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CRAWFORD COUNTY DAIRY PRODUCER OPENS UP ABOUT FARMING AND MENTAL HEALTH IN NEW PODCAST EPISODE

Jess Peters Was Interviewed in the New Episode of “Cow-Side Conversations”

Harrisburg, Pa. – In the Center for Dairy Excellence’s latest episode of the [“Cow-Side Conversations” podcast](#) during Mental Health Awareness Month, Jess Peters of Spruce Row Farm in Crawford County, Pennsylvania has a candid conversation about some of the thoughts and feelings that many dairy producers have about mental health. From opening up about her own experience with depression to the barriers that many farmers have when it comes to talking about their struggles, she reminds listeners that they are not alone. Jess shares her story and how several of her platforms are helping the agriculture industry have a safe, anonymous space to unload their secrets and take some of the weight off their shoulders.

Jess opens the podcast by describing her family’s multi-generational dairy farm in Meadville, Pa. Jess and her brother are partners with their parents, where they milk approximately 250 Jersey cows and do their own cropping. Jess manages the calf care and overall herd health while her brother focuses on fieldwork and managing equipment. Before coming back to her family farm, Jess received a degree in animal science at Penn State University.

“My dad’s stipulation was that if any of us wanted to come back to the farm, we had to leave first. He didn’t want us to feel like we were stuck here and this is what we had to do,” Jess shares in the podcast. “When I graduated from Penn State, I knew I wanted to come home to the farm but I also didn’t want to do it then.”

She ended up traveling abroad to New Zealand and worked there for two years, where she learned about herself, how to live independently, and what her next steps in the agriculture world might be.

“I really had this epiphany moment. I was in New Zealand and fixing an electric fence. I looked up and thought about how this was the most beautiful place I’ve ever been. I took a deep breath and my next thought was, ‘I’m ready to go home to the farm.’ It was a really transformative moment for me,” she says. “Managerially, it’s hard to apply what I learned there because it was a very different system – it was a rotational, intense grazing system. But [that experience abroad] really just forced me to sit with myself. When you travel like that on your own, you learn a lot about yourself.”

Jess shares how she eventually returned home and began actively working on her family’s dairy operation. In 2016, she started noticing some underlying feelings that she – and others in the dairy industry – were experiencing but not talking about.

“I was feeling like everyone was hurting in the farming industry. You couldn’t quite put your finger on it. Nobody was talking about it. It just felt like everything was heavy,” she explains in the podcast. “For

someone who can usually find the words pretty quickly, it took me three months to figure out how to say it. It's not easy to do. It's hard to post how I'm feeling, especially when I'm feeling really vulnerable."

Jess embraced her vulnerability and decided to post a video of herself in the feed alley, talking about those uncomfortable feelings, on her farm's social media page.

"A tractor breaks or a cow goes down. It usually starts as a physical problem. Then, all of a sudden, you realize you haven't laughed in weeks or left the farm in months. You feel like you can't talk about that because you feel like you can't be vulnerable," Jess shares as she reflects on her experience. "Agriculture instills in us that you just have to rub some dirt on it. You can talk about all the cow problems, but you don't talk about yours. I made that point in the video. The response I got was overwhelming."

The response included dozens of personal messages from other farmers who were struggling. Jess continued to open up the mental health conversation by writing an article and admitting to times where she was depressed.

"Hearing a personal, firsthand account like that kind of gave others permission to admit to me, a complete stranger on the Internet, that they struggle, too. That's what started me down the mental health road," Jess adds.

Throughout the podcast, Jess opens up about some of the specific signs she ignored about feeling depressed, including an overall sense of numbness and a decrease in happy emotions.

"I think people assume there was a traumatic event that kicked off [the depression]. That can be true, but not always. It kind of snuck up on me. It wasn't until I was out of college. I didn't want to confront it. There's such a stigma around it. You're embarrassed. It's so uncomfortable. I don't think it was until I made that video that I realized how deep this went for me," she shares. "Everyone thinks depression involves suicide and hiding in a dark room all day. Yes, that can be a severe type of depression. But depression can also be complete numbness. That can be almost as debilitating as suicidal thoughts. If you never feel the good or the joy, your mind doesn't recognize that it's even there."

After continuing to share her journey, and receiving messages from farmers of every age and gender, Jess created a "Secrets of Agriculture" forum. The goal was to create a platform for farmers to anonymously fill out a form and share their secrets with her. With each individual's permission, Jess re-shares the anonymous secrets on her channels to help others realize they are not alone.

"It's by far the hardest, and my favorite thing, I've ever done. I've felt the power of unburdening and letting the weight off your shoulders [by sharing]. I wanted to give other people a way to do that," she explains. "The secrets are mind-blowing. Some of them are giant secrets, and some are 'I worry more than I should.' I feel like it's truly helping people."

While Jess says opening up about our struggles is a step in the right direction, she still thinks there are several gaps in the agriculture industry and barriers to getting help – a few being embarrassment, family dynamics and cost. During the podcast interview, Jess offers suggestions for reducing the stigma around mental health and helping other dairy farmers who might be struggling:

- **Listen to understand, not to fix.** "As farmers, we're fixers. I don't think we understand the value of just listening to someone. 90 percent of the time, I just want to say it out loud. I don't expect you to fix it. Even if you can, I don't necessarily want you to fix it. I just want you to hear me and understand how I'm feeling."

- **Be vulnerable with each other.** “People feel safer to share their struggles when they see you struggle. The best way to help someone, if you’re brave enough to do it, is to share your own struggles and truly help someone.”
- **Talk to others who understand.** “Farming is hard to understand if you don’t already know it. New people coming into it really struggle. So, to find a therapist who understands both the mental health side of life and farming side of life, it’s almost impossible. I’m not saying you can’t find the right therapist, but I just think that’s a giant barrier in our world. There’s a step between someone realizing they’re struggling and going to find professional help. That [in-between step] is someone in the middle who you know, relate to and trust. You would rather talk to someone who is living it than go find a specialist on the Internet.”
- **Realize you are not alone.** “If someone pops into your brain and you’re thinking about them, sometimes it’s as easy as that. Send them a message or reach out. That would be a good day [for me] because all day long, I would think ‘they thought of me.’ Something as simple as that can change someone’s day.”
- **Change our thought process.** “Working on your physical health does not mean you’re ill. It means you’re working to get stronger so you don’t get sick. I think the reason there’s such a stigma around mental health is that people associate it with mental illness. They are not the same thing.”

To help your community cope with farm stress and offer resources to those who might be struggling, there are free posters and rack cards available at no cost while supplies last. Visit www.centerfordairyexcellence.org/stress to request material to be mailed to you or call at 717-346-0849.

To listen to the full podcast interview with Jess Peters, visit www.centerfordairyexcellence.org/podcast. The podcast is also available on [Spotify](#), [Apple Podcasts](#), and [Amazon Music](#). With a new episode released each month, Jess’s interview is the seventh episode in the third season. The podcast was designed to share real-time farmer insight, tricks of the trade, and inspiring stories from dairies across Pennsylvania.

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The Center for Dairy Excellence is a non-profit organization initiated by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture in 2004. Bringing together people from more than 40 different dairy organizations in Pennsylvania, the Center’s mission is to enhance the profitability of the dairy industry by empowering people, creating partnerships, and increasing the availability and use of resources. Learn more at centerfordairyexcellence.org.

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