

Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton



Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton began her research into farmer mental health after she heard a growing number of stories about how farmers were struggling. She decided to look at the literature to see what was known about Canadian farmer mental health.

She quickly found there was a disturbing lack of published research on the topic. She became concerned about the welfare of a population that is usually portrayed with a tough “cowboy” image, and decided to find out what was really going on in regards to farmer mental health in Canada.

“When you think about the wide range of stresses that our farmers experience on a day-to-day basis, most of those stressors are outside of their control,” said Dr. Jones-Bitton.

“There’s likely a sense of helplessness and hopelessness that comes with that, and helplessness and hopelessness predispose

us to mental health issues like depression and anxiety.”

Dr. Jones-Bitton and her team began the research as a small scale pilot study of Ontario livestock producers. The survey looked to gather data on stressors, resilience, anxiety, depression, burnout, attitudes towards seeking support, stigmas, and more.

They received an overwhelming response.

“When we released the survey we found there were farmers from other commodities and outside of Ontario that were attempting to take the survey. That’s when we knew that this was something the agricultural community wanted to talk about,” said Dr. Jones-Bitton.

In response, the team expanded the study. Over 1100 Canadian farmers participated in the 2015 survey. The results from this survey have addressed serious knowledge gaps around farmer mental health. The data has provided essential baseline statistics to inform the work of various organizations to help their efforts around mental health in agriculture.

Using the survey results, Dr. Jones-Bitton has become an advocate for mental health support for Canadian farmers. She has lobbied the federal government to help create a national strategy for farmer mental health. Dr. Jones-Bitton and Briana Hagen, one of her PhD students, have publicly presented at over 40 events and done over 70 media interviews since 2015.

Perhaps more importantly, Jones-Bitton’s research has helped propel the issue into the mainstream consciousness, serving as the basis for many news articles on farmers’ mental health as well as social media campaigns and activities. A clear link can be made between their knowledge transfer activities and farmer’s willingness to start talking openly about their mental health struggles.

Andria and team plan to repeat this survey every 2-3 years to keep a pulse on Canadian farmer mental health.

As a result of this research, Dr. Jones-Bitton and her team have developed the In the Know mental health literacy program. This program involves a four hour face-to-face session where farmers learn more about mental health issues including how to detect them in themselves and others, ways to cope with stress and how to seek support and direct others towards support as well. The program was recently piloted with six different groups and is being evaluated to ensure effectiveness. The team will then collaborate with agricultural, veterinary, and mental health organizations across the country to ensure the In the Know program is available to groups who want it.

The Canadian Federation of Agriculture is grateful to have Dr. Jones-Bitton as a strong ally and advocate in the push for mental health support for farmers. Her research has helped to bring producer mental health issues into the mainstream spotlight.