

Stress is such a common part of farming that it is taken for granted. But for some, the stress can mount and become unbearable. A few take the drastic step of suicide. These tragedies shake survivors and communities. But most suicides are preventable. Western



White

Producer reporter Ed White talked with family and friends of farmers who committed suicide and to prevention experts. They say lives can be saved if relatives and friends learn the signs of depression and suicide preparation and intervene in the right way, often with something as simple as a supportive conversation.

Tips to Prevent suicide

What do you do if you suspect someone is contemplating suicide? Here are some ways to offer assistance:

If someone threatens suicide:

- Take threats or talk of suicide seriously.
- Don't believe a person is simply looking for attention. Pay attention to them.
- Talking about suicide to those displaying warning signs will not put the idea into their head.
- People thinking of suicide are usually relieved that someone has seen the warning signs and cares enough to ask about their thoughts and feelings.
- By bringing up the subject you reduce the person's fears that they are crazy and that no one will understand they could be thinking of suicide.

What to say:

- You don't have to handle this alone - I will support you.
- You're not crazy for feeling this way; other people have felt this way too.
- I'm glad you told me the way you're feeling. I will find someone we can talk to.
- What you have told me concerns me but it is not a hopeless situation.
- I'll go with you to talk to someone about what's going on.
- If you need some other support to help you cope, I will do my best to help you find it.

Where to call for help:

Farm Stress Lines
Saskatchewan: 800-667-4442
Manitoba: 866-367-3276 www.ruralstress.ca
Mental Health Lines
Alberta: 877-303-2642
British Columbia: 800-661-2121
Centre for Suicide Prevention
www.suicideinfo.ca/
Men at Risk Project
Barbara Campbell, Suicide Prevention Resource
Centre, Grande Prairie 780-539-6680 or
e-mail barb@sp-rc.ca

Source: Suicide Prevention Resource Centre, Grande Prairie, Alta. WP graphic by Michelle Houlden

Connecting the dots

FAIRVIEW, Alta. — Students at Fairview College in Alberta's Peace River country feel comfortable popping into Tom Bidart's office. He always leaves his door open and he's happy to talk to them about the agriculture program he instructs, college happenings or just about anything.

This openness is not just because he's a nice guy, but because he believes an open door and an open ear could some day make a crucial difference for one of his students: a life-or-death difference. "I want to be there if I'm needed, and you never know when that will be," Bidart said in his office as students in the hallway scurried from class to class shortly before Christmas.

Bidart's openness is also part of his reaction to a tragedy that is still an open wound for many at Fairview College: a popular 23-year-old alumnus and area farmer, Andy Little, killed himself on a bitterly cold February morning in 2003.

Like many, Bidart is still upset about what happened to a young man he knew well, and he has vowed to do what he can to catch other troubled people before they fall into the same chasm of despair. "It makes me mad as hell — mad as hell — that I didn't see it coming," said Bidart, his voice choking with emotion, as he reviews the warning signs about Little that he thinks he should have seen.

"I thought something didn't seem right with Andy, but this was a terrible way to find out how bad it was."

Farmer depression and suicide are little studied subjects in Canada, but across the Prairies health organizations and governments have begun trying to make farm families realize that mental health is a key part of farm life and management.

They hope farmers and their families can understand that problems on the farm can lead some producers beyond simply feeling glum and into the perilous realm of depression that can have fatal consequences if ignored. With agriculture filled with stress — drought, low grain prices, BSE and trade attacks — farmers must be able to identify and understand depression so they can save themselves, family and friends from tragedy.

Depression might pose a bigger threat to farmers than for city people with nine-to-five jobs because farmers are often isolated.

"There is no human resources department for farmers," said Little's father Rob, who now devotes a lot of time to peer counselling with the Men at Risk program in Grande Prairie, Alta., which is dedicated to helping farmers and rural men cope with depression.

Rob, who also suffers from depression, is heartsick over his son's suicide, but he doesn't avoid it. His work with Men at Risk forces him to think and talk about Andy's death all the time. It's a form of self-inflicted torture he's willing to endure because he hopes he can use his son's story to stop others from taking the same terrible step.

"We only connected the dots afterward, and I don't want other people to have to do that," Rob said in Grande Prairie, where he now lives.

By accounts, Rob and Andy were alike. Rob is gregarious, with a quick, infectious laugh that makes him easy to like. It's hard to believe that he suffers from depression. He is a guy you'd talk to about your problems. You wouldn't expect him to have the problem.

He discovered he suffered from depression only a few years ago, when he couldn't face the enormity of harvesting his 2,500 acres of crops one fall. In despair, he ran to a neighbour for help — and he went to see a doctor.

That was the turning point. The doctor diagnosed Rob's depression, got him onto medication and made him re-evaluate his behaviour.

"He said, 'Rob, you take on things until you're up to your nose. Then all of a sudden problems crop up and you're way over your head,'" recounted Rob.

Barb Campbell, who oversees Men At Risk, said men are at greater risk for suicide than women because women are more willing to discuss their problems and admit they need help. Among men, farmers sometimes are the least likely to easily talk about their problems.

"They are expected to buck up, get through it, maintain that role, be the provider," Campbell said.

"They're not supposed to show signs of weakness."

This is borne out by recent statistics that show 10 times as many men as women die from suicide between 2001 and 2003 in the area. Three times as many women than men go to the doctor to report a mental health problem.

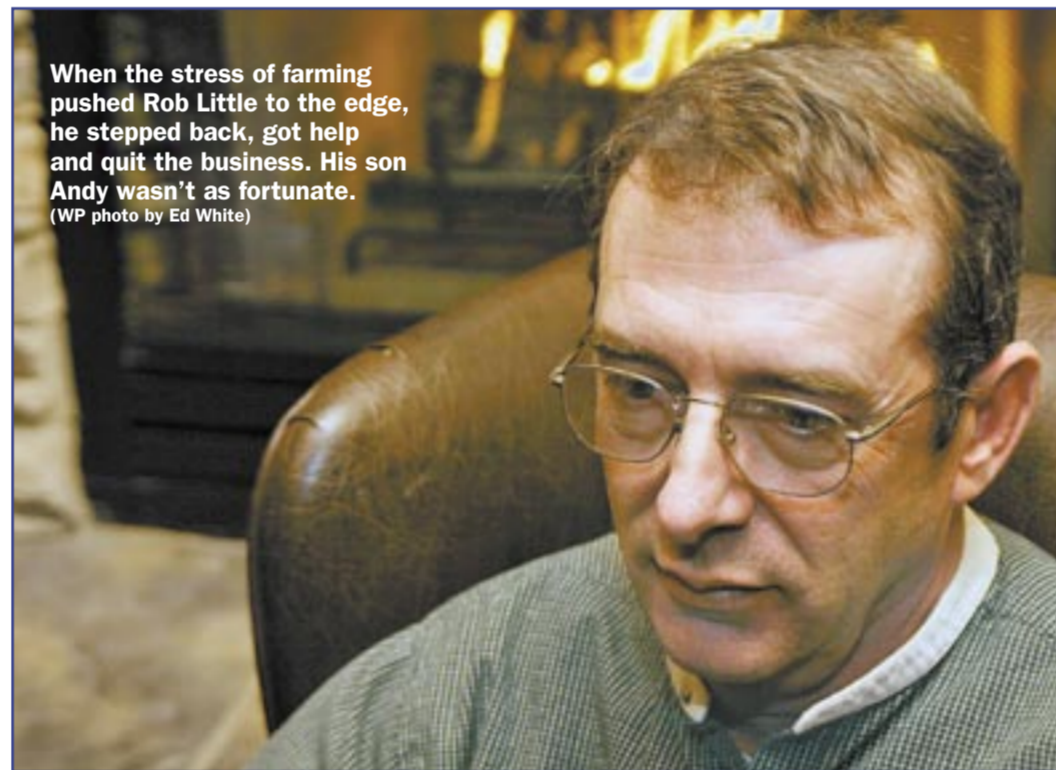
The stigma about asking for help may have overwhelmed Andy, whose farm responsibilities might have been too much for a 23 year old.

"Andy was a young, single man running a lot of cattle," said Rob. He had about 200 cows, a hog barn, 1,700 acres of land and a single hired hand.

"As a farmer you're supposed to be professional at everything. You're supposed to know how to finance it all, to be an agronomist, to be a mechanic. You're supposed to be computer literate, you're supposed to be a livestock specialist."

Rob, who had recently given up farming because of the stress, encouraged Andy to consider a less stressful career. But

When the stress of farming pushed Rob Little to the edge, he stepped back, got help and quit the business. His son Andy wasn't as fortunate. (WP photo by Ed White)



"Most people don't want to kill themselves. They want the pain to go away. That's a big difference."

— Kim Moffat, counsellor, Manitoba Farm and Rural Stress Line

It's an attempt to make program graduates the kind of people who will notice those having personal struggles and step in to help before tragedy strikes.

It's too late to save Andy, but not too late to save many others.

Andy wanted to be a farmer and a cowboy. He thought he could handle anything.

"Just cowboy-up" — that's an expression Andy used all the time," Rob said.

"That's what it's all about. Are you big enough and tough enough?"

That winter was brutally cold. Andy had trouble keeping the cattle in condition and some became sick. Then they began to die.

The farm meant so much to him he probably couldn't separate its problems from feelings of hopelessness about life.

"He loved livestock. He loved the rodeo stuff. Depression? It wouldn't have been on his radar," Rob said.

At some point Andy appears to have despaired and, early one morning, killed himself. No one knows exactly what pushed him over the edge. But Rob has no doubt.

"Depression is lethal, absolutely lethal."

Counsellors at the Manitoba Farm and Rural Stress Line have the same appreciation of depression's deadly threat. That's why they staff the phones all week, hoping to catch depressed people before it's too late. Most suicides can be avoided if a depressed person can talk to someone who cares.

"Most people don't want to kill themselves. They want the pain to go away. That's a big difference," said counsellor Kim Moffat.

Fellow counsellor Wynn Collier said getting a farmer to talk about his problems is often difficult, but friends and family need to be persistent.

"It's going to take some time to elicit. It's asking the right questions a lot of times," Collier said.

It may be simply asking how he is doing and showing interest.

"Their focus has become so narrow that they don't even realize they could talk to someone about it."

That's why the majority of calls to the Manitoba rural stress line are from worried family and friends, not from depressed farmers.

"The chances of someone going to seek help when they are depressed are slim," Moffat said.

"You have to be paying attention."

That's Rob's main message.

"You need to ask some questions," he said. "You are your brother's keeper."

Campbell said friends and families of men in trouble can help by getting them in contact with

counsellors at programs like Men At Risk.

"They'll talk to someone who's been there, done that, lived it," Campbell said.

"You don't need to be the expert."

Each case is different, but most people who begin to suffer depression show odd changes in behaviour.

"You're looking for noticeable changes in behaviour, attitude. They may sound hopeless about life," Campbell said.

Bidart noticed strange changes in Andy in the weeks before he killed himself. Andy used to get along with everybody and didn't lose control. But at a dance that winter Bidart saw a different Andy: unpleasant, belligerent, drinking too much.

Bidart thought little about it, which is why he was shocked when Andy killed himself. He is incensed with himself for missing the signs.

Like Rob, he wants to stop such tragedies. That's why he recently revised his turfgrass management technology program curriculum, expanding it from nine sections, all technical and practical, to 10 sections. The 10th one is called Dealing With Adversity in the Workplace and prepares students to deal with the human vulnerabilities of employees and co-workers.

"That's an area of management that we're just beginning to understand in our society," Bidart said.

Family, neighbours should heed signs

Friends and family of a Manitoba farmer were shocked last year when, after seeding his crop and paying his current bills, he killed himself.

"No one expected it," said a close friend of the farmer, whose name and location the *Western Producer* has agreed not to reveal for the sake of the family.

"I couldn't believe it. You don't think someone would do that."

But in the months after the suicide, friends of the deceased realized that he had left signs that, in hindsight, seemed all too clear.

This is common. Grieving friends and relatives often afterward note

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— Frances Wach, Saskatchewan SPCA

farmer is letting his place deteriorate or isn't doing what he should be, they should talk to him rather than assume things will sort out.

"The way a place is kept up is a pretty good giveaway," Rosmann said.

"That emotional paralysis is a key symptom of depression. It's one we have to look for and that's why we need neighbours and clergy keeping an eye out."

If a farmer neglects his animals, crops or farm, people should ask questions.

Frances Wach, manager of the Saskatchewan SPCA, said her officers try to assess whether depression is lurking behind cases of animal neglect.

"There have been a few cases where depression is an underlying factor," she said.

"They will neglect themselves, neglect their family, neglect their livestock.... They just sort of sit there because it's so daunting, what they're facing."

Ken Imhoff, who oversees Saskatchewan's farm stress phone service, said depressed people often don't seem depressed, but they may do odd things.

Joking about committing suicide or talking about "cashing in their chips" or about everyone being better off without him around should raise alarm.

Then there is the settling affairs prologue to a suicide, Imhoff said.

"If they start giving away things that are near and dear to them, that's a warning sign," he said.

But nearly all suicides can be prevented by the right intervention at the right time.

"Just being suicidal doesn't mean you're going to commit suicide," said Wynn Collier, a counsellor with the Manitoba Farm and Rural Stress Line.



Campbell

Barb Campbell, manager of the Men At Risk depression and suicide prevention program in Grande Prairie, Alta., said it is wrong to believe most suicide victims can't be saved because they are determined to kill themselves.

"Impulsivity and suicides are often linked," she said. "On another day, on another morning, if the phone had rung or someone had come over, things could have gone much differently."

Collier said the first step in suicide prevention is to realize depression is common and that depressed people can be helped by simply talking.

It's better to learn about depression and suicide before they strike, but it's not a subject familiar to most people.

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