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PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

*By UNMC, Central States Center for Agricultural
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Mental Health for Youth in Ag

Free resources can help you communicate the value of mental to youth.

In a 2024 study of agricultural youth (Rudolphi JM, Berg RL. Stress, Mental Health, and Risk-Taking: Associations among a Sample of Agricultural Adolescents. Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2024 Jun), it was found that about 70% of the youth surveyed had at least mild symptoms of depression, while 63% had anxiety symptoms.

AgriSafe Total Farmer Health Director, AgriSafe Network, Tara Haskins, says youth who live on a farm, surrounded by and sometimes participating in the work are often impacted by the pressures common to the agricultural industry.

"They may see (agriculture) as a future profession or occupation for themselves," Haskins says. "(At this age), they are very vulnerable to those (stress) factors that create crisis, anxiety, and stress. Many factors are beyond a farmer's control – weather, markets, gas prices, fertilizer prices, and zoonotic disease that may impact an entire herd. All these things sometimes create a more severe layer of anxiety and stress, which may lead to suicide."

Through AgriSafe, Haskins and her colleagues are offering an online webinar and related resources, "Invest In Your Health: Cultivating a Healthy Mind," designed to give adults who work with youth options for conversing with youth that they believe may be at risk for mental health issues or suicide.

"The American Farm Bureau conducted a 2019 survey to obtain impressions of how important mental health was to adults in rural communities and those working in agriculture," Haskins says. "Survey results indicated that 91% of those surveyed said mental health was very important to them and their families."

In addition to Haskins' webinar, resources include webinar presentation slides, "Invest in Your Health: Cultivating a Health Mind Guidebook, presentation slides to use for presentations to students/youth, and a video of FFA student Carson Rudd helping to raise awareness for mental health.

"We are not training (anyone) to be a professional counselor or mental health professional," Haskins says. "If you are a sponsor for a group in this age range, an ag teacher or science teacher, or involved in a youth organization like Boys and Girls Club, this information can help start a conversation. It's not going to tell you everything there is to know about mental illness or mental health. It's a comprehensive, general presentation done in a way to help start conversations with students."

Haskins explains that scientists know the human brain is not fully mature until early adulthood, when an individual reaches their 20s.

"That's particularly true of the part of the brain that sits right behind your forehead, the prefrontal cortex," she says. "That part of our brain helps make good decisions based on information we have. We call it the judge. It alerts us to an activity that may be risky or cause us to be injured."

Haskins noted that one of her former mentors used the mantra, "Keep them alive till they're 25," because it takes about 25 years before all the elements of the brain come together in the best way possible to make good decisions.

"We need to keep in mind that during that time when the brain is forming and developing, it's a very vulnerable time for adolescents," she says. "That's why substance injury or exposure to trauma can have profound and long-lasting effects."

This material provides coping skills youth can implement, such as healthy sleep patterns, diets, and relationships.

"Many students at this age are exploring friendships and maybe romantic relationships, and some relationships may not be positive," Haskins says.

The guidebook, used in presentations to youth, addresses mental health stigma, empathy mapping, mindful mapping, and cognitive distortion. Scientists know that teens assume that people can read their thoughts and expect they can predict future events – such as making mistakes or being bullied. They also tend to catastrophize and see events or experiences as unbearable. They attribute blame to themselves or project negative feelings onto others.

"We want to talk about the protection of the brain and wearing helmets for ATV safety, which we know youth frequently use on the farm," she says. "Driving safely from point A to point B. Youth in this age group, ages 12 to 20, are trying to work through questions such as Who am I? What is my identity going to be? What groups or clubs will I join? Will I be an athlete or play in the band? If they're feeling peer pressure, and there's someone they look up to that they can talk to, they can find out how to resolve that situation."

Haskins notes that a better understanding of maturing can help adults respond to issues youth face.

"I'm not saying we should tolerate poor behavior," she says. "But it's certainly expected to see mood swings in this group, anxiety about physical changes, concerns about their appearance.

"These materials aren't specifically about suicide training," Haskins adds. "It is about mental health and how to be available for students. I think it's important to talk about healthy coping mechanisms and planting positive seeds for strong relationships on the farm and out in the community. We want to do everything we can to give that brain its best opportunity to develop fully."

Find the webinar and materials for this presentation at www.agrisafe.org under the Learning Lab and Webinar links.

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