

The staff and volunteers at The Manitoba Farm, Rural & Northern Support Services



The Manitoba Farm, Rural & Northern Support Services (MFRNSS) offers free, confidential telephone and online counselling to farmers, as well as rural and northern Manitobans. They also run a volunteer training program, and provide extensive outreach and educational activities to the community. Every month they hold a suicide bereavement support group.

They spread the word of their activities through social media, attending agricultural trade shows, doing presentations to agricultural organizations, and participating in research activities related to

agricultural mental health. The MFRNSS is seen as a leader both provincially, nationally and internationally when it comes to specialized mental health services for farmers.

The MFRNSS has always been a program developed by farmers for farmers. Since its inception in 2000 the program has hired professional counsellors and trained volunteers with farming backgrounds and/or an in-depth knowledge of agriculture. Their Advisory Committee, made up of agricultural and mental health organizations, meets several times a year to provide support and guidance to the program. They have close ties with various commodity groups and provincial agricultural organizations which helps them to remain firmly embedded within both the agricultural and rural mental health communities.

Canadian research has confirmed that farmers have high stress levels, are at greater risk of anxiety, depression and burnout, and have very low help-seeking behaviours. As the farming lifestyle is very unique, MFRNSS has found that it is of the utmost importance that counsellors be well-versed in agriculture. MFRNSS services are free and confidential, and are available both online and by phone, thereby increasing accessibility and decreasing stigma.

MFRNSS collects statistics on a monthly basis and submits to their funders and Advisory Committee. During times of agricultural crisis, MFRNSS sees a sharp increase in call volumes, pointing to how they are a critical resource for agricultural mental health.

In 2019 the stress of the weather, poor harvest, trade wars, and other factors led to a 35% increase in calls. They anticipate that the winter months will see a steady increase in calls related to the stress associated with financial uncertainty and the impact this ultimately has on the farm family. Hits to their website and social media (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) are also monitored monthly and similar increases have been noted on those platforms as well.

One of MFRNSS's main focuses is to de-stigmatize mental health. They understand the importance of good mental health for the individual, the farm family and the industry as a whole. They actively engage in promotional activities (distribution of help cards and pamphlets), marketing campaigns (Thank A Farmer, Healthy Farms = Healthy Farmers), media interviews, radio, TV and print ads, a web site and social media. They helped to create a stress management and suicide prevention App called Calm In the Storm. They present to agricultural and mental health groups and are active on various suicide prevention and rural mental health committees. They attend all major agricultural trade shows and rural mental health fairs.

MFRNSS has run several successful projects over the years to address the unique needs of the farming population. The 'Sleepless in Manitoba' project (modelled after 'Sleepless In Saskatchewan') was attended by many farmers and their spouses wanting to learn more about the relationship between sleep, stress and safety on the farm. Another successful project was "Farmer-To-Farmer": a series of workshops

for men on farming and depression. These are two projects that MFRNSS believes could be scaled up easily to a national level.

The MFRNSS is a critical resource for Manitoban farmers that provides support during the toughest times in a farmer's life. Their dedication to alleviate and de-stigmatize mental health issues is a boon to their community and an excellent example of how communities can work together to help deal with problems that affect us all.