



Gerry Friesen – The Recovering Farmer

Gerry Friesen's journey with mental health advocacy began with his work in farm debt mediation. As he was doing that work, he began volunteering at the Manitoba Farm and Rural Stress Line (MFRNSS). Gerry saw that role as an extension of his debt mediation work, as both were helping farmers dealing with incredible stress.

During his time at the stress line, he was asked to help facilitate some workshops on men and depression. The manager of the help line was aware of Gerry's own journey with mental illness, and asked him if he was willing to tell his own story at these workshops.

"I didn't truly realize the implications," Gerry says.

"The kick-off to these workshops was a radio show in Brandon, and when we sat down he immediately asked me 'So I hear you have a story to tell,'"

"I realized I could either tell everyone listening my story, or I could shut up and look like a complete idiot. So I started talking. And I never really stopped talking about it,"

Gerry has supported 600 farm families through debt mediation and has reached countless others through his work focused on farmers' mental health. He has listened to farmers through their challenging times during his volunteerism with MFRNSS and shared his own story of struggling with depression as a farmer to help normalize this within the agriculture industry. The majority of his presentations have been for an audience of agricultural groups and producers across all sectors, and his story has been shared through the major agricultural publications in Canada.

Gerry identified that farmers were generally unaware of how stress was impacting their well-being and noted that this audience also lacked awareness of the available mental health resources. He decided to combat this by sharing his own lived experience with farmers to raise awareness of the issue, decrease stigma surrounding mental health struggles and provide hope to others in similar situations.

"I find the more I talk about it, the more others talk to me about it and I maintain that throughout the years. For myself, engaging with people who are going through their own mental health journeys as well has been incredibly helpful to me."

Gerry's ability to share his own mental health and farming journey has helped to break down the barriers of silence that mental illness and toxic masculinity uphold, and has led to him being known as "The Recovering Farmer". He has modeled how being vulnerable and honest is an act of bravery and healing, and we now see others are following in his footsteps, speaking up about

their own mental health struggles. His approach has already been adopted by others and scaled up into national initiatives such as Do More Ag.

Gerry continues his mental health advocacy and awareness work through his blog, speaking engagements and involvement in recent research and project work on this topic. He supports farmers' well-being directly through mediation. The next steps are to build on the momentum of increased awareness and producer engagement; Gerry will be co-facilitating the delivery of mental health literacy training for Manitoba farmers in 2021.