

What is a farm without its farmer?

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As Teagasc advisors we frequently speak to farmers about how the farm is performing in relation to its technical and financial efficiency. While these issues are central to attaining profit and minimising losses, they don't address one key element of the farm: the farmer.

An average of 26 farmers die by suicide in Ireland annually. Male suicide rates are highest in the 45- to 64-year-old category, according to CSO data. This age profile takes in more than half of all Irish farmers.

Farming is inherently a very solitary life, particularly for those without family. This, coupled with workload (particularly at this time of year when calving, lambing and sowing are in full swing), financial pressures and of course the global pandemic we are living with, can take a toll on anyone's mental health.

Social opportunities such as going to livestock marts or discussion groups, are often a farmer's only means of mixing with other farmers. These are now carried out on virtual platforms, and trips to the local co-op can no longer involve getting into lengthy conversations with neighbours you might have met along the way. Many farmers can go weeks without talking to or seeing anyone.

All of these elements combined can cause a decrease in farmer mental health, and in some cases the person themselves may be unaware of it.

While a farmer may not be having suicidal thoughts, they may be showing character changes such as a lack of interest in personal hygiene, lack of willingness to engage in a conversation, lack of interest in things that a person used to enjoy. Or they may have begun showing a negative outlook towards everything. These can all be signs of mental health issues.

One farmer I spoke with who has suffered with mental illness for more than a decade explained that the first warning signs for him were "having an erratic mood, a feeling of a dark cloud hanging over you, a lack of rhyme or reason and that things which should have improved my mood, didn't. It was a feeling of not being able to breathe or get relief from issues that constantly took over my mind".

Stigma

Stigma around mental health issues and asking for help can prevent people from seeking support early.

When talking to the farmer about what it is that makes addressing mental health with farmers, he said "aside from the isolation that farmers experience, it is the attitude that anything that isn't expressed as a strength isn't touched upon, it's brushed under the carpet."

"Farmers seem to think they need to be a tougher breed than outsiders and even their peers. I even experienced this in agricultural college among young farmers in their twenties."

“It's easy to get wrapped up in day-to-day life and forget that there are others out there who might not be dealing with their current situations as well as you might be

While help is available nationwide through many national and local groups, such as Aware, Jigsaw, Pieta House, turn2me and Mental Health Ireland, who in conjunction with Teagasc and IFA have a farm resilience programme, one particular campaign in Co Kildare has focused primarily on the mental health of males and



recognises that there is a particular issue within the farming community.

Heads Up, led by Niamh Keaveney, aims to encourage participants to make positive changes to their lives, develop resilience and offers support to access local services.

Depending on the needs of clients, Heads Up offers both one-to-one and group support. Niamh explained: "Not all men that contact us will be ready for the group programme, some may be struggling, have low moods, feel lost but not be aware their mental health has been impacted. They want something different and want to make changes but don't know what is driving this or how to go about it."

One service offered by Heads Up is an evidence-based group programme which consists of two mornings a week for 12 weeks. The programme focuses on four main areas; firstly, wellbeing and resilience which supports men to gain an understanding of their mental health so that they can build their resilience and respond positively to stress and stressful situations.

"It involves making men aware of their mental health, identifying

CONTACT DETAILS

- Niamh Keaveney: Heads Up, Kildare – 085 2845871, <https://www.countykildarelp.ie/programmes/headsup/>
- Mental Health Ireland in conjunction with the Samaritans: 116 123 free-text HELLO to 50808, www.mentalhealthireland.ie
- Aware: 1800 80 48 48, www.aware.ie
- Pieta House: 1800 247 247 or text HELP to 51444, www.pieta.ie
- Jigsaw (specifically aimed at 12-25 year olds): 01 4727010, www.jigsaw.ie
- Turn2me: provides online and in person support for both children and adults as well as the parents of children dealing with mental health issues, www.turn2me.ie

to scheduling events as similar as self-hygiene to give you routine which in turn helps you come out of the downward spiral quicker.”

He also outlined how the programme put him in contact with people who could “understand the pain and struggle but who also didn’t think less of you for it or talking about it, dispelling the same associated with mental illness. This lack of judgement in itself provides a release from the darkness.”

When asked for one piece of advice to give to someone who may be suffering with mental illness and not have confronted it yet, the farmer said: “Finding someone to express this to, a loved one, a stranger, a doctor, anyone is first step.

“You need to choose that person wisely so you can express your feelings safely. Someone who won’t judge you, someone that won’t do anything, just listen. It doesn’t even have to be in person. Online forums where you can remain anonymous can work; just some way of spreading the burden. I myself never started to truly recover until I shared it with my partner at the time, now my wife.”

Now more than ever people, farmers and non-farmers need to look after each other. It’s easy to get wrapped up in day-to-day life and forget that there are others out there who might not be dealing with their current situations as well as you might be.

Taking time out of your day to lift the phone and chat to someone you haven’t heard from in a while, or someone that is unusually less in contact with you, to see if they are alright, could provide the opening they need to share their burden.



changes that make them feel well or not well. It also helps to identify new coping strategies that work for them as not everyone will respond to the same strategies,” Niamh outlined.

The second area of focus is on life planning which “enables men to set their own personal goals and be supported to access relevant services in pursuing these goals. The men determine new pathways for themselves and are equipped with the tools, knowledge and information to progress. Sometimes people have an idea of what they want to do but feel like they have hit a brick wall and can see no way around it. This part of the programme can really help with that,” says Niamh.

The third area of focus is centred on physical activity. It has widely been proven that physical activity can positively impact your mental attitude and health.

“The programme tries to show men how being a little more active can improve mental health, how their mood can improve from feeling endorphins released during exercise and help build this into their daily routine,” Niamh adds.

The final area of the programme is developing social connections through the “creation of a male space to enable men experience support and connection. Many people may have happy marriages or good interaction with other people but are wearing a mask.”

“The group allows men to mix with others who, despite all having different stories or backgrounds, need the same safe place to allow them to take the mask off. This can have a positive impact on making changes to their own lives,” Niamh explains.

The farmer I spoke with partook in the programme and found it greatly beneficial to his mental health and quality of life.

Holistic approach

“The programme took a very holistic approach to strategies and tools to better equip yourself. It helped to identify warning signs of an imminent episode of depression earlier allowing me to put protocols in place so the outcome might not be as destructive to myself or people close to me.

“These protocols may just be activities, or going to someone to talk