

Talking, asking, and listening

>> Lewellyn Melnyk will host a free workshop with aim to open a conversation around mental health in the ag industry

RACHEAL FLINTOFT

Crossroads This Week

Breaking down barriers to agricultural mental health, Angusville grain farmer, Lewellyn Melnyk, is hosting the area's first 'Talk, Ask, Listen' workshop on Jan. 21.

Being offered through the Do More Ag not-for-profit organization, this free seminar will focus on opening up the conversation surrounding agricultural mental health, including signs and symptoms, self-care, prevention, and support. Discussed as well are the areas that surround having a mental health conversation with fellow producers, and those you feel may be experiencing mental mindset lows. Touched on also is how to support others with ag-specific resources.

As the seminar's host, Melnyk is experienced with mental health, and offers a strong agricultural background. She lives and breathes farming and knows first-hand that mental health needs to become a priority within the ag industry.

"Traditionally, farmers don't want to talk about their feelings or the stress they experience, many people think that makes them weak," she said. "It is a misconception that being vulnerable with other people makes you weak."

In a National Survey of Farmer Mental Health taken last year, 40% of producers across Canada reported that they would be against seeking professional help on account



Lewellyn Melnyk enjoys a meal with her family out on the field

of what others may think. Of those surveyed, 35% were experiencing a form of depression, 45% were experiencing high stress and 58% were exhibiting anxiety. Because of being labelled often as resilient, hardworking, and full of tenacity, a producer within the agricultural industry struggles to recognize or seek help for mental health issues they may be experiencing.

"I often joke about having PTSD after the harvest of 2018 followed by 2019, when we had two crops back-to-back that got snowed on at harvest time," Melnyk recalled. "While it was easy to joke about it, there was real stress

in the community over the last couple of years because of the implications of those tough times. We all felt it, and not only the stress producers were under trying to get the crop off but also the financial implications that had on many people."

The farming industry, although full of positive successes, can also contain a level of uncertainty. Being on Mother Nature's doorstep, regardless of the hard work, exhaustion, and burnout a farmer may experience when trying to have a successful season, the output doesn't always match the input. Farm families are faced with chal-

lenges to creating a work/life balance, juggling emotional stressors, and a level of vulnerability.

"There are a lot of good resources out there, like the

Farm and Rural Stress Line, with this course being a really great place to start," Melnyk added. "Even if you don't struggle with mental illness, I think it is good information for how to deal with stress on a general level, and how to help others that might be struggling around you."

Melnyk added that along with her personal experiences over the years, she has completed extensive research on this topic, and is currently writing a book about how mental health effects overall wellness. As a farmer, "I have suffered both anxiety and depression myself... so, I feel like I have a lot to share."

An identified shortfall in industry mental health resources and services has led to bridging the gap between farmer needs and industry-led mental health programs.

"Anyone can attend this online course, it is free," Melnyk explained. "They just need to register online at <https://www.domore.ag/how-to-do-more> before Jan. 20. Those wanting to attend can also email lewellyn21@yahoo.com to request an invite." The Talk, Ask, Listen' workshop will run on Jan. 21.

"Farmers are busy people," Melnyk said. "I know it is hard for them to pencil out five hours of a work day to take a course on mental health; however I would urge anyone who can log on, while they are feeding cows, working in their shop or loading grain, to take part anyways."

Along with the 'Talk, Ask, Listen' workshop, Do More Ag, is offering a Mental Health First Aid course, facilitated locally in Miniota on a separate date in March. Because of Code Red, the 'Talk, Ask, Listen' workshop will be offered remotely.

"A zoom call is great, because you can be listening while you are doing other things... so I urge people to take part if they can. My hope is that participants will walk away with even just a few tips that might help them," she expressed. "The current state of mental health in the ag community, is getting better but it has a long way to go."

Kindness and care felt

December kicked off with festive enthusiasm throughout the region. Even as Code Red continued throughout the province, the feeling of community was fluid, seeing many shop local initiatives blanket the region.

Hamiota lawyer, Jeff McConnell, veteran partner of McNeill Harasymchuk McConnell Law Office, retired after 26 years of serving the community. We talked to three local karate senseis about finding your inner chi, who agreed that there is something for everyone in the sport of karate. Communities across the region also began building book sharing boxes to continue the love for reading during pandemic times. Also featured was the heart of a community, an article about the St. James Anglican Church built 129 years ago, still breathing strong of history.

A multitude of stories expressing kindness and care emerged, including a group of

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four local Russell women who made and sold an estimated 3,200 face masks. They then donated the proceeds, an outstanding \$18,050, towards the Expanding Community Cancer Care chemotherapy unit. With continued generosity, we featured Marta Orłowska, formally of Inglis, who prepared roughly 100 free Christmas meals for those truly in need.

Different traditions emerged in 2020, including the unique and festive 'Our Giving Tree' initiative brought forth by the Shoal Lake Chamber of Commerce. A group from the Birtle-Miniota Pastoral Charge faithfully worked to offer digital Christmas worship as an alternative way of fellowship.

Stories of Christmas card traditions, Christmas trees, community stories of bygone days, and a one-on-one with old Saint Nick himself flooded December.

In sports we highlighted Decker's Owen Murray and his hockey with the Penticton Vees as well as a Foxwarren hockey player Tashel Scantlebury, following the game she loves to Austria.

WHAT A YEAR

Experienced as both unprecedented and undefinable, 2020 left us carrying more resilience than with what we started. With the layers of media coverage that 2020 received this past year, there were lots to remember about 2020 that didn't stem from COVID-19. Looking back on CTW in the 2020 year, there was no shortage of stories full of perseverance, resiliency, community, accomplishment, fellowship, unity, creativity, joy, and adaptiveness. However positive in strides, I think we can all agree to say goodbye to 2020 and warmly welcome a new chapter in 2021. Happy New Year to the CTW readers across the country!

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