



FCC Knowledge Podcast

Season 4 – Episode 7

Farming with ADHD: Embracing Neurodivergence in agriculture

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

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AS: From AgExpert, it's the FCC Knowledge Podcast, a show that features real Canadians in agriculture, real stories and real good conversations about the business of farming. I'm your host Aimée Stang.

NR: That is ultimately the goal, being able to help them long enough so that they're able to help themselves as they get older and more independent.

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AS: Today, we're going to go a bit off the beaten path and dive into a topic that I feel is starting to gain more traction, not only in the mainstream, but on the farm as well: the topic of neurodivergence. For those of you who aren't familiar with the term, neurodivergence refers to a non-medical category of people with variations in their mental functions from typical or neurotypical people. The most common neurodiverse conditions in this category include autism, ADHD, dyspraxia and dyslexia, among others. It's a generally accepted notion these days that there's no one right way of receiving and processing information, and many will argue that neurodiversity has been essential to our evolution as a human race.

What does it have to do with agriculture? A survey carried out in the UK reports that the number of farmers with neurodiverse conditions may be more than double the rate of the general population. The people surveyed most likely reported ADHD and dyslexia, with autism also ranking highly. Let's be clear: I am not a medical professional, but I suspect that if we conducted similar research in Canada, the results could be very similar. Why? A popular theory is that farming is often an attractive career choice for neurodiverse individuals. In particular, the varied, fast-paced work environment that requires quick, creative thinking is an attractive career expectation to a neurodivergent mind. People with ADHD are often risk-takers, and there's no question that farming offers its fair share of both business and physical risks. Finally, neurodivergent conditions tend to be hereditary. For example, if a first-generation farmer had ADHD, chances are those traits were passed on to subsequent generations.

There could be a higher-than-average number of people on the farm that are neurodiverse. So how does that impact the business of farming? That's a great question. For one, there are a number of skills that neurodiverse people bring to the table. Calculated risk-taking, when done well, is a key ingredient associated with successful entrepreneurialism. Looking at your business or operations from a different perspective, or finding solutions that others might have missed, are other possible advantages. The ability to deeply focus if tasks highly interest the person and a connection and affinity with animals could also benefit the farm.

Of course, there are challenges associated with neurodivergence. The survey in the UK reported that 84% of respondents stated their neurodivergence negatively impacts their jobs. This seems to show up particularly in areas of financial management and paperwork. Additionally, 82% of respondents reported their neurodivergence negatively impacted their mental health.

I'm particularly interested in this topic, as both of my children are neurodivergent. My eldest son has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, and both he and his younger brother have ADHD. I wanted to find out more about the experiences of other families, and Nicole Rathgeber generously agreed to share her story with me. Nicole, her husband and three children operate a grain and oilseed operation in East Central Saskatchewan, and all five of them have been diagnosed with ADHD.

Welcome, Nicole.

NR: Thank you.

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AS: So tell me about your farming journey so far.

NR: My grandparents had a farm with lots of different animals, so I had experience with some that way, but myself, I didn't grow up in it day-to-day. Farming is relatively new to me. Just shy of 20 years ago, we met and we went full into agriculture. He always was involved with the family farm, and knew that that's what he was going to do, and so it was more or less, "This is what I'm doing. You're along for the ride, or you're not." So it was kind of a, right guy, this is how we're going to handle life. We moved to the farm officially three years ago. We now have a house out here, so we're in it full-time. Myself, I work off the farm full-time, so farming is my husband's role. I'm involved as much as I can be. When harvest comes around, everyone's involved. We all take our role, and it's a family business. It's good to finally be on the farm and be immersed in it 24/7.

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AS: Before that, was your husband commuting back and forth from where you were living?

NR: He was commuting from our closest town, about a 20-minute drive, so that got to be pretty old pretty quick. So as soon as we were able to make the move out, we hopped on that bandwagon.

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AS: Where exactly is the farm?

NR: We're east of Yorkton, East Central Saskatchewan. We do mostly grain and Canola. We were in cattle, but we decided that that wasn't the market we wanted to be in. We farm with my in-laws, and they were more involved with the cattle. Now that they decided to get out, we weren't sad about that transition. We wanted to be more on the grain side of things. It's nice to have that focus on just being able to explore the grain and expand that end of our business.

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AS: How many kids do you have?

NR: We have three kids: two daughters, 14 and 12, and one son. He's eight. It's amazing to see them grow up on the farm. We were in town, so it was a bit of a transition for them to go from the conveniences of town to being now on the farm and having tried the bus. So that was a bit hard for them to get used to, but I think that they appreciate the openness and the freedom that come with living on the farm.

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AS: Your family is unique in the sense that every member of your immediate family has a neurodivergent diagnosis. Who was diagnosed first, and how did that snowball into more?

NR: It all started with our youngest son when he was in Grade one, so that would be closer to three years now. It started with his teacher approaching me, saying, "I've noticed some focus problems, and we were wondering if you could maybe help him out with that at home and see if there's something else that we can do together." So it was a bit of a process with him going through the different diagnosis, SNAP scores and things like that, that you need to go through with your health provider. So then we're going through the process with our son, and we're having a lot of these "Aha!" moments with traits that they say are ADHD, and noticing them in my husband at first and then myself. And it was a strange conversation between my husband and I where he says, "Don't all people do this?" And I said, "No, not exactly."

It was an interesting conversation between us to explore that with ourselves as well. And so my husband was the next one to get diagnosed, and he had a lot of clarity. It was a fairly good experience, just to validate himself. He had a reason for the things that he did and the frustrations he saw in his life. The same with myself. I had noticed with social media that ADHD showed up differently in women. So then it was just exploring myself, my psyche, and talking to my healthcare provider on whether this is an avenue that we would like to go down. And so I said, "It's not going to hurt. It's only going to help, to explore this diagnosis." I went through the process and I got a diagnosis, and it was really eye opening to see these traits in myself and my daughters.

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AS: So you're a little bit more self-aware, and your daughters are more self-aware of what you need to succeed and maybe how you're hardwired.

NR: Yeah, it was definitely a journey to know oneself through this diagnosis. It was eye opening and really enlightening.

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AS: Was it difficult to hear those diagnoses as a mom or for yourself?

NR: With my son being diagnosed first, it did hit in a negative light. A mom tends to almost blame themselves at first, but then you just realize they're not any different. They're still them. They just have an explanation of why they do the things they do now. It was hard in the beginning, but we had to reframe it in a positive way, so that we can also look upon ourselves in a more positive way.

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AS: I can relate to that, because, as a mom, any diagnosis of any kind is a gut punch. It's not what you envision for your family or children. But at the same time, there are some really great advantages. I've heard an ADHD referred to as super strength.

NR: We had to explain it in that frame of mind as well for our son. We put the analogy of, sometimes our brain needs glasses. Sometimes people will prefer to take a medication, and that's fine, too, and that's just you putting on your glasses so that you can do things a little bit easier.

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AS: That's funny, because I used that exact same analogy with a friend. She was struggling with giving her child medication, and I said, "If it's the right prescription for you, you can see clearly, or your brain can function clearly." And I saw a little bit of an "A-ha!" moment. When my own kids got diagnosed later, I reminded myself of that.

NR: It was definitely a struggle at first to go through the process of finding the right combination of medication and/or therapies, but once you find that right mix, it really—it just opened up for you. You're more aware of the possibilities that you're capable of. Frustration, tolerance improve a lot, so you're able to handle stresses on the farm and with your daily life a lot better. As frustrating as it was to find that right balance, it was worth the effort.

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AS: Obviously, with the medication and figuring out the right dosages or whether or not you want medication, I know with my own situation, that's something that surprised me the most was all the invisible work that goes on behind the scenes when you have a diagnosis. I naively thought that, "Oh, ADHD, you get a diagnosis, boom. You have a prescription. You move on with the rest of your life, and that's the end of it." But it's not. There's so many other things, like you said, the medication, the right dosages, whether or not you want to be medicated, if there's therapies you want to

explore, if you want to do a combination of things. What surprised you the most about this whole diagnosis process?

NR: The surprising part of it was how validated I would feel over being diagnosed, and then how much work there is that comes with that. Advocating for my children with school and health care and asking for the things that they need and any adaptations or anything like that within their school or their day-to-day life, I have to be their advocate now. It helped me find my voice for myself. So it just seems that there's a lot of different things that go with it now that have become my norm. The kids are going to be fine, but I have to speak up for them every so often.

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AS: Do you think that how you've learned to cultivate that skill of speaking up for your needs and your kids' needs – do you think that translates to a skill set for how you manage your farm business?

NR: With being able to speak up and advocate, you also have to learn how to set boundaries. With my own diagnosis, I had to become very aware of what I was capable of doing without burning out. With that becomes a big word of “No” or “Not yet.” That was a bigger one for me to learn how to do, because, of course, I want to be helpful. I want to please my family and help them as much as I can, but I can't help them unless I help myself first. Setting those boundaries was a big skill that I had to learn that comes in handy on the farm, my own job, with being a mom, being a wife, being all my different roles. It's worth setting that boundary so I can continue to show up for everybody and myself.

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AS: Do you think there's other aspects of your or your husband's ADHD that has helped you manage your farm business? Anything that helps you be a better farmer, a better farm manager?

NR: The traits of being ADHD do lend so well to being a farmer and in agriculture in general. We have a very unique ability to be able to multitask, and we have to be creative problem-solvers. And we have to be able to work long hours for long days. You think about the different traits of ADHD with your hyper focus, and you have to be able to dig in and work hard. And so that is a perfect fit for the farming side of things. If a breakdown happens in the field, and you only have a wrench and a zip tie, you're going to be able to get rolling in 30 minutes or less to beat that storm that's coming. You definitely learn how to roll with it and be creative.

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AS: They always say that farmers have to be a MacGyver. Maybe MacGyver had ADHD and we just didn't know it.

NR: 100% believe it, yes.

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AS: I've had conversations with friends who have said you almost have to have ADHD to be a farmer these days, because you wear so many hats and you're pulled in so many different directions, and if you want to thrive, you have to be able to go with the flow. There was a Farmers Weekly study in the UK, and they found that the number of farmers who considered themselves to be neurodivergent either with a diagnosis or they assumed they were could be as high as double what the general population was. A reason for that is that farming attracts a neurodivergent mind.

Like you said, there's so many things happening at once. You need creative problem-solving skills. The day is never the same. You're kind of in charge of your own day. You don't have to answer to anyone else. You're in charge of your schedule. There's a fast-paced work environment, and also life in an urban setting could be also over-stimulating to somebody with ADHD. Do you agree with that theory? Do you think your husband's ADHD played a role in him deciding to go back to the farm? Do you think your own neurodivergence played a role in you agreeing to go back to the farm?

NR: I think that there is a higher prevalence of neurodivergence in agriculture and farming. The autonomy that comes naturally with farming is really attractive. You don't have to answer to anyone other than yourself, in a lot of ways, so that's appealing. Given that, and just the way that a person has to be creative, they're going to be a mechanic and an engineer and a welder and a carpenter all in the same afternoon. So if you like to wear lots of hats and learn different things and do different things, it's a perfect occupation to have. I think that is what guided my husband towards staying with the farm and taking over more and doing more on there, because being that he grew up with it, he enjoyed the fact that he had that autonomy and was able to make the decision on his own and see the benefit of his own hard work. And I do like to take on different projects and see the end of results, and just feel like you had a good day and you worked hard. It's a really satisfying feeling at the end of the day.

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AS: That's such a common theme. If you worked hard, that means you accomplished something, therefore it was a successful day, which can be true, and also sometimes that can get you into trouble too.

NR: There's going to be a flip side to every trait. So you look at the hyper focus, for example, if you take the flip side of that, that leads to a mismanagement of time. They're often linked and a flip side of each other. It's interesting to see we have a benefit of one thing, but it leads to another trait, which can often be seen as a downside of having ADHD.

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AS: Do you find that there's any challenges in managing your farm business related to your ADHD, your husband's ADHD, that you need to be mindful of as you're navigating through your own business?

NR: There's going to be so many pros and cons to each side and each trait of ADHD. With seeing these questions and having time to ponder them, it made me realize

that some traits with ADHD, for example, there's lack of organization in a lot of aspects. On the flip side of that, that's part of the creative problem solving, because you can take apart one piece of machinery, and see all these parts. Where a neurotypical farmer might say, "Okay, that's just for the metal scrap heap," a neurodivergent farmer will think, "I need that scrap metal, and that's going to be staying with me, but I just don't know how to organize it."

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AS: I like how you worded that in terms of, there's two sides to everything, right? Even the time management thing. Someone who's more rigorous in their thinking or more neurotypical in their thinking, might say, "I'm only going to need this much time for this particular task." But, you know, if you're in a flow or you're really hyper focused, you can allow yourself to extend that time to finish the task or to keep working on it.

NR: Yes, exactly.

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AS: So obviously, for kids, I think we talked about this a little bit, an official diagnosis helps direct the support they're provided at school and in their development. For you, having diagnosis as an adult was more of an awareness of yourself, and that helped you set boundaries and limits. Did you find there were other benefits to getting diagnosed as an adult?

NR: If there's a reason it's in your head, it's worth exploring. There's a lot of talk on social media, show that ADHD and neurodivergence is actually very common in the population. And so I think if there's something nagging in your brain that says, "This fits things that I'm noticing about myself," it's worth investigating. I know that myself, even in my teens, there was depression, anxiety and different things, and finally, getting that diagnosis as an adult, just really validating, and it helped me be able to understand myself a lot better. It helped me understand my partner a lot better, and I find that we have a lot more patience for one another when things do get stressful on the farm and even personally, because we all know that happens. If we can have that understanding, "I was acting this way," or "I said this because of that," having that diagnosis behind there to kind of help explain and support you, it goes a long way.

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AS: People with ADHD can be impulsive, risk-takers, which could lead to safety concerns, or chores might need to be outlined in sequential order to stay on task. Is there anything that you've learned to help your kids specifically in farm life?

NR: There are certain rules that are non-negotiable. Safety is, of course, number one. As long as you outline to your children that these are not negotiable, that makes the basis of everything else easy to build upon. As long as we know that they're safe, we just kind of went from there. Chores in the house, it was actually hard for myself to be able to implement that, because in my mind, that's one extra thing that I have to now organize. Once we had the organization of what we had for chores and making sure that everybody was safe, we have a good system now in place, now

that things are organized. So we had to work with our kids and their own nervous systems to be able to make that work for them. We have rotating schedules for our chores, so that was an extra step that we had to take just to make things function in our own house. Things can be impulsive at times, and things aren't thought through properly when you're working out at the shop and things like that. So a good tip that I would offer is always have a well-stocked first aid kit.

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AS: Yeah.

NR: Yes, just making sure that you get the things organized for your children, especially, it goes a long way for them being able to set that expectation of, "This is what gets done after school. This is what gets done after supper," and it makes things run a whole lot smoother.

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AS: What kind of rules did you make in terms of safety that you created for your family?

NR: We don't want the kids around any running equipment without an adult, and they're not allowed to be around any bodies of water like sloughs or the dugouts without adults. We've also let them recently learn how to drive side-by-sides and things like that. So making sure that they're wearing their seatbelts as non-negotiables. Safety is always first.

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AS: And then you said in terms of the schedule that you have after school, it sounds like it's pretty specific.

NR: There are a few things. They do the dishwasher and that's a rotating weekly schedule. We also have some tight rules when it comes to screens and social media, because I find that children with ADHD tend to hyper-focus on the screens because it's very much a dopamine hit for them. To have them transition from screen time to task-oriented mind is very difficult. You have to learn some tips and tricks of your own children on what works for them to get them back. We found that limiting screen time was best tool for us.

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How does having kids with ADHD impact your plans for the future? Your kids are still pretty young, but in what ways are you proactively setting them up for success, possibly taking over the farm or being an employee, either on the farm or off the farm?

NR: If I can focus on teaching my kids transferable skills, I think that's going to help them in whatever avenue they decide to go into. If they like to do things with animals, I

want to be able to help them explore that. But there's still those underlying skills that they can transfer to almost anywhere. Their work ethic is based on things that we model for them, making sure that we're involving them in everything that we can with the farm. They're helping out at the shop, and they're riding along when we are in the combine. And we show them different skills. This is how you measure and build something. This is how you cut and weld something. All that starts at a young age with things that we can show them and model for them.

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AS: No different, really, than, I think, any farm family, really.

NR: And with ADHD specifically, you're going to have those bursts of hyper focus with your children once they do find that thing that they really enjoy doing. To learn how to foster that with them is really enlightening and eye-opening and joyful moment for myself as a parent to get to see that they enjoy something, and they're going to work really hard at achieving something.

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AS: That's great, because with my own kids, some of their interests, I wonder where they got these interests from, because it wasn't from me or my husband. You never know what it's going to lead them to. For example, my son is really interested in watching YouTube videos now of taping hockey sticks. Maybe this is something he's going to pursue, right? Maybe he's going to work in a sports store or be an equipment manager or something, or, I don't—who knows where that's going to lead, right? It's great that you've got that mindset, because it's easy to not encourage interest that we don't hold ourselves

NR: I agree with that, especially with traditional roles that are seen on the farm. It can be hard for us as parents to not have them be interested in those things that we need from them at that moment on the farm. It's something we have to strive for, to try and encourage those interests with them as much as time allows.

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AS: And you said as a teenager, not knowing that you had ADHD, it probably led to some struggles for you. What's your perspective now that your kids are approaching teenage years? Does that change your mindset and how you're helping your children navigate through that stage of their lives?

NR: That's a really big topic in our house right now, especially since my oldest has started working outside of the farm. She's starting to see stresses that she wouldn't normally maybe see until she was older. Knowing what I know now and knowing her, I'm going to try and help her the best I can. This is a way that we can try and mitigate the stress, or this is how we can talk about it. These are ways that we can help avoid these problems from snowballing in the future when she gets to be an adult.

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AS: That's probably another reason why it's so great that you received a diagnosis yourself, because then you can understand some of those things that you went through as a young adult. And if your children are open to listening, you can help them be more self-aware too.

NR: That is ultimately the goal, being able to help them long enough so that they're able to help themselves as they get older and more independent.

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AS: Knowing what you know about ADHD and neurodivergence, if you were to hire a neurodivergent employee on your farm, what sorts of considerations would you take as an employer?

NR: As long as they have autonomy and still able to achieve that goal at the end of the day or the week or that season, I think that that is going to be able to really feed that employee a lot of self-satisfaction with the workplace and their employer. And just being cognizant of different things that can just help their day go a little bit smoother, like having whiteboards in the shop or dry erase markers in the tractors so they can jot things down on the windows or things like that, because we can always get sidetracked. So if we don't write it down, it either stops existing or it doesn't get brought up again.

It's important to have that rapport with your employee, to have an open conversation on what's going to help them be the best employee for you, versus, "This is what I want from an employee, and you have to do ABC in order to be a successful employee for me." So I think as long as there's that flexibility and that relationship between employer and employee, things would go great. As long as that conversation is open, I think that's just going to be appreciated from the employee standpoint. Just being heard and being seen is going to go so far with them.

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AS: What kinds of things would you hope future employers consider when they're employing your children or other people with neurodivergent traits?

NR: They should be open to goals being met in new ways that aren't necessarily how they thought would be done. With ADHD comes creativity, problem solving. As long as a person stays open to that and is willing to be open and flexible to a different way, things are going to go really well. Having my children now joining the workforce, just making sure I'm setting my children up with things that they need to advocate for themselves, making sure that they're saying, "This is too much for me," or, "Can you repeat that again?" Or, "Can you explain that to me in a different way?" is going to help them as they enter the workforce.

Especially now that my daughter is working, I've had to go through things a few times with her now, where I've asked her after the shift, "How did things go? Was there anything that was too much for you?" Even maybe helping her, being that she's so young, helping her approach her employer and say, "I'd like to see this instead of that," just in that advocate role for my child. I'm hoping that by modeling

that for her, she's able to see what that's like and be able to do that for herself as she matures and keeps on with the workforce.

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AS: That sounds like a great way to help her build that muscle of asking for what she needs, and making sure that she gets set up for success in the workplace.

NR: She is a quieter girl by nature, so having her speak up is going to be a good skill to learn for herself. I want to be able to make things more comfortable for people to say out loud that this is what's going on. And hopefully that will make things more comfortable to bring things up to other people, employers and things like that, just to start breaking down that stigma that oftentimes goes around with the neurodivergence.

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AS: Do you feel comfortable telling people, "I have ADHD," or, "My children have ADHD," or do you feel like you don't always want to broadcast that?

NR: I don't have a problem telling people that this is part of my story. If they are meeting me for the first time, they probably wouldn't even realize that it's part of our household, because it is so much a part of our day-to-day. I'm trying to become more and more comfortable with saying this is just a part of me and who I am, and it's not an excuse. It's just what it is.

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AS: My son is diagnosed with autism, and I remember being really afraid when he started kindergarten that people were going to be, like, "Oh, great. Now we have this kid with special needs in our class." And not that I would think that way, but I just was so worried about how he was going to be perceived by his peers and the other families at school, and it never played out that way. I was just worried about it. I think the conversation is changing, like, if I casually drop the fact that my kid is on medication, I hear someone go, "Oh, I'm on that medication," or, "I tried that, and my kid's on this." And all sudden, you have a whole buddy group of the same prescription, and you can talk about whether or not it's helping.

NR: As a mother and a parent that is our main worry, is making sure that they're being perceived in a good light with their peers. You don't want that to be their only qualifying trait. But I think children are a lot more accepting. They seem to find the good in other people, and they're much more accepting than even as adults, we seem to be. As we start to talk about it more, it's going to become more commonplace to be able to talk about it and just have it be a way of life.

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AS: I wonder about how an adult is perceived as a business owner, if you're dealing with creditors or if you're dealing with suppliers, and do you not want to hide that part of you from them? Or are you open about it? I feel like it's kind of the conversation too about mental health, like, if someone comes out and says, "I struggle with my

mental health,” how is that perceived by the people that you do business with? Do you think things are shifting in that perspective?

NR: I have seen things go out towards that more accepting way of life for people that are open to sharing that piece about them. I would like to see it continue even further, because I think a lot of depression and anxiety is just from a lack of being able to express oneself. If there is that neurodivergent diagnosis, that can snowball into so many other things. I feel if a person's just able to express themselves in a more open way, just having that conversation would become easier given time.

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AS: When my son was diagnosed with autism, the autism consultant said, “I feel like autism is going in the direction where it's getting more accepted in our society.” Autism and ADHD are looked at differently. It's interesting to me how I thought to myself, “Oh, well, my son's autistic. Like, is he going to be able to have a, quote, unquote, “normal life,” and is he going to be able to go off and work and go to school and get married and have kids or pursue whatever he decides to? I don't think that's as much of a question for people with ADHD, but it probably was at some point, right?

NR: Now, that we're finding out so much more about it and how large of a spectrum it falls on, there's so many different avenues and different therapies and things that can aid in small children, even adults, with themselves and their journey in getting to know themselves a little bit better.

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AS: What excites you about the future of agriculture?

NR: I'm most excited about the increasing adaptability and creativity that I'm seeing in agriculture, just the diversity of things that are going on now, and it's not just set to grain and cattle anymore. Farmers are diversifying. They're branching out in creative ways to meet the needs of the public. There are smaller farms making a big impact with their brand because of their creativity. I'm excited to see how my own children will then be able to take the reins on the farm and how they're going to steer it to meet their own needs.

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AS: Yeah, there's no one recipe for farming. Thanks so much Nicole for taking the time to chat with me today. It's great for people to know that they're not the only ones with these situations on their farms and in their families, and it's possible to leverage those superhero qualities. I look forward to seeing where you guys go from here.

NR: Thank you very much.

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AS: Since my son's diagnoses, I've been asking myself a lot of questions, like, how do my husband and I keep them safe on the farm, especially if they're prone to

impulsivity and risk-taking? How do we best prepare them for the workplace? If one or both of them wants to take over the farm, what can we do to help set them up for success with the right skills, such as managing the paperwork, staying on top of their finances and leading their employees? Of course, there are questions that families with more severe cases would have, in particular for their will and estate planning. How do you plan for the needs of dependent adult children when you're no longer there? How does this impact the children who decide to take over the farm?

If you're facing these questions, I encourage you to reach out to your lawyer, financial planner and accountant to discuss solutions that make sense to your specific situation. Our goal as parents is to set our children up for as much success and independence as we can, and that takes finding out what's going on inside their brains and advocating for them. Like it was for Nicole, you may even discover more about yourself in the process, leading you to find ways to better your own life and career. If you or members of your family are questioning whether they are neurodivergent, like Nicole said, the idea is worth exploring if it's in your head.

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