

Dairy farming: It's a passion, but it's hard.

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This cow, Cinnamon, she got me hooked. She was my gateway drug. She was my 4-H project that turned into my college fund, that became a career. She continues to be my inspiration and dedication (my kids will always be my motivation). Cinnamon was born on January 1st (year is not of importance ☺), and I claimed her as mine. She was the first Red & White born on the farm. Being daddy's little girl, Cinnamon got put in my name and she became my project. Cinnamon spent many hours on a halter being led around the dooryard, and then to every 4-H fair. Cinnamon's first

calf was a heifer "Cameo" who, similar to her dam, would be treated like a new puppy. Cinnamon was sired by a "jumper bull" but became something special, and in 1999 she was Grand Champion at the International Spring R&W show; for a teenager this was the most exciting thing in the world. When we got home, Cinnamon was dried off, calved in again (for the last time) and went on a flush program. Cinnamon made lots of embryos, and had numerous daughters, but eventually that came to an end. My dad has a 3 strikes rule, and after 3 failed flushes Cinnamon's name appeared on the cull list. It was spring time, so I bought a little leeway and she was able to live out the spring and summer in the dry cow lot (not the most profitable or realistic business decision), but I wasn't ready to say good bye. As fall came to a close and winter was upon us, the barn was full and Cinnamon wasn't paying her way; her time had come to take one more trailer ride. That Monday night I said goodbye to a cow that gave me lots of memories, opened many doors, built lifelong friendships, and provided me with opportunities I never knew existed. Cinnamon may have been seen as "just a cow" but she was mine. We had a history together and she was responsible for my love of the dairy industry.

Every day I get to work with dairy farmers; it is the most rewarding job. I love my farmers, I love seeing them make progress, and I love seeing their dreams come to fruition. Over the last couple of years my job has shifted. We might still be working on projects and ideas for the future, but more and more often I'm someone to talk to, someone to vent to, or someone to commiserate with. It is no secret that dairy farming is a stressful business and times are tough. These farmers have put everything into their businesses and their cows are part of their family. Frustrations range from current milk price to labor to consumer demands and more. Depression, exhaustion, mental illness, and suicide have become topics of conversation. Farming is a stressful occupation because many of the factors that affect agricultural production are beyond the control of the producers. Emotional well-being of farmers, and their families, is often intertwined with these changes. Many people believe these topics are taboo, and shouldn't be talked about. However, we need to be talking about these issues, we need to normalize these topics and support each other.

Depression, stress, anxiety, financial worries, marital difficulties, alcohol consumption, drug addiction, and gambling additions have increased in farmers over the last couple years. In December I had a farmer tell me that he thinks he needs to talk to someone. He was frustrated with the hours he was working,

but he wasn't seeing any progress and his returns were getting smaller and smaller. He was starting to take his frustrations home with him and it was impacting his relationship with his wife and children. He didn't think talking to a doctor would help; last time he told his doctor he was stressed out the doctor told him to go on vacation for a week, or maybe it was time to take a sabbatical from work.

Unfortunately, most doctors don't understand farming. After a long conversation, and a pot of coffee later, it was decided that he would reach out to his doctor to talk about depression and take his wife out to dinner. I recently spoke to this farmer and he said that he and his wife went out to dinner and decided they needed to make more time for each other, as well as time to talk about the farm and time to talk about everything but the farm. He also reached out to his doctor, who referred him to another doctor who understood agriculture and has been able to help him work through his feelings and better communicate what is going on.

Depression is not one size fits all, but at the end of the day it needs to be addressed. Reaching out for help may seem like the hardest step, and it often is, but it's the most important. No one can help you if they don't know you are struggling. Reaching out can be done over a cup of coffee with a good friend, a trusted colleague, or spouse. Maybe you feel more comfortable reaching out to a medical professional and for some, remaining anonymous and reaching out to a hotline may be the first step.

The U.S. suicide rate in agriculture (farmers, laborers, ranchers, fishers, and lumber harvesters) are nearly 5 times that of the general population. This is even greater than veterans, and unfortunately echoes trends observed globally. In Australia, one farmer commits suicide every 4 days, while in the UK one farmer takes his life every week. Why are the rates so much higher in farmers? Suggested causes include: social isolation, potential for financial losses, barriers to and willingness to seek mental health services, and access to lethal means.

What can you do?

- Start the discussion. Have a family meeting, a partners meeting, a team meeting. How is everybody doing, what are your concerns, do you have ideas you want to share? If it's easier, have people put things in writing. There are lots of ways to have positive communication, find one that works for you. Work with a moderator to help the flow of the conversation and to prevent one person from taking over or shutting others down. The moderator could be a trusted business consultant, an extension educator, or a member of the clergy.
- Be a friend, a neighbor, a caring person. If you know someone who is struggling, let them know you are there for them. We all need some encouragement, someone to vent to, and some who cares about us. Be that person.
- Reach out for help. FarmNet (1-800-547-3276), Cornell Cooperative Extension, and local clergy are all options to reach out to if you want to have a one-on-one conversation.
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or Live Online Chat. If you or someone you know is suicidal or in emotional distress, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Trained crisis workers are available to talk 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

When asked why they are still farming, most farmers will tell you, it's their heritage, a love of the land, a passion for working with animals, and the feeling of feeding the world. Whatever it may be, farmers are one of the most honest, dedicated, and caring groups of people in this world.