

THE RECOVERING FARMER:

The Ag Health and Safety Network sat down for a chat with author Gerry Friesen, to talk about his new book and share his story with Network News readers.

“For me, positive change started when I began connecting with people, and opening up about my story,” explains author and ‘recovering farmer,’ Gerry Friesen

In his new book, *The Recovering Farmer: A Journey through the Labyrinth of Anxiety and Depression*, Gerry Friesen takes readers through the winding path from mental illness to a place where health, healing, and recovery are his everyday life.

It’s filled with humour and wit, and with powerful insight into what it means to be a farmer, and to have a mental illness. Chock full of farm anecdotes and hard-won truths, the book reads like a visit with an old friend over coffee.

Friesen has spent his life in and around the agriculture industry. He grew up on a grain and poultry farm near Wawanesa, MB and later became an active pork producer, president of Manitoba Pork Marketing, and worked as a debt remediation specialist.



Author Gerry Friesen

By 2004, Gerry knew that something was off with his mental health. *“It was difficult to acknowledge the sickness because I thought it was a weakness. The stigma got in the way of being proactive [about my health]. I was avoiding naming the beast.”*

As Gerry began the arduous journey to name and understand his illness, and to seek help to find the tools to fight it, he came to his first major realization about mental illness: you are not alone. Mental illness indirectly, or directly, affects all of us. Agriculture is full of family, friends, and colleagues who also live with various kinds of mental illness. And when no one talks about it, each of us can feel really alone. But the truth is, it’s a part of many lives.

By far the best path is to be open and honest, to ‘name the beast,’ as Gerry explains. Once you’ve accepted that there is something that needs to be addressed, you’ll find Gerry’s second a-ha realization: *It’s more than OK to reach out for help.*

“People that suffer from mental illnesses often try to keep it a secret. We put on a mask hoping no one will know. We feel shame. And because of that we often do not seek the help we need.” But, he adds, *“it’s not just ok to seek help. It’s absolutely the right path – for you, for your family, and for your farm business.”*

Gerry is passionate about facing and reducing the stigma of mental illness head-on, to help other farmers to overcome the stigma and seek help and support. That passion led him on a journey of recovery: recovering his own health and sharing his journey with others through regular blog posts, interviews, and speaking at ag shows. Each chapter of his new book, drawn from those blog posts and speeches and insights, ends with a takeaway, distilling his life lessons for readers.

A Journey through the Labyrinth of Anxiety and Depression

“When I put my thoughts out there, it helps my own mental health. When I talk, when I write stuff down, when I share it. How incredibly helpful that was. When I verbalized what was going on in my head, suddenly I start understanding.”

There are hard truths about mental illness, and Gerry doesn’t shy away from addressing those in the book, too. His own battles with addiction (in his case, alcohol) are openly shared. And his chapter on suicide offers an astonishing and encouraging view that defies cultural norms. “Being stuck on suicide being a sin, an unpardonable sin, does nothing to help. It just creates feelings of guilt and shame, making it more difficult to reach out for help.” Instead, Gerry shares a view where the journey with mental illness is a valiant fight, like you might describe someone’s fight against cancer.

Gerry shares a story about a family who described their loved ones as brave, and strong, and tried so hard but ultimately lost the fight and died of suicide. This story was a game changer for Gerry.

“I felt encouraged to understand that I along with many others were fighting courageous fights.”

Gerry’s book goes a long way towards helping people to see and understand their preconceived biases, their beliefs about these tough issues.

“Turn judgement into curiosity. Curiosity will lead to understanding. Seek understanding in spite of your own thoughts or beliefs,” Gerry suggests.

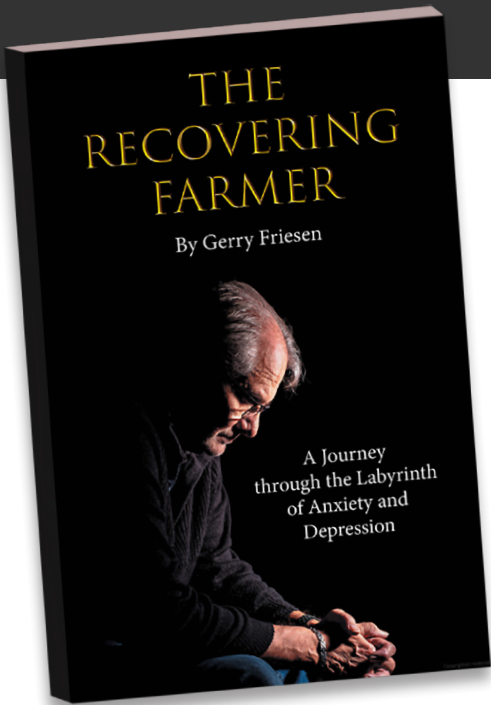
The book, and Gerry’s willingness to share his journey, opens space for everyone to talk about mental illness. By sharing his story in public, Gerry has heard from many farmers, grateful that mental illness as a long-secret aspect of farm reality is becoming visible.

While visibility is needed, Gerry emphasizes that taking the first two steps (recognizing illness, and asking for help) will lead to the third realization: hope.

“I want people to know that there is hope, that there is relief,” he said. Gerry shares numerous tips and tricks that have helped him ‘tame the beast’ of his illness, and wants people to know that as you learn more and as you share more, you get more ideas, tools, and resources.

In the end, the book reflects a journey of positivity, with coaching, stories, takeaways and ultimately, hope and determination. *“Because without the farmer, there is no farm,”* Gerry says. So, doing what’s needed to keep farmers healthy, physically and mentally, is work that needs to be done.

The book is available for order via Gerry’s website at **gerryfriesen.ca**, with links to online purchasing or simply send him an email.



REMEMBER >>

- 1. You are not alone
- 2. It’s more than okay to reach out for help
- 3. There is hope and there is relief