

THERAPIST NETWORK MEMBER INTERVIEW

MITCHELL TOKAREK

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

I have a personal connection with farm life, and I've lived in rural areas most of my life. I grew up on an acreage with my mom, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins which were some of the best memories I have. I feel like throughout my journey of becoming a psychologist and working in rural areas, in comparison to more urban settings, that we've fallen behind in terms of actually seeking out and accessing the services that are out there, and that includes farmers and their families. I don't want people to be left behind. Part of that is people not knowing what's out there and what people's knowledge is regarding these resources or how to access them. I'd like to be a part of this program and help expand awareness as to what's actually available.

WHAT IS YOUR CONNECTION TO FARMING?

I grew up on an acreage. My grandfather was a farmer. My grandmother was one of my many caregivers on the farm, as she spent all of her time raising the family. I know their values had a big impact on me. One thing I really loved about being around family was just helping as much as I could as a kid outside. Whether it was with the crops or just being outside, that was such a great time. Not so much with the machinery though, I'll put it this way - I wasn't as handy as my grandfather. Still definitely just enjoyed the space and the connection to the land.

WHY DOES HAVING GOOD MENTAL HEALTH ON THE FARM MATTER?

For a lot of reasons. I think the physical and mental aspects of our well being are very interconnected. I'd like to think that I take a holistic approach when it comes to my work and want to make sure we give respect to how it all comes together. We know that having good mental health is so closely linked to physical health and well-being - they play off of each other in many ways. Farming can be a very demanding type of work, both mentally and physically, so we need to keep that in mind and not let one or both of those pieces start to feel neglected.

I think having good mental health just leads to being more able to achieve your goals on the job as well. Productivity matters to farmers because the work is literally their livelihood. Having a good sense of feeling fulfilled and a sense of meaning in your work is very important, which I think good mental health can help with.

I guess another practical piece when I think about it is just safety in general. You know, you want to make sure that you're firing on all cylinders when you're operating heavy machinery or working with potentially hazardous materials. Farmers work long hours and I think it can be tough sometimes to make sure that you're able to be alert, attentive and feeling good about where you're at cognitively.



Mitchell Tokarek is a Registered Psychologist offering in-person and virtual sessions in Beaumont, Alberta.

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And the most important thing from my point of view is ensuring that a sense of family and community persists and knowing you don't have to go through these struggles alone.

I think that farmers often work closely with their families and their communities as well. So having a good sense of mental health can help foster those interpersonal relationships.

MOVING ON TO THE NEXT QUESTION. WHAT'S ONE PIECE OF ADVICE YOU WOULD RECOMMEND TO SOMEONE WHO IS STRUGGLING WITH THEIR MENTAL HEALTH?

I think first and foremost that seeking professional help can definitely feel overwhelming and like a huge stressor in itself, but I would want people to know that the first step of walking through that door or having the first appointment is often the most difficult and that it does get better. I can't tell you how many times people have said that the hardest part of therapy has been just walking through the door on day one. Once they're actually sitting down and having a real conversation, it seems like that weight is off of the person's shoulders.

When we really think about it, it's just about talking to someone with a different or outside perspective. I will say that talking to a therapist isn't really the same as with your family and friends. You can still share your thoughts and feelings with people you are close with, but I think

...a big difference is that a therapist isn't going to exist in your world outside of therapy. They are going to be objective, keep good boundaries for certain, and make sure your information remains with them.

It's just about opening up the doors and the possibility of knowing that vulnerability doesn't have to be associated with weakness. That old school way of thinking that "I have to be stoic and I can't let others show when I'm hurt".

My other advice is if you are interested in therapy, don't feel pressured to have everything all sorted out in your head before you come in. That's something that the psychologist or your provider can help you with. I feel you know, a lot of people when I ask "what's bringing you in today?" kind of have that deer in the headlights look and that is completely okay. It is something that we can work on together. You just have to organize your thoughts and sometimes it does require a little bit of help. So I would say don't put pressure on yourself to have everything figured out even before you sit down, let it be part of the process.

FROM YOUR EXPERIENCE, WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MAJOR ISSUES FACING FARMERS TODAY?

Too many to list. I think there's definitely a lot of economic pressure with the global market competition. Things like fluctuation of crop prices, you know, the financial stress just associated with owning a farm, the technology and the upkeep of different materials. I think all of that can contribute to a high degree of stress and anxiety. There's a lot of uncertainty there. I think that's a huge factor in a lot of professions, but particularly with farming when it's such a big operation for a lot of people.

I guess the other piece to this and why this program is so great is that there's such isolation in farming



communities. It can be a solitary occupation. You know, spending a lot of long hours in the field working by yourself. Even if it is a family business, it can be very isolating.

One issue that I have some personal experience with more so is succession planning. I think that's a huge issue, particularly when farmers face that difficult decision of passing the farm on to the next generation, or that next generation taking on those responsibilities. There's a lot of complex stress in both roles there. I find that that can be really helpful in having those conversations with each other, but it can also be hard without support.

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

Oh, I don't know why they should choose me specifically, there are a lot of great psychologists out there. I don't like to consider myself an expert as if I know everything about a particular issue. I don't really like that word too much because there's always more that you can learn even about a field, even one that you are very knowledgeable in. But that being said, I feel like I have a pretty good foundation as a psychologist with quite a few different evidence-based and practical approaches to therapy. I don't know if I put that on my profile, but things like Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy. Just a few examples. Those are all just fancy ways of packaging psychological tools to help people with struggles in life. So there's a lot of variety there which I appreciate about my work. I think just offering not a one size fits all approach, but like I said before a holistic approach to therapy.

A little on my background, I've worked with such a diverse number of people over the years. My youngest client I've ever worked with, I think was four years old and the oldest has been like eighty something years old. I've worked with kids, parent-child relationships, couples, and families. In addiction centers and emergency shelters, hospitals and community mental health clinics. Like I said, I really enjoy the variety.

WHAT CAN A FARMER OR THEIR FAMILY MEMBER EXPECT IN THEIR SESSION WITH YOU?

My hope is that the first session would be as comfortable as possible. Like I said, they don't need to have all the answers about what they're seeking or what it is that they want to work on necessarily in the first session. It's about getting a sense of trust and connection, making sure they realize it's a place they can come to where there isn't going to be any judgment regardless of what is shared.

I do find myself asking a lot of questions just to get to know people the first time I meet them, which I appreciate can be a little bit exhausting for some people. Ideally those questions will help us get to what's important and what may be helpful for you as you consider therapy. They don't have to answer all of them. They might say "I don't know" and that's completely okay. But some of those questions would be about their personal life, their work stressors, relationships, mental health history, and if they've done therapy before what's worked well in the past and what hasn't worked very well for them.

Once we get that all figured out, goal setting I think would be the next step. What we want to do is find something that works for them. I don't want to come across as if I know everything about a person I just met. My part is offering possibilities to help the person choose and direct what they feel would be beneficial for



them because I guarantee you after an hour of talking to you, I could tell you at least a little bit about who you are, but I won't know you anywhere close to as well as you know yourself.

AND WHAT WORDS WOULD YOU USE TO DESCRIBE YOURSELF?

That's always the hardest question, isn't it? I'd like to think I'm a kind and patient person. I asked my wife and she said I'm calm, hardworking, and a soft-spoken person. I'd like to think that I'm empathetic, as I try my best to put myself in other people's shoes. Trying my best to understand where they're coming from. I think for any psychologist, an essential skill is being a good listener, but also somebody that can provide feedback and that practical piece of knowledge that the person is coming for a reason and that the help is there. And I guess I'm also a fairly analytical thinker, very logical. I enjoy strategy games like chess where there is a problem to solve, so that's why psychology is so interesting to me. I like to help people figure out complex problems, and humans are nothing if not complex. Psychology is a lot like farming. It's a lot of fun. I have a passion for it!



Interview by Dr. Rebecca Purc-Stephenson
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