



TALKING WITH FARMERS & RANCHERS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE

CONVERSATION STARTERS FOR FRIENDS, FAMILY, AG PROFESSIONALS & HELPERS

Farming and ranching are stressful even in the best years. Weather, markets, debt, labor, family, health, and isolation all pile up. Those pressures can take a toll on mental health and, for some, lead to thoughts of suicide.

You don't have to be a counselor to make a difference.

You do have to notice, ask, and listen.

BEFORE YOU START THE CONVERSATION

- Pick your moment and place: Choose somewhere private enough to talk but still comfortable: pickup, shop, machine shed, coffee spot, sale barn parking lot, a quiet corner at the café.
- Avoid starting deep conversations when they are rushing, handling equipment, or obviously distracted.

YOUR MINDSET

- Go in with care, not judgment.
- Your job: open a door, not fix everything.
- Be ready to stay in the conversation if they open up.
- You can start with neutral topics (weather, market, harvest, calving, repairs) and then gently shift.

GENTLE OPENERS ABOUT STRESS & WELL-BEING

- Use simple, plain language. “Stress” and “being worn down” can feel safer than “mental illness.”
- *You might say:*
 - “How have you been holding up with everything this year?”
 - “You’ve had a lot on your plate with prices, weather, and health. How are you doing in the middle of all that?”
 - “I’ve been worried about you. Things seem really heavy lately. What’s it been like for you?”
 - “What are you doing these days to take care of yourself, not just the farm?”
 - **If they shrug it off, you can gently persist once:**
 - “I get that. At the same time, I can see this is wearing on you. I care about you and just want to check in.”

CLEAR WARNING SIGNS YOU MAY SEE

- Big changes in sleep, appetite, or energy
- More drinking or other substance use
- Talking about being a “failure,” “burden,” or “better off gone”
- Letting things go that they usually care about (equipment, livestock, bills, hygiene)
- Giving away equipment or talking as if they won’t be around next season

WAYS TO SAY WHAT YOU’RE SEEING:

- “I’ve noticed you haven’t been yourself lately—quieter, not coming around like you used to. What’s been going on?”
- “You’ve said a few times that you’re ‘done’ and ‘it’s not worth it.’ What do you mean when you say that?”
- “You’ve been missing breakfast or coffee, and that’s not like you. I’m concerned. How bad has it gotten?”
- “You’ve been talking about selling everything and walking away. Are you feeling hopeless about the future?”

ASKING DIRECTLY ABOUT SUICIDE

If you are worried they might be thinking about ending their life, ask directly. You will not put the idea in their head. Asking shows you’re someone who can handle the truth.

YOU CAN SAY:

- “Sometimes when people are under this much stress, they think about ending their life. Have you had any thoughts like that?”
- “You’ve said things like ‘they’d be better off without me.’ Are you thinking about suicide?”
- “I care about you, and I need to ask: have you thought about hurting yourself or killing yourself?”

IF THEY SAY YES, TRY TO STAY CALM AND RESPOND:

- “Thank you for telling me. I’m glad you trusted me with that.”
- “I’m really glad you told me instead of keeping it inside. Let’s figure out the next step together.”

HELPFUL THINGS TO SAY (SUPPORTIVE RESPONSES):

Once they start talking, focus on listening more than fixing.

- “That sounds really hard. I’m sorry you’re going through this.”
- “It makes sense you feel worn down. Anyone in your shoes would be struggling.”
- “You’re not weak. This is a lot for one person.”
- “Thank you for trusting me with this. You’re not alone in it right now.”
- “We might not solve it all today, but we can take a next step.”

IF THEY WORRY ABOUT STIGMA, YOU CAN NORMALIZE IT:

- “We go to the mechanic when the tractor’s not running right. Getting help for your mind is the same kind of thing—maintenance, not failure.”
- “You’re the most important piece of equipment on this operation. If you go down, nothing else runs right. Taking care of you is taking care of the farm.”

GENTLY ENCOURAGING PROFESSIONAL & PRACTICAL HELP:

Offer specific, concrete help rather than “let me know if you need anything.”

- “Would you feel comfortable making a call while I’m here to support you?”
- “There are folks who understand farm stress. We could start with a free, confidential call and see what they say.”
- “Can I help you make an appointment—doctor, counselor, pastor, whoever you’d feel most comfortable with?”
- “What would make it easier to get some help—a ride, help with chores, someone to go with you?”

YOU CAN MENTION OPTIONS LIKE:

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline – call or text 988, or chat online, any time, for yourself or someone you’re worried about.
- Local or state farm stress lines, Extension, or Department of Agriculture resources.

IF THE RISK SEEMS IMMEDIATE:

TAKE IT SERIOUSLY. STAY WITH THEM. GET HELP.

Signs of immediate danger:

- They have a plan, the means, and intend to act soon.
- They are intoxicated and talking about suicide.
- They’ve written notes, given away important items, or said clear goodbyes.

YOU CAN SAY:

- “I’m really worried about your safety. I’m not leaving you alone with this.”
- “Let’s call 988 right now and talk this through with someone trained in this.”
- “I’d like to get you more help. We can call 911 or go to the ER together.”

If they refuse help and you still believe they’re in danger, this is the time to involve 911 or local law enforcement, explaining clearly that you’re concerned about a suicide risk.

THINGS TO AVOID SAYING

EVEN WITH GOOD INTENTIONS, SOME PHRASES CAN FEEL MINIMIZING OR SHAMING.

Try to *avoid*:

- “Just toughen up.”, “Other people have it worse.”, “You wouldn’t really do that, would you?”
- “If you do that, it would be so selfish.”, “You’ve got nothing to be depressed about.”
- “When someone is struggling, ‘At least it’s not harvest’ can feel less like comfort and more like dismissal. Stress is valid no matter what season we’re in.”

Instead, aim for validation and hope, like:

- “This is really hard and there are people who can help you carry it.”

FOLLOWING UP AFTER THE FIRST TALK: ONE CONVERSATION HELPS, BUT ONGOING SUPPORT MATTERS.

IDEAS FOR FOLLOW-UP:

- Call or text: “Checking in—how are things today?”
- Drop by the farm, bring coffee, ride in the tractor or pickup and chat.
- Ask: “Did you get a chance to call ? How did it go? Anything I can do to make the next step easier?”
- Put reminders in your phone to check back regularly, especially around stressful times (planting, harvest, weaning, loan renewals, anniversaries of losses, court dates, etc.).

A SIMPLE 3-STEP SCRIPT YOU CAN REMEMBER

WHEN IN DOUBT, KEEP IT TO THESE THREE STEPS:

1. Notice and name what you see

- “I’ve noticed you’ve been really quiet and haven’t come to coffee. I’m worried about you.”

2. Ask directly how they’re doing (including about suicide)

- “How bad has it gotten?”
- “Have you had any thoughts of ending your life?”

3. Stay, listen, and connect to help

- “I’m glad you told me. Let’s figure out our next step together—can we call 988, your doctor, your pastor, or this counselor?”

Please remember: Supporting someone else doesn’t make you immune to your own struggles. It’s important to seek support for yourself, too.

