

THERAPIST NETWORK MEMBER INTERVIEW

ALISON VARGA

WHY DID YOU WANT TO JOIN THE THERAPIST NETWORK AT AGKNOW?

Well, I'm connected to AgSafe, which gets very confusing between AgKnow and AgSafe all the time but I am connected to AgSafe and I started doing the "InTheKnow" presentations, which is all about helping farmers access mental health and how to recognize depression, trauma, and then also opening up conversations about suicide. And I've been doing that for online presentations.

And the more presentations I did, the more I started realizing that there really is very limited support and services for farmers, and anyone in agricultural industries. I mean, in different sectors, there are work benefits that cover counselling benefits and mental health benefits. But farmers don't have that, and even if they do have benefits, they don't know who to access, to go to, or anything.

And then the other part is that counselling can be quite expensive. So there are lots of barriers that I started discovering doing these InTheKnow presentations for farmers.

And then, of course, timing. Some of the farmers that I see, I see them right now, but I also know they're getting into calving season, lambing season and also starting to plan for their crops. So they're coming in to see me quite a bit and then basically they're like, "Yeah, peace out. We're not going to see you for the next 2-3 months." It's been waves. A lot of therapists like consistency, like you see a person every one, two weeks on a consistent basis, so therapists also struggle with the fact that farmers don't have that ability to commit. So there are just so many barriers on both sides and the more I got into it, the more I got interested in offering counselling for farmers based on what I was learning there.

WHAT IS YOUR CONNECTION TO FARMING?

Well, that's kind of a funny story in the sense that, like I was a city kid, grew up as a city kid. But then we moved to Okotoks when Okotoks was a small town so that does age me a little bit if you know Okotoks at all because it's like a massive city now. But when I moved there, the population was like 5000 people, so don't go back in records to find out how old I am but, it was a small town then and it was really rural. It was all farm kids I went to school with.

I was horse mad as a kid, but my parents couldn't afford the 'fancy pants' horse riding lessons. So my mom in her blissful ignorance bought me an off-the-track thoroughbred who literally only knew how to run one direction when I was 10 years old, and I thought it was fantastic. And then my mom put me in Pony Club and we found these farmers who were willing to board my horse for like \$60 a month.

And the agreement was that me at 10 years old would help them out around the farm to help pay for my horse. And I got into? (*audio cut out*), I knew how to drive tractors and trucks, by the time I was 10 years



Alison Varga holds a master's degree in counselling psychology and has been working in various mental health settings for over 15 years within Canada and internationally. She is a registered Canadian Certified Counsellor, Counselling Therapist, and Provisional Psychologist.

[VIEW PROFILE](#)



Sustainable Canadian
Agricultural Partnership

Partenariat canadien pour
une agriculture durable

AGKNOW
ALBERTA FARM MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK

Alberta

Canada

old. I loved every single minute of it, including that every single minute of it my horse was trying to kill me because she didn't know what she was doing and I most certainly did not know what I was doing.

But the farmers also taught me like the old school way of training the horse, and basically gave me a skill set to then pay my way through university like I stayed at their farm, literally until I was 18 and then I went off to university and then I paid my way through university working in the horse industry, training and starting young horses and coaching riding lessons, which was all because of these two farmers who took me under their wings.

And then they had a daughter who helped me out with Pony Club. And everything I know about horses is really because of them, everything I know about farming is because of them, like I helped them spread the fertilizer, plant the seed for their hay crops, collect up the squares and rounds, they also had some cows. They also dove into ostriches for a little bit which is a little bit interesting. But I also discovered how not very smart Ostriches are but I got to see every part of farming without being a farm kid.

And, yeah, and then it paid my way through university which was even better.

Then I went into psychology. I actually wanted to do something with agriculture, but trying to find any type of agricultural schooling is (*hard? Unlikely? Audio cut out again*) unless you actually want to do Agricultural Sciences, which wasn't really my jam. So that's kind of my world in the agricultural world.

Then I bought my own farm. It's just a little hobby farm about eight years ago, and I have chickens. So I've been exposed to the stress of the avian flu. I have two pot-bellied pigs, and I did not realize how finicky pigs were. We have goats - also did not realize how finicky sheep and goats can be. You know, like you drive past these fields and you just think like, well, they're self-sufficient. No, they're not. The most needy animals out there are the sheep and goats. But yeah, I just love every single minute of it.

We have an orphan cow, well he's a steer. So then I had to get over my fear of cows, with having this pet steer. And he's a Black Angus. We tried to Google how long do Black Angus' live and people were like there's no answer because they're meat cows. And everyone's like, well they get butchered, so we have no idea how old the oldest Black Angus is so we're going for the world record of having the oldest Black Angus, he's only 2, but then of course I have horses and ponies and donkeys and, you know, kind of the whole gamut that comes along with a hobby farm.

(That was good. I was laughing about the Black Angus, just as an aside, my daughter really wants a house cow and I'm like, they are cute now but they get large).

Oh yeah, this steer, he would be in the house if he could. Like he'll climb our stairs. And he comes out to get doughnuts and danishes in the mornings or whatever food he can have. In the summer he's allowed out. In the winter, he's in a field with a horse that we joke identifies as a cow. Because this horse doesn't get along with any other horse on our property, but he sure loves Calvin, our cow.

WHY DOES HAVING GOOD MENTAL HEALTH ON THE FARM MATTER?

Well, I always liken it to, and this almost always kind of resonates with most of the farmers that I talked to,

...like you wouldn't run your tractors or your machines 24/7, 7 days a week at full rpm, all of the time. You wouldn't do that. So why do you do that to yourself?



And a lot of the time, they don't realize that that's what they're doing. They might not necessarily be doing the physical labour that goes along with the farm, but they're in the office, stressing about their crops or the cost of fertilizer or stressing about the impact of last year's avian flu, potentially this year as well, avian flu might have on their flocks of chickens or geese or ducks or whatever they have. And they're just constantly running at full rpm. And I say to them, like, "would you do that to your machine? No, then why are you doing it to yourself? And there's a lot of burnout that happens on farms, but then they can't be burnt out because who's going to take care of the farm if they don't? And then you just see them spiral.

It's so inspiring to see how a few check-ins with me can really kind of reset some of the farmers and they learn like okay, a lot of times my kind of motto with farmers is "at what cost?" So sure, they could spread fertilizer in a field for an extra \$100,000. That sounds amazing. But at what cost? And then often they'll say, "well, I might not see my family, I might not be able to go do this, if one of my machines fails then everything fails" and I'm like, "Okay, well, is that a cost you're willing to accept?" You know, is that a gamble you're willing to take? And a lot of the times it's almost that like perspective of "no, you know what, I'm not. That \$100,000 would go a long way, but at the same time, to the detriment of my family, my house, my psychological health..." - so that perspective-taking.

And then also the sad part is that the suicide rates among farmers are the highest of any industry and it's because they work hours and hours and hours in isolation. They have no control over anything. They don't control the cost of anything. They don't control the weather. I mean, we would all love to control the weather, but here in Alberta, we definitely don't. You know, we don't control the cost of gas or anything. And it's all of those things that we don't have control over, that end up negatively impacting a person's mental health. And then sometimes the only way out for farmers that get to such a terrible place that the only way out is, they believe, suicide. So I think it's so important that there are services and supports that run that intervention and try to support them before they get to that place.

WHAT'S ONE PIECE OF ADVICE YOU WOULD RECOMMEND TO SOMEONE WHO IS STRUGGLING WITH THEIR MENTAL HEALTH?

Take time. Take time for yourself. And unapologetically, take that time. Whether it's going for a walk - one of my one of my clients, his go-to taking time for himself is shooting gophers - just anything that is away from the bump and grind of the farming side of things that's causing this stress. Really commit time to themselves, even if it's going to church, even if it's connecting with family, like whatever it is, that brings them a little bit of enjoyment. They need to unapologetically take that time.

YOU ALREADY ALLUDED TO THIS PREVIOUSLY, BUT FROM YOUR EXPERIENCE, WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MAJOR ISSUES FACING FARMERS TODAY?

Well, I mean, one of the therapeutic approaches I use is called grounded theory. People have five innate needs. I'm not going to get into all that because it's very techie. But one of the most innate needs is control. Power and control. You need to feel that you have power and the ability to control things. If you don't have those two, that can be a major hedge to a person's ego, their mental health in general. But the number one thing that farmers don't have is control.

At the end of the day, if you constantly are feeling like you have no control and are disempowered, that can trigger so many mental health issues, and it starts with being stressed out, and then that stress turns into



unhealthy stress rather than - I mean we need stress, it motivates us. We need anxiety, it motivates us. But when does it flip to a very negative influence on our life? And that is a very, very slippery slope that a lot of farmers are like, "suck it up, buttercup, grin and bear it, we can get through it. I've gotten through way worse. Mental health doesn't matter. Like look, I broke a leg last year and I was fine. I kept farming" Like, they just keep trying to suck it up. So I think that's the biggest issue is that you know, it's a very slippery slope over something they never had control over in the first place but then they also blame themselves because, "well I know better, I should do better. Like I'm not a crazy person, like why am I like this?" and then there's that stigma around mental health and then they become even more put off from the idea of accessing mental health support.

HOW DO YOU THINK YOU CAN HELP A FARMER WITH THEIR MENTAL HEALTH? IN OTHER WORDS, WHY SHOULD THEY CHOOSE YOU?

I've kind of grown up in the farming industry in the sense that I've seen certain things, I've been involved with certain things. I have an understanding. I also own, well a hobby farm, yes, but I own a farm, and I can appreciate the pressures that farming has on a person. So I'm not going to tell someone, "no, you need to stop doing that because you need to prioritize this." I'm not going to shame them into having to take care of themselves. Not that therapists do that, but I think it's a lack of us, you know, some therapists don't have that understanding of, yeah, a farmer might have to do like the next two to three months, they're gonna be working 20 hours a day. And that's just what they're gonna do. I'm not gonna say no, no, you need to save time to come see me, you need to do this. You need to stay on this programme, you need... No, I totally get it. Like, I hope everything goes well for you. I hope to see you in the next two to three months.

So it's more of that understanding of, you know, counselling is not going to be fluid, counselling is not going to be consistent. And also with all of my farmers, I have no cancellation policy. So with a lot of counselling services, if you cancel within 24 hours, you still get billed for that session. I have a zero-cancellation policy for farmers. So I get it, you know, like in the morning, they could have every intention of coming to see me, but something happened, like a cow goes into labour and the baby's breached and they're trying to get the bed out or they're trying to get the baby out - there's all these things that they have to do that there's no way in hell, they're gonna make it to our counselling appointment, and I will never, ever, ever hold that against them. I get it. You know, I'll see when I can see you next, give me a call when things have calmed down and we'll book you. I also try to offer as much flexibility as possible as I do work for Alberta Health Services, but it's part-time. So my schedule is a little more flexible, where I can kind of fit around.

And then the other thing I also do and offer is online counselling if I need to. So as you can appreciate, like most people that live rural, they don't live 10 minutes away from town. Sometimes it's like an hour drive one way so they can't you know, that's three hours out of their days to come and see me. Whereas hop on their computer- if they have internet, I also know internet could be a major issue, but if your internet's not working or whatever it is, then I'll do a phone session. Like I tried to be as flexible and accessible as possible for farmers. Obviously, I do that for my other clients too. But farmers I have, you know, an appreciation for the extra hurdles they have.

DO YOU HAVE A PREFERRED STYLE OF THERAPY?

So, I am very eclectic. I try to utilize a number of different approaches based on the client's needs. So if I was to say anything, it's person-centred therapeutic approaches. I have been extensively trained in addictions, trauma, those side of things because that's what I do with Alberta mental health, and am very much a



trauma-informed therapist. But you know, there's the standard approaches like cognitive behavioural therapy, solution-focused therapy, narrative therapy, all those ones I use quite often as a go-to, but really, at the end of the day, it is what the client needs. There have been times, especially when I first started as a therapist, I'm like, Okay, I'm gonna use this modality for this person. And then I actually get talking to them and suddenly realize, like, oh, no, this is just not going to work for this person at all. So then it's having to be flexible to offer different approaches.

WHAT CAN A FARMER EXPECT IN THEIR SESSION WITH YOU?

It really is client driven. So I want to know why they're there, and what their priorities are. If they want to talk about one thing one day, and then completely shift gears the next day, we'll shift. I'll work with what they need.

A lot of the times they can expect that I'm going to really try to reinforce the reframing of certain thoughts, which is classic cognitive behavioural therapy, in the sense like, you know, if they're feeling overwhelmed or they're feeling really anxious about things, like identifying some of the things that are triggering them, that may be causing that stress, and then them coming up with solutions and how to kind of shift that mindset or to manage the anxiety or the emotions that are cropping up when they're feeling triggered. And just kind of giving them the tools to know that they can get through it. They have the ability to get through it. And I'll give them different suggestions on how to manage that stress. Manage the triggers, manage trauma or anxiety or emotions that are cropping up and work through each one of them, and then we'll kind of revisit, "how did it go, what worked, what didn't work?"

I'm also really open to my clients saying, you know, this isn't working for me, this doesn't feel right, I tried what you told me to do, and I just, I can't, I don't like it. And it's like, okay, well, let's try something else. So it's really like, they can expect that what they need will be what I try to address the best I can.

I HAVE ONE LAST QUESTION FOR YOU AND IT'S WHAT WORDS WOULD SOMEONE USE TO DESCRIBE YOU AS A THERAPIST?

Real. Like, I come from a very realistic, down-to-earth approach. I'm approachable. I use humour a lot of the time. Growing up with different farmers, sarcasm is a big thing. And sometimes that goes a long way. I can laugh at myself. I take feedback really well, so I think it's more that I'm approachable and I care.



Interview by Dr. Rebecca Purc-Stephenson
*Applied Social Psychologist and Professor in
the Department of Social Sciences*



**UNIVERSITY
OF ALBERTA**



Sustainable Canadian
Agricultural Partnership

Partenariat canadien pour
une agriculture durable

AGKNOW
ALBERTA FARM MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK

Alberta

Canada