When Farming Gets Tough: Conversations that Make a Difference

Recognizing concerns, having conversations, and connecting farmers to support

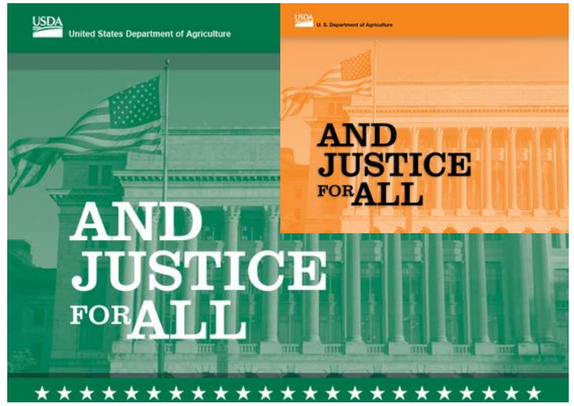
Rebecca McFarland
District Director and Family and Community Wellness Agent
K-State Extension, Frontier District
rmcfarla@ksu.edu
785-229-3520

“How many of you regularly interact with producers who may be carrying significant stress—but never talk openly about it?”

K-State Extension
Frontier District



Kansas State University is an equal opportunity provider and employer.



In accordance with Federal civil rights law and USDA civil rights regulations and policies, this institution is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin (including limited English proficiency), religion, sex, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from public assistance, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity.

Title IX prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, pregnancy, or parental status in educational programs and activities that receive Federal financial assistance. Kansas State University's Title IX coordinator is Justin Frederick (Frederick@ksu.edu)

Program Information & Accessibility: Program information may be available in languages other than English. Individuals with disabilities who require alternative communication methods (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language) should contact the event coordinator.

Filing a Program Discrimination Complaint: Complete Form AD-3027 (online, any USDA office, or call (866) 632-9992). Submit by mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; or email: program.intake@usda.gov.

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension

Why this matters

Farming is one of the most stressful occupations.

WEATHER + DISASTERS

PRICE FLUCTUATIONS

RISING INPUT COSTS

BREAKDOWNS + LABOR

ANIMAL + CROP HEALTH

FAMILY + SUCCESSION

SCRUTINY + REGULATION

Stressors are often chronic and cumulative. Stress is a normal response to extraordinary pressures.



What Makes Agricultural Stressors Unique?



- Home and workplace are often the same
- Farm identity is deeply personal
- Financial strain can feel like personal failure
- Generational expectations run deep
- Culture of independence can delay asking for help.

Distress is often noticed by others before farmers ask for help.

Stress changes how people feel—and how they think.

EMOTIONAL

- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Loss of humor
- Hopelessness
- Low energy
- Depression

COGNITIVE

- Difficulty concentrating
- Poor decision-making
- Increased negativity
- Trouble planning ahead



Watch for changes from their normal.

BEHAVIOR

- Withdrawal from family or community
- Missed meetings or appointments
- Sleep problems
- Increased alcohol or substance use
- Changes in appearance or hygiene

ON THE FARM

- Deferred maintenance
- Reduced livestock or crop care
- More accidents
- Unfinished projects

The signal is not one imperfect day—it is a noticeable shift in pattern.





Good intentions can still shut a conversation down.

- “Things will work themselves out.”
- “Others have it worse.”
- “You just need to stay positive.”
- Giving immediate advice before listening.
- Arguing with feelings.

These responses can unintentionally minimize a person’s reality.

Listen to LEARN.

A simple path from presence to support

LISTEN
without interrupting

EMPATHIZE
with their situation

ASK
open questions

REFLECT
what you hear

NAVIGATE
toward support

“I hear you saying…” “This sounds like a lot to manage.”

“How are you coping?” “What support would help right now?”

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension
Frontier District

Three moves. One human conversation.

01

NOTICE

“I’ve noticed you seem more stressed than usual.”

02

ASK

“How are things going right now?”

03

LISTEN

Allow silence.
Encourage discussion.

**You are not expected to solve every problem.
Your role is connection—not counseling.**





When you're concerned about suicide

LISTEN FOR

Hopelessness
Feeling trapped
Being a burden
Mentioning death or suicide

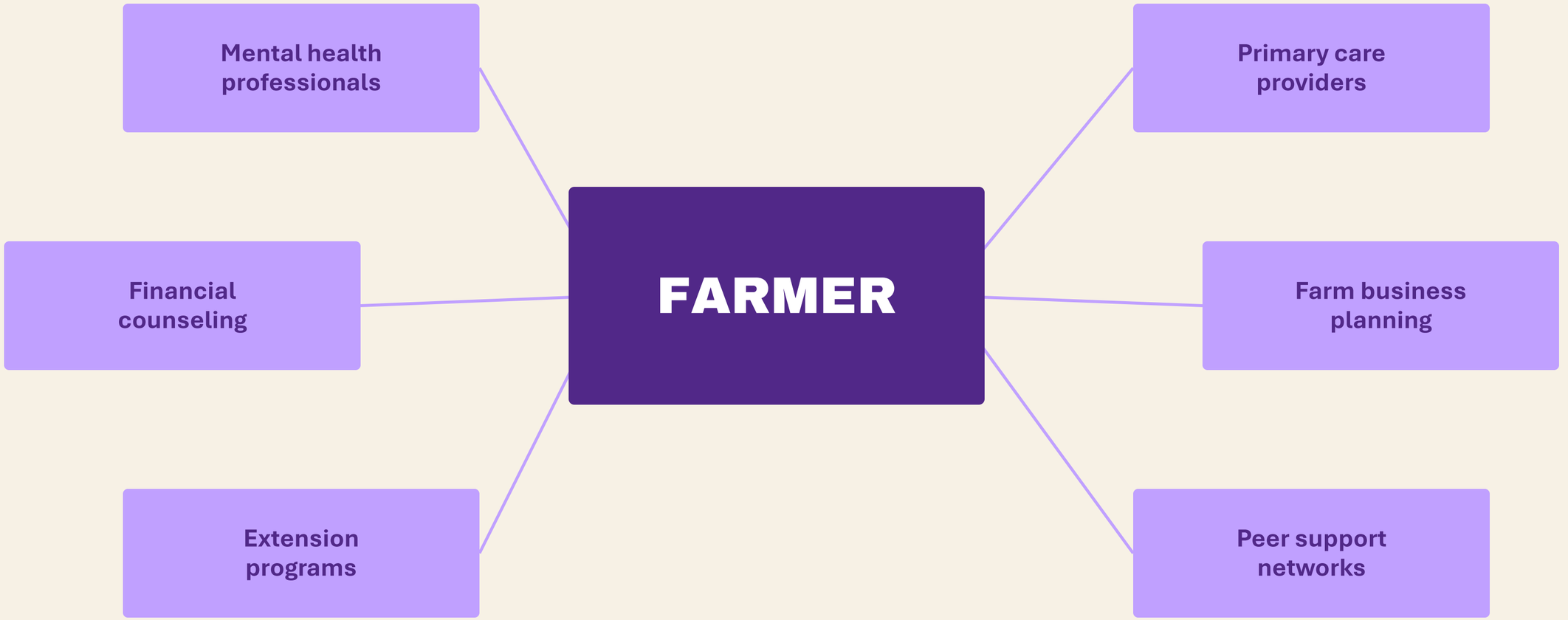
Asking does not increase suicide risk.

"Are you thinking about harming yourself?"

Connect immediately: 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline • local emergency services • trusted family or supports

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension Frontier District

Connection is the role.



CALL OR TEXT 988 — ANYTIME

Case study: what do you notice?

A long-time producer who normally attends meetings and returns calls quickly has become withdrawn. You notice frustration, missed appointments, slipping farm maintenance, and: “I don’t know how much longer I can keep this up.”

Discuss in pairs. Lead with observation, curiosity, and care.

1. **What warning signs do you observe?**
2. **How would you start the conversation?**
3. **What resources might be appropriate?**

Resources

Notice. Listen. CONNECT.

- K-State Extension Stress and Resiliency Team: https://extension.k-state.edu/program-areas/health-and-wellness/stress-management/
- Kansas Agricultural Mediation Services: https://www.k-state.edu/kams/
- Kansas AgrAbility Project: https://agrability.ksu.edu/
- Kansas Farm Management: https://agmanager.info/kfma
- AgKansitions, Office of Farm and Ranch Transition: https://www.agkansitions.org/
- North Central Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Center: https://farmstress.org/
- Kansas Ag Stress Resources: kansasagstress.org
- Kansas Farm Bureau Rural Minds Matter: https://www.kfb.org/Rural-Minds-Matter
- Center for Rural Affairs: http://www.cfra.org/news/180130/10-helpful-resources-farmers
- National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: 988. Chat: Text 988
- Veterans Crisis Line: 1-800-273-8255, Press 1 (website also has a chat option) https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/

Notice. Listen. Connect.

Watch for changes in mood, behavior, and farm management.

Listen more than you talk.

Express concern with empathy and respect.

Connect people with resources before crisis develops.

“A supportive conversation may not solve a farmer’s challenges, but it can remind them they do not have to face those challenges alone.”

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension
Frontier District