



HAVING SPOKE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH for years, Michele Payn felt it was important for people to have a take-home tool to remind them of quick tips throughout the year.

Everyday reminders can help mitigate stress

Geared toward agriculture, this calendar is filled with tips and ideas that can help people deal with uncertainty and initiate challenging conversations.

by Andrea Stoltzfus

AT THE end of the year, free calendars seem to abound from seed dealers, nutritionists, local businesses, and feed companies. Brilliant photos celebrate agriculture through the year: barn sunrises, harvest sunsets, newborn animals, and county fairs. The calendars help with planning for the hundreds of seasonal farm tasks that arise annually.

While these calendars can help people plan their days, weeks, and the year ahead, they don't help plan for the stress and uncertainty that comes with a career in agriculture. As a member of the ag community, Michele Payn has seen firsthand the struggles that come with the stress of farming and saw the need for a visual tool to help deal with the day-to-day struggles.



STOLTZFUS

The author and her family own and operate a 570-cow Holstein and Jersey dairy near Berlin, Pa.

A firm foundation

For more than two decades, Payn has been writing and speaking about agriculture advocacy. As an author of three books about connecting consumers with agriculture, Payn couldn't see a farmer picking up a book about stress as "light

reading." Instead, a calendar, filled with stress management tools, tips, and ideas, just might fit the bill.

After months of planning, research, and a photo contest, "Agriculture's Growth Calendar," a flip desktop calendar that fits in nearly any space, was born. Payn worked with more than a dozen contributors including farmers, doctors, veterinarians, and psychologists to share their real-life insights.

"Topics were based on practical needs of today's farmers," Payn added. "I wanted to be sure the content was compelling, helpful, and specific to agriculture."

A Holstein breeder since she was 9 years old, Payn has passed her love of dairy cattle to her daughter, who is finishing her 4-H and FFA career. Payn's company, Cause Matters Corp., marked its 20-year anniversary this past year. She travels extensively, speaking to audiences across the globe about connecting farm and food, communicating science, and having hard conversations.

"I've been speaking about mental health in agriculture for several years and felt it was important for people to have a take-home tool to remind them of quick tips throughout the year," she said. "One of the central themes is about having difficult conversations, so this fits right in. Mental health is not an easy topic to speak about, but I do so because of the suicide rates and

depression that are so prevalent across our business — I especially see it in the dairy sector."

The weekly pages feature quick reminders and practical tools and are organized into planning, planting, growing, and harvesting seasons. The tips come from lived experiences, data supporting stress management as a business tool, and resources for families.

Sorting through the stress

"I strongly believe that normalizing stress management and integrating it into business plans will help families better find their way through the risks of our business," she said. "I also try to help farmers remember that they were not created as a farmer, but as a human. It is critically important to separate your self-worth from your business, especially when the business hits hard times."

Payn has personal experience with farm stress and loss; her parents lost their farm to bankruptcy and she remembers the emotions of seeing an empty barn. Additionally, a dairy friend's suicide impacted her tremendously and made her realize mental health was an issue. "My friend, Rhonda, was a big part of my motivation around helping families in agriculture better handle the consequences of the stress and risk we are all under," she said.

Payn conducted a nationwide photo contest through social media to help fill in the calendar with agriculture pictures from around the country. More than 300 photos were submitted; the 56 photos selected recognize the contributor and their talent.

While she had never created a calendar before, she said she followed a similar process as writing books with the content development. She admitted this project was easier than writing a book, but the intended audience was different.

"My three books — *Food Bullying*, *Food Truths from Farm to Table*, and *No More Food Fights!* — are designed to help people know where their food comes from," she said. "This last creation, Agriculture's Growth Calendar, is specifically for farmers, veterinarians, agribusiness owners, and families because I deeply believe our business needs help."

There's a better way

In homes, barns, and offices, calendars serve as planners and reminders of upcoming events; Payn said this calendar serves as a reminder that there are "better ways to handle stress than beating your head on the wall or yelling at your loved ones."

"You are not alone in feeling stressed out; the uncertainty of the world is difficult to navigate," she said. "Changing milk prices, crazy

feed prices, and labor shortages add to that. However, your life is far more valuable than your business and managing your stress has to be part of your business."

For example, she noted that taking a walk for 10 to 20 minutes will likely do far more for business decisions than fighting with the latest broken piece of equipment. Additionally, eating right for a couple of weeks when things are really tough in business may allow a more balanced perspective in looking at the future.



AFTER RECEIVING MORE THAN 300 PHOTOS, Michele Payn selected 56 to serve as the foundation for her Agriculture's Growth Calendar.

"Talking about your stress may offer others the gift of helping you, and improve your physical health," she said. "Agriculture's Growth Calendar also helps those who visit farmers have tools to identify signs of stress, have the difficult conversations, and gives resources for more in-depth help."

A long and lingering impact

Payn said that science proves that stress has direct consequences on health; it impacts sleep, heart health, the brain, and much more. "This calendar offers tools to be proactive and address stress with weekly challenges," she said.

To date, thousands of Agriculture's Growth Calendars have been sold. Payn is optimistic that the calendars will help members of the agricultural community focus on their mental health all year long and into the future.

"My hope is that it will not only help people consider how stress management must be a part of a business plan today, but change thinking around mental health," she said. "People matter more than product. We need to do more to care for the people of our business." 🐮



For more information about Agriculture's Growth Calendar, visit Michele Payn's website, www.causematters.com/growth-calendar, or follow @mpaynspeaker on social media.