

CHANGES TO FARM AND RANCH LIFE ON THE HORIZON

By Dr. Mike Rosmann

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Beginning in September, I will decrease my weekly columns to monthly columns. This change is coming about so that I can help implement regional Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network (FRSAN) centers in four parts of the U.S. — the Northeast, the Southeast, the Midwest and the West — that were approved as part of the 2018 Farm Bill.

The overall aim of my columns has always been to make behavioral health care more understandable, acceptable, and available to farmers, ranchers, and farm workers everywhere in the U.S and other agricultural countries; that major purpose remains. I also endeavor to inspire more people everywhere to protect the most valuable asset in the food production chain — the producers.

That endeavor continues and is also a purpose for my next phase of life. I need enough time to complete a book about agricultural behavioral health in time for the new FRSAN centers and FRSAN service programs to use, as well as to make it available to farmers, teachers, researchers and interested people everywhere.

This is a good time to look at how the understanding of the behavioral health of agricultural producers has evolved over the past several decades.

Development of mental health services for distressed farmers began in earnest in response to the Farm Crisis of the 1980s, although a case can be made that the 1930s' Great Depression was a forerunner to bringing attention to the struggles of marginalized farmers and ranchers. State-operated farm crisis hotlines, counseling tailored to distressed farmers, assistance from church denominations and Farm Aid concerts and grants emerged during the 1980s' agricultural depression.

Farming stress never went away, it only subsided as farm market prices improved somewhat in the 1990s, and as laws regarding farm bankruptcies were made less formidable and lender interactions with debtors became more collaborative. Federal and state programs sprung up to focus on agricultural safety and health and farm machinery engineers and companies devised safer farm equipment; behavioral health, however, was largely ignored.

Nonetheless, previous leaders in seven Midwestern states who developed behavioral health supports during the 1980s were asked to come together in 1998 to carry out the Sowing the Seeds of Hope project by the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health and the Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association with funding from the federal Office of Rural Health Policy to strengthen mental and community supports for distressed farmers.

While the Wisconsin entities designed and initiated the project, they were unable to continue administering the project outside their state, so the consortium leaders selected a nonprofit organization, AgriWellness, Inc., to continue administering the project. It turned into a 15 year effort to determine services that worked best to assist distressed people involved in agriculture.

The farm worker rights movement, initiated largely by Cesar Chavez, also helped establish practices that improved the behavioral well-being of all agricultural producers. Advocates who understood the

psychosocial issues of migrant, seasonal and permanent farm workers promoted culturally suited services by clinics such as Proteus.

Low farm prices during 2014-2019, weather-related perils, trade policy shifts and media attention to the high suicide rate of people involved in farming galvanized action by federal and state governments and calls for legislative action by farm groups. Senators Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, and Tami Baldwin, D-Wisconsin, guided the FRSAN through to approval as part of the latest farm bill.

The FRSAN is a clear signal that the behavioral health of all agricultural producers has become accepted as a key to their well-being overall and must be understood and managed to be optimally functioning producers.

Agricultural behavioral health is emerging as a new discipline that will likely become part of vocational agriculture courses in high school and community colleges, in coursework in college and graduate school programs in agriculture, veterinary medicine, behavioral genetics, bioinformatics and the training of people who deal with farmers, such as lenders, agronomists and animal nutritionists. Even the behaviors of fish, insects, plants and other species will become areas for research and education.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have furnished 380 Farm and Ranch Life columns during the past 7-plus years, which isn't nearly as many as my predecessor, Dr. Val Farmer, wrote during his 28 years of authorship.

The time for me to pursue another phase of life has materialized to be as useful as possible. I will write a new article each month.

I will continue to respond to persons involved in agriculture when possible, but my work is becoming more national and increasingly in advisory capacities. Hopefully, the new FRSAN centers will become sources of information and resources for farmers, ranchers, workers and media.

Moreover, I will continue to provide workshops and to give speeches as much as time allows.

Aspiring authors may contact the editor of IFT Publications at: news@iowafarmertoday.com.

I thank Dr. Farmer for setting a precedent and my wife Marilyn for reviewing articles. Yup, this column passed "the Marilyn test."

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