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May 2019 Enhance Webinar #2: Mental Health Signs and Symptoms

On May 17th, 2019, Dairy Girl Network offered the second of three webinars in their Behavioral Health Mini-Series titled, “Signs and Symptoms of Mental Health.” This series of three webinars was one part of Dairy Girl Network’s campaign to recognize Mental Health Awareness Month throughout the month of May. Besides the webinars, there were also several posts made to the Exchange Facebook Group; many of these posts featured women courageously sharing their stories about their own struggles and triumphs with mental health. The conversations in the Facebook group, combined with the series of webinars, were great steps toward breaking down the stigma around mental health and opening up honest dialogue about this often uncomfortable topic.

The May 17th webinar featured a presentation by Kristin Potterbusch and Tramaine EL-Amin with the National Council for Behavioral Health. Kristin is the Director of Special Projects and Tramaine is the Assistant Vice President of Strategic Partnerships. Both women are involved with the Mental Health First Aid Training program. Mental Health First Aid is an 8-hour training program (open to anyone) that trains first aiders to be the initial help offered to a person developing a mental health or substance use problem until the appropriate professional help can be provided. Think of MHFA like you would CPR—the purpose is to sustain life until the ambulance arrives.

Why would someone take Mental Health First Aid training? The training allows you to learn how to notice when someone needs help, promote understanding about mental health, encourage community members to support one another, help more people get the help they need and learn how to intervene—which could save a life. MHFA teaches you what to say and not to say in crisis situations and how to recognize depression, anxiety disorder, substance use disorder, and other mental health issues. The curriculum teaches the response acronym **ALGEE**:

- Assess for risk of harm or suicide
- Listen nonjudgmentally
- Give reassurance and information
- Encourage appropriate professional help
- Encourage self-help and other support strategies

Maybe you’re wondering why getting training like this really matters or if it’s the right fit for you. Kristin and Tramaine discussed how we all have the opportunity to become champions for

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mental health in our rural and agricultural communities. Being able to be a resource for others could be the connection to help that someone suffering with a mental health issue needs. Breaking down the stigma around mental health in rural and ag communities is critical. Kristin and Tramaine shared that more than 6.5 million people in non-metropolitan counties experienced a mental health condition in 2016 and 1.3 million people in rural areas have thoughts of suicide each year. A major challenge is the chronic shortage of mental health care providers in rural areas. Other challenges include people needing help waiting to seek care, a lack of information about mental health, shame about needing help, stigma and isolation.

Becoming proactive in recognizing the signs of mental illness is critical. The median onset age of anxiety disorder is 11; the median onset age for depression is 32. Some signs (what we may see) of depression are weight change, withdrawal, irritability, personality change, forgetfulness, and self-criticism. Symptoms (what someone feels) of depression can include sadness, low energy, appetite change, headaches, helplessness and hopelessness. If you recognize these signs in someone and are concerned they may harm themselves, you should call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255 (TALK). You can also contact the Suicide Prevention Textline by texting "MHFA" to 741741. Familiarize yourself with the resources that are available locally through your county and/or state as well.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, the speakers reminded us about the importance of self-care. It's impossible to pour from an empty cup. We need to be at 100% if we want to be able to give 100% of ourselves to others. Explore a variety of strategies to maintain your mental, physical, and emotional health. This could include deep breathing, meditation/relaxation, exercise, support groups, self-help books or therapy. Find what works for you and assess your wellbeing regularly.

Overall, the May 17 Enhance Webinar offered a lot of great information on mental health in rural communities, resources for becoming a rural mental health champion and the signs and symptoms of mental health issues. If you're interested in learning more about Mental Health First Aid or finding a training near you, visit www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org. On a personal note, I have been a Mental Health First Aider since January and it has made me an effective resource at work and in my community; I cannot recommend the training enough. We can all play a role in breaking down the stigma around mental health and being a support system for others. We're all in this together.

Written by DGN Press Corps Member, Emily Wilmes
Edited by DGN Interactive Media Lead, Amanda Borkowski

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