## Mental Health in the Agriculture Field: Andrea Bjornestad

## Season 1, Episode 46

[Intro music]

**Kiernan Brandt:**

Welcome to Cattle HQ, a podcast from industry experts and progressive producers discussing cutting edge info about the cow calf sector to keep cattlemen and women in the know and positively affect their bottom line.

**Addie:**

Welcome to the Cattle HQ podcast. This is brought to you by South Dakota State University Extension. I am Addie Womack, the livestock production and stewardship field specialist based out of Mitchell. This is my first time hosting the podcast. Today, I'm here with Andrea Bjornstad. She is the associate professor in SDSU Extension mental health specialist. So, having an agriculture background, it is really easy to talk about the physical hazards that come with farming and ranching. But in the past, it's been a little more difficult to get people talking about the stresses of the industry and how they're really doing mentally. But you have been doing some really interesting research and getting out across the state, starting these tougher conversations with agriculture workers. I think this is really awesome. So, I'll have you tell us a little bit about what you do at SDSU. If you've got something that you're working on that you really want to share with us, go ahead.

**Andrea:**

Sure. Well, thank you, Addie, for having me on the show. As the SDSU Extension mental health specialist, I do a lot of research and outreach across South Dakota. I'm an invited speaker. I usually speak about stress, and our stress signs and symptoms, and how to recognize when maybe that moves into depression and anxiety. I also have numerous brands that I'm working on. One of my major projects has to do with the comprehensive needs assessment on farm stress and mental health across South Dakota. So, I'm currently finishing that up. Otherwise, I've partnered with different organizations across South Dakota, including the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources, and Department of Social Services. We offered an ag voucher program last year that I'm hoping to continue in the upcoming year. I received some grant funding for that. I also put together some unique training for mental health providers on agriculture. So, really, teaching counselors, and social workers, and our current counseling graduates students on what does agriculture entail, and what helpful things do you need to know in order to serve those farm families.

**Addie:**

Yes. I think that is really valuable because when you go into those conversations and you're talking with someone that really understands what stressors you deal with as an agriculture worker or a rancher, that makes you more comfortable to open up.

**Andrea:**

Absolutely. One of the biggest concerns that I heard from farmers and ranchers as I travel across South Dakota is “If I seek help, will they really understand what I do?” So, it was really fun. We had an extension panel of colleagues talking about their various work in extension on agriculture. Then, we also had a farmer rancher panel where they talked about different things. For example, one of the farmers showed up and they were almost late. This couple was almost late. I was sweating. I was like, “Really?” They said they had to chase a baby calf back into the pasture. Some of the counselors were like, “Oh, I didn't know that that sometimes happens.” So, talking about the financial side of agriculture and the risks that are taken with determining where to put investments in on their farmer ranch. It was a really unique opportunity. The councilors walked away with a lot of great feedback on how beneficial the training was.

**Addie:**

Friends, and family, and neighbors, those of us that aren't trained in any counseling or mental health, if we notice signs that our neighbors or friends are struggling, and we understand, maybe we're in a drought or the market has gone down. We know what's going on. We know they're going through a tough time. How can we start the conversation of how are they doing and really get them to open up? Is there anything you've had success with that you could share?

**Andrea:**

Absolutely. I think it's important to understand the climate of agriculture and what's going on. Obviously, you do work on the beef side of things where I just recently read an article, and you can certainly chime in, that economists are debating on whether or not there is a farm recession happening. Some are saying there is one and some are saying, “Well, we're not quite there yet.” So, with all of these stressors that are happening, it is important to recognize when somebody might be struggling. So, the common things to look for are any changes in behavior. So, maybe they're more irritable, maybe they're more showing symptoms of sadness or hopelessness, withdrawing from friends and family, or normal things that they do. Maybe you're seeing more signs of distress, such as not sleeping well, increase in anxiety, excessive worrying. Some of the more - the bigger red flags would be, obviously, any increase in substance use, extreme withdrawal and isolation, giving away prized possessions, any talk of self-blame, a lot of should’ve, would’ve, could’ve. Those are definitely things that we need to keep an eye on. just that increase in hopelessness, that sense of, “I can't get out of this. I don't know how to get out of this” type of mentality.

**Addie:**

Yes. I think that should’ve, would’ve, could’ve is a big one in agriculture because you're in a drought, and obviously, you didn't know it was going to come. But as the steward of those animals, you think, “Man, had I known, I could have done this better. I should have done this better.” You feel a lot of that responsibility even though that's something out of your control.

**Andrea:**

Absolutely. In one of my most recent studies, we looked at what were the biggest risk factors for suicide with farmers and ranchers. It was surprising. It was not depression, it wasn't anxiety, it was actually self-blame. So, that's where it goes, to the should’ve, would’ve, could’ve. When you start hearing that type of language, when they're really dwelling on past mistakes, or thinking about poor decisions, or “I should have sold this sooner. I shouldn't have bought this.” So, that lends itself into some of those suicidal thoughts that may be happening when that self-blame emerges. I give so many presentations to farmers and ranchers across South Dakota, I asked them this question, how do we know? How do we see self-blame? If I were living with a - for example, if I was a spouse living with a farmer, how would I be able to recognize that my significant other is engaging in that self-blame? It is a lot of listening to the language, but it's also that maybe the language of being stuck, “I'm stuck in this irrational thought that I can't get past.”

**Addie:**

Okay. So, when we pick up on that, are there some resources you would suggest if we realized they need to talk to someone other than just me? What is the resource that you would suggest they reach out to?

**Andrea:**

Absolutely. I think it's important to keep that communication open though. That maybe you're struggling, you’re trying to figure out how to help them, and maybe there's some resistance to getting help too. One of my biggest referral resources would be the Avera Rural Farm stress hotline. They are available 24/7. It's anonymous. You can call anytime. Somebody answers the phone that's trained in mental health, and they're able to walk you through whatever is needed to make that assistance. That number is 1-800-691-4336. So, again, they offer a range of services related to stress, anxiety, depression and medication management. The hotline is 24/7. So, that would be number one. The helpline center is another one. That's two in one, as well as the suicide hotline, 988. Those would be the main ones in South Dakota. Granted, I always offer that if somebody is really struggling and wants some local resources, I'm always available. E-mail. You can find me on the extension website. I look up local resources. Maybe somebody's trying to find a counselor in Aberdeen or maybe a smaller town six to 10 or something like that, then I just look up additional resources for them in that area.

**Addie:**

Okay. I'm going to go back. You mentioned at the beginning the ag voucher program. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

**Andrea:**

Yes. So, in the past, it was a partnership with the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources, and Department of Social Services, where we provided opportunities for free counseling for farmers, ranchers, and their family members. We ran out of grant funding, but we served – gosh, I believe it was something like 92 individuals with an average of five sessions in roughly 30 counties in South Dakota. I did secure some funding for another year of the program. I just need to receive the grant funding. I know it's coming. I just don't know when it's going to be available. But that will definitely be an option in the future, of that free counseling that's available in South Dakota for farmers and their families, because we do know that access and affordability is an issue here in South Dakota with mental health. So, we're trying to break down some of those barriers of those two main concerns.

**Addie:**

Yes. I actually went to a training in North Dakota. There was a lady who her position, I'm thinking, is similar to yours. She was talking about some of their resources. She said sometimes it's the time also that - maybe it's harvest season, which is really stressful time, but it's also a very busy time. So, those farmers feel like they can't take the time to step away when maybe they really need to. So, some of these counselors or the different resources you can call, do an online session, which gives them more opportunities to talk.

**Andrea:**

Yes. The tele mental health is an option across South Dakota. It also depends on broadband access too. We have some very dead areas in South Dakota, where that's very limited as an option. So, working on that in South Dakota would be very helpful. But I agree with the person who offered that training. I commonly hear, “I can't get away from the farmer ranch.” I mean, a lot of counselors want their clients to work on self-care. What that might look like would be, “Hey, take a vacation.” But is that realistic in this kind of work? Not always, unless you have somebody available to cover, and maybe you can pay somebody, maybe you have a neighbor, maybe you have a relative that can come and cover your farm and ranch while you're gone. So, some of the typical things that we say for self-care just doesn't apply well. That makes it very difficult and challenging when you're really struggling, and you need to take care of yourself.

**Addie:**

Yes. Because I feel as though the busier times typically cause higher stress and a big problem. So, when we are experiencing times of high stress, or maybe that's led into bigger concerns, what are some healthy coping mechanisms that we can start putting into practice?

**Andrea:**

I get that question all the time. We talk about nutrition, we talk about the importance of sleep, the importance of physical activity, trying to find some ways to relax. I typically ask this question to farmers and ranchers when I'm interacting with them. A lot of them will share, “Well, I go for a drive to clear my head, or I listen to some music. Maybe I spend some time with family.” No matter what, we do know that our mental health and our physical health are very interrelated. So, if we aren't taking great care of our physical health, our mental health may struggle. If we're not taking great care of our mental health, our physical health will struggle. So, I hear, “I don't really have time to exercise. I don't really have time to eat healthy,” because it's easy to put a microwavable entree and heat that up, right? I mean, the other – “I felt like I didn't have anything in my house. So, ramen it was.” Is ramen the healthiest? Probably not, or frozen pizza. But we all do it, and that's okay. It's a matter of do we do it all the time with eating those sorts of things. But I also talk about as far as physical activity goes, if I tell you to go run a mile - Addie, are you a runner? Do you enjoy running?

**Addie:**

No, not really.

**Andrea:**

No? So, if I tell you, “Hey, you need to run a mile every day to improve your mental health, are you going to do it?”

**Addie:**

Probably not.

**Andrea:**

Probably not. If you do it, are you going to love it?

**Addie:**

No. I think it would cause me more stress.

**Andrea:**

Exactly. So, some of the things that we promote for improving mental health doesn't necessarily apply to everybody, right? I really enjoy strength training, so I do a lot of workouts with weights, but if you tell me to go run a mile, I'll be like, “No way.” It would cause me more stress. So, we have to find things that work for us. But we also have to be willing to try new things. For example, if I try some deep breathing that you can find on multiple apps or even on YouTube, and I really enjoyed it, I was able to release stress, then I know that that works. But I won't know that unless I try it. So, really, when we're talking to farmers and their families, it's a matter of, “Hey, what works?” I hear a lot about, “Hey, I go to the bar to try to relax.” Right?

**Addie:**

Yes.

**Andrea:**

I'm not going to say you can't go to the bar and hang out and socialize, because a lot of socializing happens there. It's just a matter of are you going every night? How much are you drinking? Are you drinking to escape certain things? So, again, is that drinking in moderation or is it excessive drinking? My most recent needs assessment showed roughly - I'm trying to find it here. Roughly 28.5% of males and females in the study were at risk for hazardous drinking. Again, I'm not saying that's not something you should engage in. I'm saying that, “Hey, how much are you doing it and how much are you drinking?”

**Addie:**

Right. What are your motives behind what you're going out and doing - and at what point does that healthy coping of socializing, and getting out and about, and off the farm, being aware of if that's leading now into an unhealthy coping mechanism?

**Andrea:**

That was a nice summary that you provided, Addie. Yes, really focusing on family engagement, what other social activities are available, working on not isolating yourself, all those things are healthy coping behaviors. Now, as I've aged, I feel like I’ve turned more into an introvert. So, I do find that sometimes it's more healthy for me to maybe watch a movie rather than go out and socialize. However, I do realize that I do need that socialization aspect too. So, it's a matter of finding that healthy balance between what is really effective self-care for me. But it is helpful to set aside that time to be present with your family and your friends. One of the biggest things I hear from the older generation of farmers and ranchers is that they wish they had gone to more of their kids’ events, wished that the farm -they didn't put the farm first all the time. So, that's something to think about. If you're not at that stage, maybe your kids aren't gone, maybe your children are still in school, are in multiple activities, that regret is very much present and expressed in the older farmers, that “I needed to go to more things” and “I wish I had.”

**Addie:**

Right. Farming and ranching can sometimes become a very isolated environment if you don't have the opportunity to get off the farm and step away.

**Andrea:**

Yes. I've talked to numerous spouses. I was able to facilitate some groups with them. They talked about how isolating it was. It's not just farmers and ranchers, it's also their spouses on what that feels like where maybe not enough socialization is happening and “I feel alone.” So, I guess I encourage that. I do think farmers and ranchers should get together and talk, spouses should get together and talk. I facilitate focus groups as part of the needs assessment. One of the farmer groups actually lasted two hours. They would have kept going. Number one, I said I had to leave, but they commented on how it was so helpful for them to get together and just talk. Not necessarily about depression or anxiety or those sorts of things, they talked about, “Hey, what's happening in agriculture? What's stressing me out? Hey, what's stressing me out is also stressing you out. I don't feel so alone in this.” That is what I think is needed, is where they get together and talk, then they don't feel so alone. I encourage - I really think women in ag need to do the same thing.

**Addie:**

I agree, to be able to have that space where maybe it doesn't feel like you're talking about your mental health, but you really are about being able to express those feelings and concerns in a safe environment. Yes.

**Andrea:**

Yes, definitely. I think one of the biggest stressors I'm hearing right now has to do with communication. So, we have multi-generational family farms in South Dakota. When we have that many generations on the farm, a lot of people have a voice that that they feel needs to be heard. When we have so many voices happening, sometimes, that conflict can happen within the family system. A lot of producers have told me, “Well, if you want to work on our mental health, we really need to work on communication within the family.” Some families are great at it and have figured it out. Other ones really do struggle with, “Hey, Grandpa still wants to do his favorite things.” Maybe dad is still running the show, but the younger generations want to step in with the newer ideas that they've learned in agriculture and want to change things up. When we get all that happening, conflicts can happen. So, with that, I'm also hearing concerns about legacy of maybe the younger generations don't want to take over the family farm. That is a concern especially with third, fourth, fifth generation farms that nobody's going to take it over because of what's happening with the farm economy, and how it's sometimes challenging even just to break even. Addie, I don't know if you're hearing about some of these things too.

**Addie:**

Yes, I am. Heather Gessner, she was on the podcast. She does some trainings that revolve around that, and workshops and things. When I first started and I saw what she talked about, I thought, “I don't really need to know about that because my parents are nowhere near retiring, or they're not done yet.” Right? But it's so much more than just taking over the family farm. There's learning how to work together during that period of transition. How do you start those conversations? It can be pretty difficult. Yes.

**Andrea:**

Absolutely. I think Heather's work is amazing, working within the family system on those different areas of the business. But that also relates all to mental health. When we have increased conflict within the family system, we can experience increased stress, maybe some depression anxiety. People are triangulated. Maybe Mom is caught between her son and her husband on trying to figure out how to manage this family farm. So, with that increased conflict, again, we can see that decline in mental health.

**Addie:**

A way to handle that maybe is when you all come together for dinner or go to your separate houses, to your smaller family groups, the farm and the family and work are so interconnected, but don't talk about the work stresses. Set aside some time where you're just spending time with your family and not so much talking about the farm, the work, and the stress that goes along with that. Yes.

**Andrea:**

I agree. I think that's important. It’s healthy to be present with your family and friends. I don't know about you, how often your mind wanders to a worry or something that you have to do with your job, maybe out on the farm. “I forgot to do this. I need to do this. I need to do this.”

**Addie:**

Sometimes at home, I'll sit down and think, “Oh, I need to do this. If I just sit down and do it tonight, then I won't have to do it tomorrow.” I have set hours. That's a little different than a farmer rancher, but I still have to work the eight hours tomorrow. I still have other tasks that are going to cause a little stress. So, taking the time to say, “No I'm done with my workday.” That's harder when you don't have set work hours. But at some point, don't excessively work. So, say, “I'm done for the day. I can't get any more done. I'm tired.” Whatever. Draw a line. That's probably helpful.

**Andrea:**

What you're describing as establishing personal boundaries. Boundaries are important between our personal and professional lives. We've talked about those blurred lines within the farm families, of how our job has to do with our family, which has to do with our individual identity. They're all very interrelated. But boundaries are important. You might go out and do what you needed to do that was on your mind, but you'll just replace it with something new tomorrow.

**Addie:**

Exactly.

**Andrea:**

You’re leaving stress, but you're just replacing the stress. You'll just replace it tomorrow. So, that personal boundary is important of, “Hey, I need to stop what I'm doing and I'll revisit it tomorrow.” Unless it's something major. Those things can come up in agriculture. So, something that can wait until tomorrow, let it wait until tomorrow.

**Addie:**

Right.

**Andrea:**

We do know other things are affecting mental health too. I hear a lot about whether they can control it. Obviously, they can't. So, how do I control something I can't control? Tariffs, trade markets, input cost, machinery issues, lack of affordable and accessible land. Can they control any of these things?

**Addie:**

No.

**Andrea:**

So, as a mental health provider, I'm sitting here thinking, “Well, how do I help them control things that they cannot control?” Right?

**Addie**:

Yes.

**Andrea:**

Then, you add in unpredictable and long working hours. We still have farmers in the field right now trying to finish harvest season. West River, we're hearing about snow. The first snow season. So, harvest right now is increasing stress. We have some dangerous working conditions. I'm reading about lots of equipment fires. I don't know about you. Dry land, some concerns with fire and fire hazards. So, dangerous working conditions. All of that piles up, right?

**Addie:**

Yes. I was just thinking as a base like lack of sleep, long hours, anything piled on top of that, it just feels worse, and worse, and worse because you've affected your physical health first. So, everything else is just bigger and bigger.

**Andrea:**

Yes. I think you bring up a great point. When I don't sleep, I don't know about you, I get super grouchy.

**Addie:**

Oh, yes. Me too.

**Andrea:**

Super grouchy. Then, things just - maybe I overreact to things that I shouldn't. But I see things in a bigger, stressful way when I don't sleep either. But then, we talk about, “Well, how do we sleep healthy?” Well, we turn off our electronics. Try to engage in a regular sleep pattern. Maybe some white noise, relaxation techniques. But if you're an excessive worrier and your anxiety is high, how do you shut off your brain? That’s why we have to work on those self-care techniques, finding something that works, because if we don't find something that works, then we have - we're less apt to sleep, we're less - we're more likely to have those irrational thoughts that come into our brains that we can't turn off, the should’ve, would’ve, could’ve. Those sorts. Addie, I don't know what you do for self-care. But maybe your listeners would like to know.

**Addie:**

I actually work in an office environment. So, whenever I get off, I take my dog on a walk. I need that outside time after being inside all day. So, that's something that I normally do. I like to cook. That allows me to think about something other than my work. You're not worrying about the outside things because you're focused on what you're doing. I'm still finding things that aren’t work but take focus, if that makes sense, so that I don't have the mental space to worry anymore. Those are things that work for me.

**Andrea:**

I think my biggest message is to find something that works that isn't unhealthy. It is easy to cover up our feelings with other things that are unhealthy. It is just a Band-Aid. I talked to a producer. I actually interviewed one - I want to say it was two summers ago. He used alcohol to cover up his feelings, to mask a lot of different things. You think it works and you think it continues working, but it only just builds up more. Then, it's like a Band-Aid. So, there are a lot of things that are just Band-Aid for an open wound. I do think if people are struggling, different moods, all those different things I talked about at the beginning, and I say the borderline is like two weeks or longer, or you just can't get out of your funk, that's where it's time to seek some help with somebody. I feel like we've talked a lot about stress, and we've talked about stressors, different ways of coping, but I do want to really emphasize that there is hope, that - I hear so much from farmers and ranchers about the joy that's in agriculture too, about the things that they enjoy doing, that they're tied to the land, that they walk outside and they breathe in the fresh air, and they love what they do. A lot of them with their animals have that - they talk about a relationship with their animals, that there's love that's present. That also helps keep them mentally healthy. So, there's so many positive aspects of agriculture too. Sometimes we need to really focus on those to get us through the hard times, that there is hope that if you are struggling, there are resources, there are different people you can contact. You don't have to live in a state of anxiety or worry, you don't have to live in a state of hopelessness, that there is help available. So, I think hope is important to hold on to, and the joy of doing what you do.

**Addie:**

Yes. That that made me think calving season can be a hard time because you've watched those animals grow and get bigger and bigger, now you're worried about checking them more frequently. It may be cold and all those things, but there's nothing better than when you see those little babies running around. That's where that hope and – like, “We did it.” That's where that feeling comes. That feeling comes in all the areas of agriculture that people work in. That may be the feeling when you start to see your crop growing and get taller and taller, and you're like, “Yes, that was what it was all for.”

**Andrea:**

Yes. I think you described it very well. So, really focusing on the joy in agriculture and what are the positive aspects of it. I don't know. That farmer panel we had, their faces lit up when I asked what was the best parts of their job. It varied. Most of them did talk about that, tied to the land, or animals, or that sort of thing. So, those of you listening, finding that joy is important, seeing that joy is important. Again, if you're struggling, there is hope that things will change. There are people available to help with some of those changes.

**Addie:**

Well, it was great to talk to you today, Andrea. Thank you for the information that you've given us, and the helpful tips. I think we can all start to implement some of the healthy coping mechanisms and fun things that work for us.

**Andrea:**

Yes. Thank you for having me on the podcast.

**Kiernan Brandt:**

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