only child, Brandon is close to his parents and had always shared work on the farm with them. One day in July, he was having pints on a patio with friends and he thought about his mom and dad, who would be harvesting that evening until at least 8 p.m. The thought didn't sit right with him.

"I started to put a lot of pressure on myself because in Canada it's not like you can just start farming," he says. "If I don't take over the farm, who will? After all this work my parents and grandparents put into building something, I couldn't picture a for sale sign on the front of the place and feel confident I was making the right decision. So now I'm back."

But that decision has brought its share of anxiety. Brandon and his girlfriend parted ways. And now the 26-year-old is readjusting to spending more intensive time with his mother and father than many guys his age have the stomach for. There's also the \$2 million in bank loans he recently took on to build his future on the farm.

Last week, Brandon saw a counsellor for the first time.

"Farming is a high-risk game. It's stressful to expand the farm and plan for a future there, and it's almost like we're expected to handle that stress ourselves," he says. "I decided it's time to talk to somebody. I wish counselling was more commonplace. I'm very fresh in taking this step."

Farmers want and need mental health support

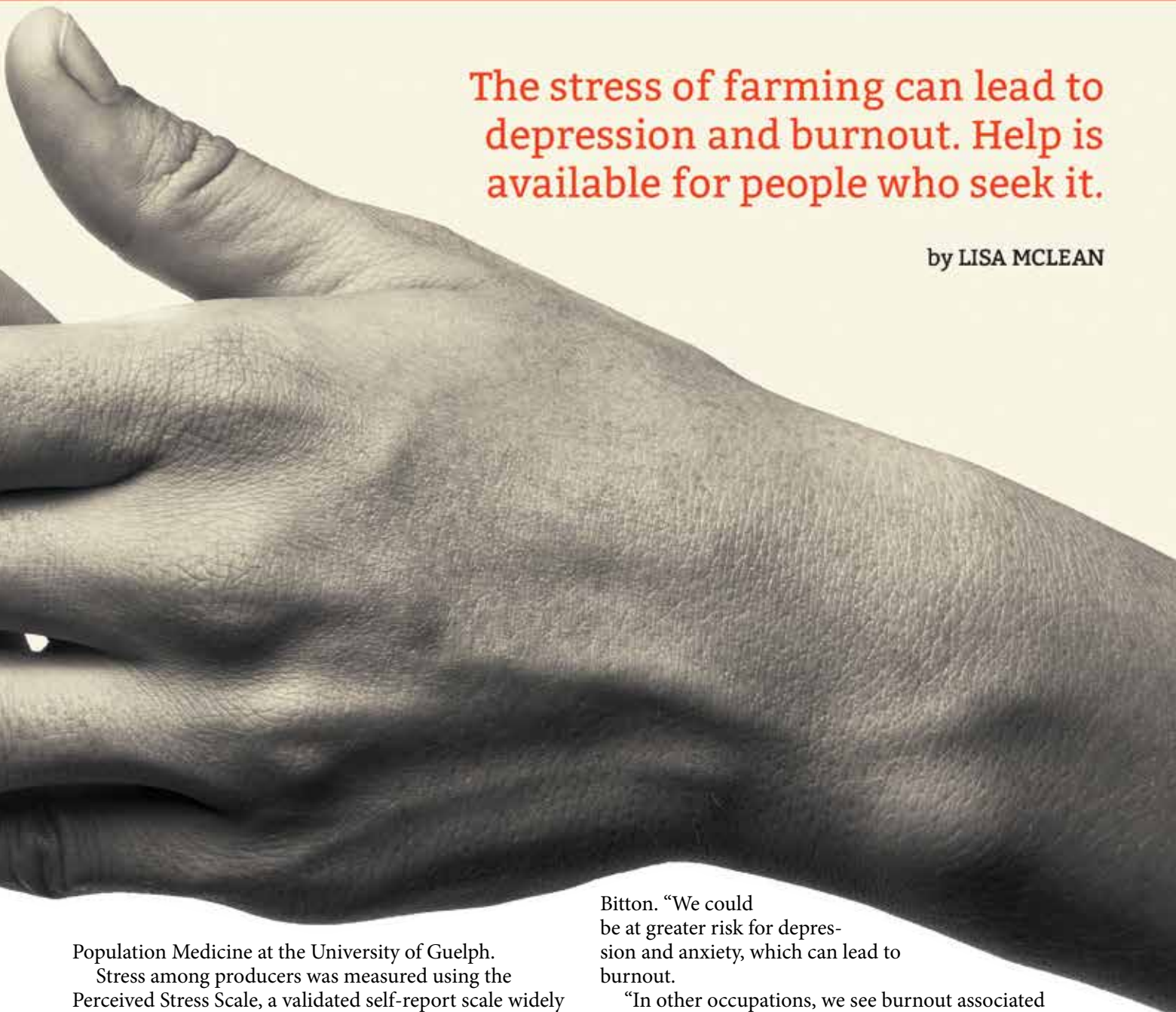
Brandon is a rare breed of Canadian farmer: one who has recognized he is under stress and is seeking help to manage it. New research from the University of Guelph suggests Canadian farmers, like their counterparts in the United Kingdom and Australia, have higher levels of psychological distress than the general population. The study – which garnered more than 1,100 responses from Canadian producers across sectors – is the first of its kind assessing the mental health of Canadian farmers.

"We found a very high proportion of producers were in the high stress category, and there was a higher than expected number of producers classified with anxiety based on the scale that we used," says Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton, a researcher in the Department of

HEALTH ON THE FARM

The stress of farming can lead to depression and burnout. Help is available for people who seek it.

by LISA MCLEAN



Population Medicine at the University of Guelph.

Stress among producers was measured using the Perceived Stress Scale, a validated self-report scale widely used in other studies. Approximately 45 per cent of the producers surveyed were classified in the high stress category. Another 58 per cent were classified with varying levels of anxiety, and 35 per cent met the scale definition for depression.

“Our scores were two-to-four times higher than previous studies of producers in the United Kingdom and Norway using the same scales,” says Jones-Bitton. And two-thirds of Canadian producers surveyed scored lower on resilience – our ability to cope with physical and psychological stresses – than a comparative U.S. population.

“It’s a problem because when our resilience is low, we’re less able to cope with the effects of stress,” says Jones-

Bitton. “We could be at greater risk for depression and anxiety, which can lead to burnout.

“In other occupations, we see burnout associated with people leaving their jobs. I worry this could be the case for agriculture too.”

A lot of risk

Janet Smith, program manager with Manitoba Farm, Rural & Northern Support Services, says there are a number of factors about farm life that make it uniquely stressful. Commodity prices, pests, disease and climate change are among the factors beyond farmers’ control.

“Farmers are exposed to a large number of stressors that many in the general population are not,” she says. “(Farming) can also be a dangerous occupation, with chemicals and livestock and equipment. There’s a lot of risk.”

Smith manages the Manitoba Suicide Prevention & Support Line, and she says farmers struggle with mental health because of the circumstances they're exposed to and because they tend to have low help-seeking behaviours.

Notably, the University of Guelph study revealed 40 per cent of survey respondents said that they'd feel uneasy seeking professional help "because of what other people might think."

One-third said that seeking such help can "stigmatize a person's life."

"Farmers typically don't talk about personal issues or mental health. They may not want to burden loved ones and find it hard to talk about their feelings. As a result, farmers end up isolating themselves and feeling

like failures," Smith says.

Scott, a former Ontario hog farmer, says it's true he internalized the financial distress on his operation during volatile times in Canada's hog sector. He left farming when he was in his mid-40s, around the time many of his colleagues also left.

"When you wrap up your business and house and family together in one place, it has crazy and unexpected implications," he

says. "You look out the window every morning, and the cows or pigs come first, and sometimes the family suffers because of it. That's a lot of stress to put on farm families."

Scott says he realized at the time he was under an abnormal amount of stress, particularly when his pigs became infected with a virus. He recalls the emotional turmoil of

nursing struggling piglets throughout the week, only to euthanize them by Friday.

"I didn't want the weekend person putting energy into nursing along three little pigs and neglecting another part of the operation," he says. "It was the right thing to do for the piglets and the business, but I would literally go into the corner and throw up and then have to look at my wife and kids for the weekend."

Scott says after discussions with his wife, it became clear that "keep doing this" wasn't a good enough justification for either of them. The couple made the decision to exit farming. Their marriage did not survive the farm.

"I felt so alone," he says. "I had built up a network of people around me, but the ones who were pig farmers were under the same stress I was."

"I can look back and say I should have got out earlier or later or not at all, but getting out was the best thing for both me and my ex-wife."



Andria Jones-Bitton

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"It's essential the people providing help to farmers understand the realities and demands of farming," Andria Jones-Bitton says.

Ag mental health literacy matters

The next phase of Jones-Bitton's work is to build a team of producers, industry representatives, veterinarians and mental health professionals to create, deliver and evaluate a mental health literacy training program for farmers.

She says research will also focus on characterizing the lived experience of farmers' mental health during times of calm and times of emergency. She plans to make one-on-one interviews part of the research.

"As part of the work, we're targeting producers, including some who

have experienced an agricultural emergency like a barn fire or disease outbreak. We plan to talk to them about their experiences, whether they sought help for the distress they were experiencing, how useful they found that help to be and their recommendations for future programming," she says.

Jones-Bitton hopes to identify barriers to help-seeking. Some producers have expressed criticism of family doctors and mental health hotlines because the advice offered shows a lack of understanding about farm or rural life.

"In some cases, counsellors were

making recommendations that just aren't feasible in the agriculture world. It's essential the people providing help to farmers understand the realities and demands of farming," she says.

That's one of the reasons Manitoba's hotline is located in Brandon, in that province's agricultural hub, says Smith. All staff members responding to farmers either have direct experience of farming or have farmed in the recent past.

"Farming communities have shared values and communication styles and a way of being that is commonly understood," says Smith.



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"Taking care of your mental health can also be viewed as an important business management tool," Janet Smith says.

"Having someone on the other end of the line that understands that goes a long way."

Smith notes that, of the roughly 1,500 calls and online chats her team fields from the rural community each year, many are from callers who don't know what counselling is about or what to expect. She says the message that resonates most with farmers is the one that shows value to their bottom line.

"Taking care of your mental health can also be viewed as an important business management tool," she says. "We're not on the production end of things; we're on the human side. If your relationships and mental health are suffering, then your business will suffer too."

Overcoming the stigma

Courtney, a dairy farmer, has seen the stigma firsthand. Courtney says she has struggled with anxiety and depression since early childhood, but when she moved from a city to her husband's family's farm, the symptoms worsened.

"Suddenly I had a husband who was never home, I was living beside my in-laws, I went from working in an office to a home office, and we were carrying so much debt," she says. "It was my experience that farmers – particularly farm women – were reluctant to show any signs of weakness. When I moved here, it felt pretty closed off."

Courtney was afraid to tell people in her new community about her struggles. She says for the first few years she managed her anxiety by declining invitations or inventing excuses. She had panic attacks in the past and she lived in constant fear that they would reoccur, making uncomfortable situations worse.

"It's exhausting hiding this: you lie, you omit the truth, you establish a fabricated life that you're not even really living," she says. "So, a few years after I moved here, I started telling people gently and then online."

In 2015, Courtney's mental health took a nosedive when her depression and anxiety returned. She experienced hormonal imbalances, physical trauma and

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MENTAL HEALTH

grief caused by two miscarriages. After a year of struggling, she found a therapist in her community, paid out-of-pocket for treatment and gained new tools for managing her symptoms.

Courtney kept her miscarriages and illness a secret for a full year. Then she took an unconventional step: she shared the news on Facebook.

"I always thought it was kind of tacky to talk about those things on Facebook, but I've changed my mind," she says. "When I did it, the responses I got were overwhelming: 'Me too.' 'So did we.' It was humbling and beautiful. And now I'm that girl who talks about her miscarriages and mental health, and I've never felt better."

The case for healthy farm families

What if we learned to treat mental health as we treat physical health? What if we could acknowledge the importance of an overall health that encompasses mind, body and safety? That's the approach farm health programming in Australia has taken. Dr. Susan Brumby, founding director of the National Centre for Farmer Health, is at the helm.



Susan Brumby

Brumby and colleagues developed Sustainable Farm Families, a program providing farm families with tools and techniques to manage their health, well-being and safety. The program has been successfully implemented in rural communities across Australia since 2003 and has also run in Alberta since 2015.

"My observations working both in agriculture and the health system were that

farming populations tended to have worse health outcomes across a variety of measures," says Brumby. "They included general health, well-being and safety. We set out to develop a program that focused on farming men, women and families – something they were willing to engage with."

The program began with trained health teams going in to agricultural communities to conduct farmer health assessments and provide education about health conditions prevalent in farming communities. Participants were given a healthy breakfast and attended workshops on topics such as cardiovascular disease, men's health, women's health, physical activity and mental health. They were asked to write their health, well-being and safety goals, and teams measured progress the following year when they returned to the same communities. Approximately 15 per cent of the program focuses on mental health.

"We received quite a bit of feedback from farmers at that time that if we were coming to talk to them just about mental health, they didn't want us to come," she says. She notes that initial feedback came in 2003. A lot can change in 14 years.

Today, Brumby's team is active on a new project that has a greater focus on mental health. The Ripple Effect is an online



"The benefits of counselling outweigh the cost an awful lot," Darryl says.

platform designed to help users investigate tools to reduce suicide stigma, particularly among males, ages 30 to 64, from Australia's farming community. On the platform, users can find true stories from others in the farming community who are affected by mental health challenges and suicide.

"We have invited farming people to do digital stories and share their experience, to offer messages of hope and to help people understand there's a variety of ways people find themselves in these situations," she says. "We're trying to reduce the amount of stigma around seeking help,

particularly around suicide."



Janine Lunn

For Ontario producer Darryl, seeking mental health support as an adult was a way to finally cope with the significant trauma that he endured as a child. He says he had sought help twice before as a younger man, but the third time was the charm. He found a counsellor who was right for him.

"The benefits of counselling outweigh the cost an awful lot," he says. "If I didn't seek help, I don't think I'd be here. And if I was here, I would have nothing left for myself."

Darryl says these days he doesn't shy away from talking about mental health. He feels he has nothing to hide, and he's quick to suggest to people who appear to be having a rough time that they talk to someone.

"I feel that farming has gotten so boastful that nobody

wants to talk about how tough it is some days," he says. "I think there would be an advantage to having information about mental health available at farm shows and events. We should be encouraging farmers to talk to someone. We're always by ourselves."

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Those kinds of conversations lay important groundwork, says Janine Lunn, member service representative with the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA). Lunn and some of her OFA colleagues took part in a pilot program offering mental health first aid training to agricultural support workers. The program was co-delivered by the Ontario Livestock and Poultry Council and Jones-Bitton. This training used the Canadian Mental Health Association's trainers and the Mental Health First Aid program.

"A few of us ... saw people with different levels of stress and we weren't feeling well-equipped to help them," Lunn says. "How do we professionally support someone who is going through a serious personal struggle?"

The training offered valuable tools and underlined the importance of listening and recognizing that both positive and negative changes or life events can trigger stress, which can lead to bigger mental health issues.



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"We should be encouraging farmers to talk to someone," Darryl says.

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Sometimes others find relief in simply talking to someone and feeling as if they have permission to take a break or admit they feel stressed, she notes.

"I come from farming and I farm with my family," Lunn says. "I see the damage we do to ourselves when we only promote how great farmers are at working. I think there's danger in that. Sometimes working through the pain can cause a lot more problems than it's worth."

Lunn says she has been open about telling others that she has some mental health training under her belt and, although she's not a counsellor, she feels more equipped to assist others in need.

"Sometimes I think we just need the script," she says. "I've been amazed the last couple years in the farm community (by) the people who have told their stories. It opens up a lot of peoples' minds to say, 'Is that what mental health concerns look like? Because maybe that's in my family too.'"

The OFA is among several agricul-

tural organizations that have endorsed the next phase of research on Canadian farmer mental health. The list of confirmed partners also includes the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Egg Farmers of Ontario, Ontario Sheep Marketing Agency and Ontario Pork.

Jones-Bitton says her team is still analyzing the data collected from Phase 1 of the project. They're analyzing whether factors such as commodity type, age, gender and hours spent sleeping or working off-farm have an impact on the mental health outcomes measured.

"It's going to be a long-term project. There's tons of data, which is terrific," Jones-Bitton says. "And our new phase of research is beginning, which is very exciting. We are committed to going the distance with this work. We want to shed light on the issue and build resources for good mental health that farmers are likely to use, so we can support Canadian agriculture."

The interest from Canadian industry partners is encouraging, says Brumby. She notes that finding industry partners in Australia's Sustainable Farm Families project was slow going at first. Involving producer groups was key to that program's success; the program was being delivered at the request of specific commodities including dairy, cotton and sugar, she says. The program is being piloted to fishing communities in 2017.

"You think people don't want to engage, but that's not actually right," Brumby says. "They do and they will, but the context is so important. That's why the farming industry needs to be involved. It's not just about health and it's not just about agriculture. It's about both working together to address the inequities in farmer health." **BF**

Author's note: Some names have been changed to protect privacy. Thank you to everyone who responded to requests for interviews and for your honesty.





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