

THERAPIST NETWORK MEMBER INTERVIEW

DR. KENDELL BANACK

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

That's a tricky question for me because I feel like I was with AgKnow before the referral network was launched. But I just thought there was the need for tailored services for farmers and their families to at least remove a bit of the barrier for them to access needed services. And so if I could put myself out there as a provider who has a connection to agriculture, to just say, "Hey, I'm out here. There are people here who can help you." I was more than happy to do that. So yeah, it was just in knowing the need and hoping to help.

I also know of farmers personally who have struggled with isolation, anxiety, and depression. To my knowledge, none of them have reached out for support. I suspect part of this is due to shame. Farmers are consistently portrayed as strong, almost infallible humans up at sunrise working until sunset every day no matter what. When a farmer is struggling and not living up to that ideal, I think the instinct is to put their head down and work harder, certainly not to stop working and talk to someone. Unfortunately, the long-term impact of this strategy can exacerbate symptoms and cause burnout which can make future seasons harder to endure.

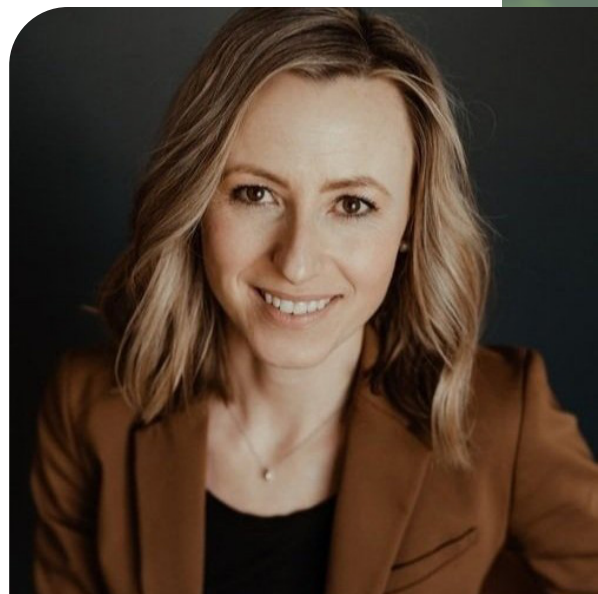
I also think a barrier to reaching out for support is not knowing where to reach. I cannot imagine any of the farmers in my life wanting to take half a day off work to clean up and drive into the city, all the while thinking it is a waste of time because the person sitting across from them likely doesn't have a clue about what their lives are really like.

I think AgKnow is doing a great job of providing information and normalizing the experiences of stress, depression, and anxiety among farmers, and this hopefully can reduce shame by making farmers feel less alone. AgKnow is also addressing the barrier of access by creating the referral network. By joining this network, I am part of a collection of therapists who know agriculture and value and care about the farmers in our communities. I am playing a small part in advocating for farmers and addressing the barrier of access to services.

WHAT IS YOUR CONNECTION TO FARMING?

I grew up on a mixed farm. We had grain and cattle. My grandfather lived next door and so I had that experience of "the dad farming with grandpa" and all the dynamics that can come with that including uncertainties associated with succession planning. My brother hopes to take over the farm one day. Aside from me, all of my siblings are still directly involved in agriculture in some way.

I still feel a connection to my family farm. Even though I moved out 20 years ago, it is still the place I call "home".



Dr. Kendell Banack holds a Ph.D. in Counselling Psychology from the University of Alberta. She is a Registered Psychologist in Alberta.

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WHY DOES HAVING GOOD MENTAL HEALTH ON THE FARM MATTER?

I think good mental health matters for everyone everywhere and farmers should not be overlooked or excluded.

I also think there are unique stressors associated with farming such as unpredictable elements like market prices, the weather, and breakdowns, as well as the stress of debt and isolation which I think many farmers and their families encounter. For somebody in a position of high stress and low support, it is a formula for declining mental health.

In addition, farmers are people who operate large equipment and are responsible for the lives of hundreds, sometimes thousands of animals. They have a great sense of responsibility to their land, their animals, and also to their families. If a farmer does not do their job, in most cases, no one is there to do it for them.

There's a lot at stake when it comes to a farmer. If they have an off season where they are not functioning well, the consequence is not to lose their desk job and to start sending out resumes to find a new one. The consequence can be losing livestock, not being able to pay bills, and sometimes even losing the farm. The mental health and wellbeing of a farmer is important to their livelihood, their land, their family, and to the animals under their care.

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

I think awareness is key. A lot of people put their head down, put one foot in front of the other, and just try to keep on marching even though they are not moving forward anymore. It is hard to be aware of struggle. It is hard to acknowledge struggle.

If you do notice struggle, or if someone you love is gently encouraging you to notice struggle, notice the urge to defend and withdraw, and take a breath, acknowledge that it is hard right now, and reach out for support.

IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU'VE GOT A LOT OF EXPERIENCE JUST EVEN FROM THE FAMILY FARM. WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE SOME OF THE MAJOR ISSUES THAT ARE FACING FARMERS TODAY?

Just thinking about some of my clients right now, there are general topics that they touch on such as the stress of unpredictable weather, the market, the isolation, the huge financial costs, succession planning, and family dynamics, and I think all of it can culminate into experiences of stress, and feeling like they just cannot cope anymore. For some of my clients, it is communicated like, "There's all this going on, and I'm stressed about it and it's hard to figure out how to get through the day sometimes."

I think isolation is also a major issue facing farmers today. Many farmers and their families might say they exist in community, and some of them do have connection to community, whether it be neighbouring farmers or a church, and yet, they are often still very alone. Even for farmers who do have a sense of



community, I think there still is a lot of holding back from disclosing what might actually be going on because it doesn't feel okay to say, "I'm really struggling," or "Wow, was it hard to get out of bed today," or even, "I'm behind in my seeding."

Likewise, when I'm speaking with the partners of farmers, typically wives, they don't feel like their friends necessarily understand the experience of going through a harvest, being alone with the kids and the extra demands on the family at that time. Or sometimes they're living next to their mother in law, who can be a primary support in terms of helping to bring meals out to the fields and helping with the kids, and yet, they are not able to talk about the challenges of the family farm to someone so intertwined with the family farm.

In addition, I think farming has become increasingly competitive which also contributes to loneliness. A neighbour might not be perceived as a friend anymore but as a foe, someone competing for land, livestock, resources, and the best market prices. There aren't collective experiences of gathering together and raising a barn anymore, or a branding day where everyone shows up with hands ready to help. As farming has become increasingly individualistic, I think that competition and isolation have also increased. Farm culture has shifted over the last hundred years.

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

The first thing that came to mind was that farmers first and foremost need a safe place to chat. Farmers need a space that is confidential, a space where they can talk freely without worrying about hurting somebody's feelings.

It makes me tear up, but I am deeply respectful of the therapeutic encounter. It feels perpetually like an honour and a privilege when somebody is entrusting me with their experiences and their story. They're entering this space that I try to hold for them. Clients trust me with things that are so private, and personal and painful. And so in every therapeutic encounter, I try to bring so much respect for the dignity of the person across from me, honouring, validating and respecting their struggle, honouring and respecting their courage and strength, and seeing their resilience in the midst of the pain and the adversity. It is very powerful to me.

At the end of the day, regardless of therapeutic modality, the most important change factor, and the research shows this, is the therapeutic relationship. I think if I can come into the space I share with clients, holding the safety of the relationship in mind, farmers won't take to these words but, respecting the sacredness and the preciousness of the human across from me, that change and healing can happen. I think that's what makes the difference. I think that's what promotes change.

YOU HAD MENTIONED MODALITY, BUT DO YOU HAVE A PREFERRED STYLE OF THERAPY? OR DO YOU HAVE A SPECIALTY THAT YOU USE?

I do. When people ask me this question, I say I'm a person centred therapist, and I'm integrative which I think all therapists say, but I identify as an emotion focused therapist, and this is something that can scare off people in the farming community - "Emotion focused? I dare you to ask me to name an emotion. I'm not going down that road." So I hesitate in sharing that I'm an emotion focused therapist, especially for people within the farming community. I of course am trained in CBT and other approaches, as many psychologists



are. I will say that of my clients who are farmers, I've had some who have become strong advocates for EFT, and for therapy generally. But yeah, I would say I'm a person centred integrative therapist.

AND DO YOU FIND THAT ONCE FARMERS HAVE HAD THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING IN THERAPY WITH YOU THAT THERE IS A SHIFT AND THEY ARE MORE OPEN TO TALK ABOUT IT BEYOND THERAPEUTIC SETTINGS?

Yes. For some of my clients, certainly. Some of my clients will come back and say, "Oh, man, I've been telling all of my friends, you've got to do therapy." And I've heard clients say, "Therapy is magic. And I'm telling everybody." And I've had other people come and say, "I have started to write posts or blogs related to mental health". So yes, I do hear that from clients. I also hear people saying that in their personal life, they're more open to sharing with their partner, or their children, or their friends. So I do notice those changes for sure.

For people newer to therapy, I warn them that they might have a "vulnerability hangover" after the session. A vulnerability hangover is my name for the rawness that a client may feel after sharing their experience, particularly if it is not something they have shared before. I want clients to be prepared for it. I use the comparison of going to the gym - if you go to the gym for an hour and work out really hard, your muscles might be a little sore after.

Early experiences of talking with someone else can be unfamiliar and uncomfortable, but eventually, clients almost begin to thirst for it. It begins to feel good to not hold it all in and be so alone.

Talking in therapy can also open people up to sharing with others, including their partners. While talking initially feels scary and exhausting, people realise that holding up walls is the greatest exertion of all. People can then make choices about when to hold up walls and when they can let them down.

A good massage therapist will pay attention to the knots and bring focus to the knots. As a psychologist, that's what I have to do too. When we go into painful places there can be discomfort, and ultimately, the hope is that relief will follow.

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

Oh, gosh. I hate these questions. I'm just thinking about what a client told me yesterday. You know, once in a while, I like to check in with my clients about how we are doing. As a psychologist who is trying to practise ethically I'm always weighing benefits against harm, and looking to see if the therapy is benefitting my clients. So I was checking in with my client about what, if anything, she was getting out of therapy so far. And she said that it felt safe. It was a safe place. She could come and she felt understood and heard and validated. And so I think that speaks to what I see as the most important thing about therapy: for someone to feel seen, heard, and understood. I think my clients would say they experience me as empathic, understanding, and someone who genuinely cares about their well-being.



*Interview by Dr. Rebecca Purc-Stephenson
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