

SUICIDE BY FARMERS CONTINUES TO BE AN UNRESOLVED PROBLEM

By Dr. Mike Rosmann

FOR RELEASE ON: June 26, 2017

Suicide in the agricultural workplace is more likely than in any other United States' occupational workplace for which there are data, according to Dr. Wendy Ringgenberg and her coauthors in an article in the May 2017 issue of the [Journal of Rural Health](#). The analysis, which is Dr. Ringgenberg's doctoral dissertation, draws on data collected annually by the U.S. Department of Labor.

Entitled "Trends and Characteristics of Occupational Suicide in Farmers and Agricultural Workers, 1992-2010," her findings are consistent with similar conclusions derived from other sources of systematically collected information, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report on July 7, 2016. The CDC report indicated that farmers are more likely to end their lives by suicide than any other occupational group, including military veterans (See the Farm and Ranch Life column for the first week of August 2016).

The Department of Labor data has not been examined in this fashion previously. Ringgenberg's analysis also examined homicide, which revealed that the frequency of homicide in the agricultural workplace ranks in the middle of the occupations which were evaluated.

Farmer suicides in the workplace were most common in the West, followed closely by the Midwest, but lagged well behind in the South and the Northeast. Farmer homicides were most common in the South, followed closely by the West, but lagged considerably in the Midwest and the Northeast.

Why look at farmer suicide again? This column has often focused on suicide by farmers, as have many radio and television broadcasts, print media articles, and online news sources.

The best answer to "Why" is: The problem isn't going away. There is more to the problem that we (the agricultural producers, their families, healthcare-providers, researchers, and everyone else) don't understand, than what we do understand.

Few people want to openly talk about suicide. It's usually taboo to discuss the suicide of a loved one, even though the subject must be addressed candidly if we are to learn more about factors that are linked with suicide.

I admire the frankness of the wife and adult children of a farmer who ended his own life recently when they told how angry they felt at him during the memorial service. It was healthy for them to openly display their feelings, and it helped everyone at the memorial service to understand their dismay and to share sympathy for their experience of unexpected loss.

The family gave me permission to say their loved one who ended his life had talked about suicide previously during a period more than a decade ago when their farm income was negative. For the past three years the farm earnings once again did not meet expenses and he would have to sell off livestock, farming equipment, land, or quit farming.

The farmer felt he let his family down, his wife and children said, for he claimed that he had made poor business decisions and blamed only himself. He would not reach out to farm crisis and suicide hotlines, websites, or seek counseling; he said he had tried these approaches previously and they did not solve his problems.

This distressed farmer also was reluctant to let other relatives (his mother and siblings) outside of his immediate family, or any neighbors know of his financial and emotional plight. His neighbors would gladly have helped him with field preparation, planting and harvest, if he had to sell some of his farm equipment; they would even have helped with some of his financial needs without expecting anything in return.

He was unable to accept help from his neighbors or anyone. All he could focus on was his perceived failure in comparison to their success.

Intense desire to succeed on their own is characteristic of many farmers. Farmers want to be responsible for their successes and failures and they may isolate themselves emotionally and socially from assistance, even when desperately needed.

The strong urge to succeed at all costs, even ending one's life, is seen somehow as more noble than failure at farming. How can this be true? This is my personal conclusion, based on observations--and not a proven fact--from having provided behavioral healthcare to many seriously distressed farmers during 40+ years of professional service as a clinical psychologist.

This and additional observations helped me to develop the agrarian imperative theory. It holds: "The agrarian imperative is a basic drive of humans to acquire sufficient territory and other necessary resources to produce food and agriculturally-derived materials for clothing, shelter, and fuel, so that the human species thrives."

"The agrarian imperative instills farmers to work incredibly hard, to endure unusual pain and hardship, to take uncommon risks, and to rely chiefly on themselves in their efforts to furnish these essential life-needs of their fellow humans."

This is the first article of a four-part series.

Dr. Rosmann lives with his wife on their farm near Harlan, Iowa. He is a researcher and University of Iowa Adjunct Professor as well as a licensed psychologist. Contact him at:

mike@aqbehavioralhealth.com.