

## No more “tough it out”

*It's time to talk about rural mental health challenges, says one OSF expert*

While living in Greene County, Illinois, in the 1980s and 1990s, Lea Anne Varble took a gut punch each time she heard about a suicide in her community. Eight to 10 in total in 15 years, she says.

“It just took me aback,” she says.

What the tragedies had in common: the person faced mental health challenges common to a rural setting.

Varble, a clinical psychotherapist at OSF HealthCare, knew she had to do something about it. So not only did she devote higher education time to studying the problem, but she’s also now getting the word out about the resources available.

### The issues

Varble says stress and isolation are often experienced by people living in a rural setting, such as a farmer. There’s also a desire to be self-sufficient – a trope associated with farmers and other rural residents for decades.

“People living rurally often are independent. So, when stress comes, they want to handle it on their own,” Varble says.

Varble also knows the issues – stress, anxiety and even depression – of planting and harvest season.

“Hours and hours,” in the field, she says. “You’re expected to keep working even if you don’t feel well. Even if the stress is getting to you. You have to get up and do it again. Or at least that’s what your father before you did and his father before him.”

The work ethic can be admirable, but it can lead to medical issues if left unchecked.

And, the heads of some rural households are caring for two generations: their kids and their parents. School, chronic illnesses and advanced care planning are just more things to add to the to-do list. Varble adds that older adults in a rural setting are more likely to see themselves as a burden and choose to end their life.

### Treatment

Varble says getting better starts simply with noticing the problem and talking about it with a trusted adult, like a friend, family member, faith leader or a medical professional.

The good news is that mental health professionals have made strides in this area, such as telemedicine and mobile health services. And society is more willing to talk about mental health. Farming magazines have articles on mental health, for example.

Other ways to help that Varble has picked up over the years:

- Get to know your neighbors and local organizations, like churches and businesses. Then, lean on them for help when the stress gets to be too much.
- Look into resources offered by state or federal agencies. In Illinois, where Varble works, the [Family Farm Resource Initiative](#) operates a 24/7 hotline and email.

“Individuals can receive support from trained professionals who understand the unique challenges faced by those in the agricultural sector,” the initiative website states. “The helpline offers specialized assistance, including mental health resources and agriculture-related support, ensuring that farm families have access to the help they need.”

- Health care professionals should encourage people with rural backgrounds to become therapists.

“It’s someone from their community who understands what’s going on,” Varble says.