



Bringing darkness to light

Rural Minds works to give a voice and hope to people living in the shadows of mental illness.

by Andrea Stoltzfus

IN AMERICA'S close-knit rural communities, residents are quick to rally when an illness or accident affects their farming neighbors, helping them through the rough patches. But all illnesses are not created equal, and the silent specter of mental illness often brings no recognition and no extra hands to help.

This situation is one that many organizations, health advocates, and individuals in agriculture are working hard to change. For Jeff Winton, a New York dairy farmer, his passion to address mental health in rural America led him to found Rural Minds in October 2021. The nonprofit aims to serve as the informed voice for mental health in these areas and provide mental health resources.

"We are in the middle of an emergency in rural America," he said of the mental health crisis. "We were aware of other organizations out there and the materials that already exist. We wanted to bring these groups together that don't always get a chance to interact."

Call to action

While the organization is relatively new, Winton has long been aware of the stigma surrounding mental illness in rural areas. Growing up, he discovered many of the families in

his 500-person town had a relative or friend living with untreated mental illness like depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety, or schizophrenia. Few or no resources existed for treatment in the community, and their struggles were met with silence.

Then in 2012, Winton's nephew, Brooks, died by suicide at the age of 28. "This was really a wake-up call, not only for my family but for a lot of people in my area that we have a silent epidemic going on," he said. "It was my mother, Elaine, who said 'Enough is enough. We are going to talk about this and we are going to talk about it in detail.' And we did, at Brooks' funeral. With my mother's urging, we began talking openly about our loss. It put a face to this silent killer in our community and gave other families the courage and permission to talk about their journey."

Tools for the conversation

Winton was the first in his family to leave the farm to go to college, attending Cornell University. He first worked as a cooperative extension agent, then moved on to careers in the agricultural and biopharmaceutical industries. In his last corporate role, he became truly aware of mental illness and substance abuse efforts for urban and suburban residents,

A COMMITMENT TO MENTAL HEALTH advocacy led New York dairy farmer Jeff Winton to establish Rural Minds so all people who can benefit from mental health resources have access.

yet felt people in rural America were being left behind.

"From the time that Brooks died, the seed was planted for me wanting to do something in his honor, but I wasn't quite sure what it was," Winton described. "Rural Minds was 10 years in the making, but in retrospect, it took me this long to gain a full appreciation and understanding for what was needed and how we could help become the voice for people in rural areas living with various forms of mental illness."

Rural Minds brings together resources for those struggling with mental illness; it's information that already existed but is now categorized by subject on their website. "We wanted to be mindful there already is a lot of great information out there from other long-established organizations," he said. "These materials are applicable whether you live in a small town or large city."

The rural areas and small towns, however, have unique challenges. The stigma of mental illness, reduced access to mental health care in remote areas, and limited internet access can all play a role in determining how someone can get help.

Starting the conversation about mental illness is an important first step to healing, Winton said.

"We need to have the same ability to talk about this as we do other diseases," he explained. "The stigma still exists in many rural areas, so people are ashamed to talk about it and don't feel they have the ability to share their feelings. That's unlike if you are diagnosed with cancer, which people readily talk about, or diagnosed with diabetes. Mental illness is still a topic that is forbidden in many parts of this country."

Winton hopes Rural Minds can provide access not only to professional resources, but to others struggling with mental illness. One of the most recent efforts to connect the two was a webinar of panelists who stressed the power of sharing experiences and confronting mental health challenges. Other webinars are planned for later this year.

"People with lived experience need to feel comfortable talking about their illness like they do COVID-19, cancer, and heart disease," Winton said. "Sharing personal stories is so critical in the healing process and will ultimately help people feel more empowered to seek help."

For more information, visit www.ruralminds.org, or follow their Facebook page. 🐮

The author and her family own and operate a 570-cow Holstein and Jersey dairy near Berlin, Pa.

A SURVIVOR'S VIEW

The following was written by a farm wife who knows firsthand the challenges of mental illness.

I'VE KNOWN my husband since we were 13, and in the last 35 years, I watched his illness grow from a manageable inconvenience in our late teens to deadly in our 40s. I call it "stage 4 depression." Just like any stage 4 illness, it has infected every part of his body and our lives. His personality is different; he has physical ailments like sleeplessness and nausea. Unlike a cancer, mental health is subjective. "On a scale of 1 to 10 how suicidal are you?" is all we can ask. Sometimes, his illness becomes mine. I feel myself pulled into the depression rabbit hole with him, and that is not good for either of us.

It has taken us 30 years to figure out treatment options and how to navigate a convoluted, understaffed mental health treatment system. I learned not to say things like, "But you have a wife who loves you, beautiful children, and an amazing farm," because he knows he shouldn't be feeling this way. If love and success could have healed him, we would not be having this discussion. He has a biochemical imbalance, and no words can help that. Only medication to treat the physical symptoms and therapy to teach coping skills can help. So, I make sure he knows I support and love him. I've learned to let the negative comment slip by and wait for the positive one to come.

But I know how some loved ones leave someone with this devastating illness. It's tiring to wonder what mood is coming home, what to say, and if the new medication is working. I am one of the blessed ones who has a spouse willing to fight to be healthy. And he does, every day.

Mental illness is the most isolating of diseases. And that is where we need to change. I am so grateful for the people who sat with my husband and shared their stories — other tough farmers who talked about crying while on a tractor or winter months spent doing the bare minimum, praying to feel better. These are the stories we need to hear to feel hope and to know we aren't alone, as a caregiver or a patient. My husband's depression is in "remission" right now, but it lurks just below the surface of everyday life. My prayer is that in the near future, mental health is discussed and dealt with in the same way as physical health and that people who suffer in the darkness of their minds no longer feel they have to hide and can come into the light.