

## THERE ARE INDICATORS OF FARMER SUICIDE ALL SHOULD BE AWARE OF

By Dr. Rosmann

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A farmer ended his life by suicide recently, which raised questions about his and other farmers' self-destructive behavior. He became financially pressured over the past three "down" years, much like he experienced a dozen years ago. Now he was being forced to sell either land, livestock, or farming equipment in order to make overdue farm loan payments.

The farmer forbade his wife and their children—all adults, to contact legal authorities to require him to seek professional behavioral healthcare. He refused to share his economic and emotional plight with his siblings, his mother (his father is deceased), and neighboring farmers.

He told his wife and children that he would "figure out something" and persuaded them "to give him some time." Two weeks after his family reluctantly agreed to his request, the farmer ended his life with his shotgun in a barn on their farmstead.

Today we follow up last week's article about why the suicide rate of farmers is the highest of any occupation.

**The agrarian imperative theory**, as last week's article explained, postulates that people engaged in farming have a strong urge to supply essentials for human life such as food and materials for clothing, shelter and fuel, and to hang onto their land and other resources needed to produce these goods at all costs.

The theory also suggests that when agricultural producers are unable to supply these requisites, they feel they are letting down those who depend on them, foremost--their families and communities, and all consumers as well. That's when some farmers undertake what they may feel is their last alternative: to hold themselves responsible for their failure, even if it means taking their own lives.

The agrarian imperative theory is a plausible explanation of the motivations of farmers to be agricultural producers and to sometimes end their lives. There are additional questions that are fundamental to addressing the persistent problem of suicide by farmers and what can be done to prevent it, such as the following:

- What are signs of suicide by farm producers that most people don't pay attention to?
- What are the best means of preventing suicide by farmers?
- What resources are available or need to be developed to assist suicidal farmers, their families, and other concerned persons?
- What hampers the development of these resources?

**There are observable signs** of severe financial and emotional distress among farmers--if we pay attention, chiefly these:

- Verbalizations by farmers about hopelessness, such as "I feel like giving up because nothing I try works."

- Persistent loss of interest, laughter and pleasure in anything for days on end, and grim statements like, “Nothing is fun anymore.”
- Threats, such as “I’ll get even, if it’s the last thing I do.”
- Avoiding social and public events such as church, their children’s activities, and meetings.
- Flat emotional expression for days on end that is atypical of the farmer.
- Deterioration in the appearance of the farm, machinery, or livestock health that the farmer would usually not allow.
- Decline in the farmer’s usual personal appearance such as disheveled clothes, sallow complexion, weight loss, etc.
- Mention of feeling worried, distressed, difficulty sleeping, or no sleep for two or more successive nights.
- Acknowledgement of “having a lump in my throat, but I can’t cry.”
- Inability to undertake expected farm activities, such as harvesting crops when the weather is suitable, and difficulty making important decisions.
- Recognition that too many major stressors are occurring simultaneously, such as multiple livestock deaths, pressing debts, natural disasters such as drought or tornadoes, losses of key supports such as a parent or long-term employee, etc. Most farmers can manage two simultaneous stressors, but three or more may push them beyond their coping capacity.

In my experience--and research findings agree, the first three and the last four signs are particularly important indicators of possible suicidal deliberation. Unfortunately, those who know best aren’t around to tell us.

**There also are farming practices and physical health cues** that farmers and the persons around them should pay attention to, including these:

- Has the farmer been exposed recently and/or repeatedly during previous occasions to farm chemicals that affect the nervous system?
- Certain insecticides are among the most hazardous farm chemicals; they are designed to kill insects by altering the synapses of their nervous system (synapses are the spaces between nerve cells that are filled with substances that regulate nerve signal transmission); they overstimulate the insects’ nervous systems and have the same effect on humans.
- Other substances used on farms can also enhance undesirable neuropsychological changes, such as certain fumes, veterinary treatments for parasites, herbicides, and fungicides.
- Dust in grain bins, animal facilities and sometimes during harvest operations can harm pulmonary functioning among working farmers that may limit oxygen intake and lead to neurological compromise.

Next week’s column includes an interview with a farmer who has often considered suicide, as well as interventions to reduce farmer suicide, and useful supports for families.

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