Transcript

The Transcendent Farmer

Episode 3

Emily Reno

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Emily Reno**:** You're listening to the Transcendent Farmer podcast with Emily Reno, created to inspire and empower the next generation of land stewards. Alright. Well, today, I have with me Emily Krekelberg, who is an extension educator with farm safety and health at the University of Minnesota. She is dedicated to supporting farmers through education, networking, and communication, and she's been with the university for about 9 and a half years. A variety of positions ranging from being an extension educator within the livestock production systems within Stearns, Benton, and Morris County.

Emily Reno: And her concentration there was primarily dairy production with beef work as well. She worked with education and outreach to area farmers, including offering workshops and tours, evaluation and consultation work, serving on local agricultural committees, and communications work, including articles, radio, and social media. Previously, Emily served as the director of the farm of the rural stress task force, which worked to provide streamlined access to educational programs and resources related to stress and mental health issues in rural Minnesota. And as a fellow podcaster, Emily cohosts a show called The Moo's Room, which is a cattle focused podcast discussing relevant topics to help Minnesota beef and dairy producers be more successful. If it wasn't apparent from the introduction, I'm currently in the presence of someone who's clearly very passionate about dairy

farming, livestock production, farm safety, and health, and mental health. So welcome, Emily thank you for being.

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Emily Krekelberg**:** Thank you so much for having me. I you made me sound very impressive about it. You know, sometimes a little surreal to hear, you know, people kind of say back to you the things you've done. And, yeah, 9 and a half years. It doesn't feel like it's been that long, but it's exciting how much I've been able to do in that period of time and I'm really excited to be on your podcast here with you today.

Emily Reno: Most definitely. Yeah. And I think this, you know, time flies when you're having fun. So that's good.

Emily Krekelberg: Yeah. Absolutely. s off by.

Emily Reno: I wanted to kick thing just asking a little bit about your experience in agriculture and maybe what your personal connection is to the industry.

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Emily Krekelberg: Yeah. Absolutely. So I grew up on a dairy farm in Southern Minnesota. So have been in farming and agriculture my entire life. And, yeah, that path led me to the University of Minnesota where I majored in animal science and was convinced that I was gonna be a ruminant nutritionist. So and design diet for dairy cattle and then I took a ruminant nutrition class and was like, well, I don't think this is the path I actually wanna go down. It was not a great match for my skills. It involved a lot of math, which is not not a strength of mine. And yeah. So through that time, was really involved on campus with various organizations and still helping on my family's farm as well. And then I interned for Ascension the summer before before my senior year, and that was kind of it for me. I I just knew I had found, you know, what I called at the time my dream job, and now I'm in my new dream job in extension as well, which is so exciting. But yeah. And so, you know, my experience in agriculture is very firsthand and is very personal, and I'm really, really fortunate that I get to say that. That you know, I interned for Ascension and just realized it was some place where I could really utilize my strength, which were, you know, I have people skills.

Emily Krekelberg**:** I like people. And as much as I love cows too, I'm much better at working with people. And so this was an opportunity to do that, to be on farms and still see cows, but work with farmers and work in something I'm really passionate about, which is education. And I know, Emily, that's something you and I have bonded over quite a bit, you know, talking about being lifelong learners and how important that is to always be wanting to learn more and to have a curious mind. And so yeah a lot of that for me has come from my experience in agriculture and and come from, you know, personal experiences with extension as well growing up in 4 h and and some of those other programs too.

Emily Reno: I've heard so many things about people that work in extension that it's just it's such a good fit for them. I think there's so many different arms of the university system, and I'm gonna hear a lot too about people within the regional sustainable development partnerships. It's just, like, a really interesting and cool sort of subcommunity of of the university. So that's really exciting and I think that, you know, for people who are kind of looking to supplement sort of their farm work too because this is something I think of a lot about in terms of our listeners. You know, a lot of these people are those who

are trying to balance their on farm work versus off farm income. And I think extension, you find a lot of people that are within that system that are both extension employees and farmers. So pro tip for anybody listening that that could be an opportunity for you to figure out, you know, how do your finances work. But

Emily Krekelberg: Yeah. Absolutely. You are right. I can think of, you know, a dozen colleagues off the top of my head that, yes, are extension educators and also run successful farming operations.

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Emily Reno: Exactly. Yeah. So would love to know a little bit more about could you describe maybe more of the position that you have right now with the extension, and maybe what was the trajectory from when you started to what you are doing now?

Emily Krekelberg: Yeah. Well, buckle up this height. This could get long. I'll try to give the abridged version here. But yeah. So the position I have now is I am the extension educator for farm safety and health. So I took on this role in April of 20 20, which was a very interesting time to take on a brand new job role, and it was truly brand new. I am the first full time pharmacy person at the university since thousand 8. So it was, you know, this beautiful clean slate for me to really build flagship programs that I believe in and to build these projects that are really gonna help keep Minnesota farmers safe and help, but, you know, of course, not without its challenges. Again, April 20 20, a difficult time for many of us. But yeah. And so this role, like I said, it's specifically farm safety and health. And like I said, I've really been able to use this position to pursue, you know, my own passion related to these topics and also a lot of the emerging issues that we've seen the past few years, including things around mental health and suicide prevention and agriculture.

Emily Krekelberg: And, you know, along with that, so I do a lot of work on the mental health and wellness side. But, of course, safety is a huge part of my work as well, and it's so intertwined with wellness and health as well. So it's a really great pairing of these 2 topics, at least for me personally, because I love being able to weave them together any way that I can. But yeah. So I do a lot of the traditional farm safety things too, like, safety training, grain bin safety, livestock safety, all of those topics and so in my work, I do serve the entire state of Minnesota. So I get to travel around this big beautiful state a lot, which I love. And, yeah, I do things related education, providing workshops and courses for farmers and for farm professionals as well. So especially on the mental health side, we do a lot of training with people who work with farmers as well, just kind of when they're in that frontline role, being able to figure out how they can provide support for people as well. I also get to work on applied research, which is really, really cool.

Emily Krekelberg: And, you know, lots of research projects I'm working on right now, and I think we'll get into some of those a little later too. But, yeah, I guess the biggest piece I haven't been getting to here, but that I love to share because I, you know, I wouldn't be here without this portion of my life. So, really, my trajectory to the position I'm in today started when I was a kid growing up on the farm. Something about my family that made us a little unique among the farmers in our area was my dad only had 1 leg. When my dad was 19 years old, he lost his leg in a farming accident. His leg got caught in a piece of equipment with an auger. So my entire life, I only knew my dad with 1 leg. But I also knew my dad as, you know, this really hard working man. He was a full time dairy farmer. He also worked part time as

an occupational therapist, an interest that kind of grew for him out of his time in therapy after he lost his leg.

Emily Krekelber: And so he just set this really great example of, you know, first of all, not not letting the challenges in your life hold you back from your true passion. But, also, you know, he was a daily, very visual reminder of the dangers of farming. And so farm safety was something that was always important on our farm and was something that always would be interested. And, yeah, so that was something that I always took with me even when I first started in Accentan over 9 years ago. Yes. My emphasis areas were dairy and beef, but I also included farm safety. You know, we talked about safe cattle handling at my programs and, you know, when the mental health crisis in agriculture really came to a front, you know, I was offering programs to dairy farmers about managing their stress and and, you know, what it means to be farming when times are tough. And so, yeah, a lot of that really came from, you know, my dad and growing up with him. And then somewhat unfortunately, it got renewed in 20 16. In October of 20 16, so just about a few years ago to the date here, my brother had an accident.

Emily Krekelberg: He worked at a tea plant, so this was an agricultural, you know, processing accident. He lost his arm in a piece of equipment with an auger. So very, very similar to what my dad had gone through. You know, the key difference here is I was alive for this 1 and, you know, witnessed the aftermath and saw my brother in the hospital and, you know, saw him cry with his wife. And, you know, I saw what really happened and the thing that really sticks with me the most is the phone call I got from my mom to tell me what had happened. And that was something that just gave me this renewed sense of urgency in talking about the topic. And now whenever I do, I always tell people, you know, my goal is that none of you get that phone call because, you know, that is 1 of those moments in my life that will just be burned into my memory forever. And it is such a horrible, helpless feeling. And so, yeah, that's why, you know, I tell people, like, you never think it's gonna happen to you or to anybody in your family.

Emily Krekelberg: Then you get that phone call, and it all changes. So, yeah, I'm really fortunate that I get to use my personal life to fuel my professional work. I'm really fortunate that my family allows me to let the farmers I work with into our family's darkest days and hope that it will, you know, ignite something in them to to do something differently to make a change that will, you know, make them healthier and and make their farm a little bit safer too. So a very long winded answer, but I just I like to give full justice to the story because I wouldn't be where I am today without my family, for better or for worse.

Emily Reno: Yes. Yeah. I really appreciate that. Right. Yeah. I appreciate you sharing that because I think there's a lot of people that this story and the work that you do, and I think it has this whole other level of importance because of that.

And I think there's a lot of people that couldn't fully appreciate him unless you had shared that, so thank you. I'm really sorry to hear about your brother.

Emily Krekelberg**:** Thank you. He's doing fine now. He now our we have a 1 legged farmer and a 1 armed farmer, and together, they make it work. So.

Emily Reno: Yeah. On that front, and this is me coming from a place of not having done much research. But I know that 1 of the, you know, target audience is people that I'm hoping to serve are farmers that might have some kind of, uh, maybe mental or physical disability of some kind. And I'd be curious to

know within maybe some of the work that you've done with within the university system or even just personally things that you've had to navigate in terms of resources that help you get through that time or figure out, you know, who can help pay for these medical bills or suddenly now we have things that we need to help someone get around or do day to day activities that we maybe hadn't budgeted for anything like that. What have you found has been the most helpful of the resources that are out there for people?

Emily Krekelberg: Yeah. You know, I will say the Department of Agriculture does have, uh, a lot of resources and tools available for farmers, especially, you know, you mentioned on the mental health side, specifically. In the state, we do have 2 counselors that are available to farmers. No cost. No paperwork. You call them directly. Legislator. We are the only state in the nation that has something like that, and we are so fortunate too. So that is a resource that I refer people to quite a bit. And some of them, not all, but some have come back and told me that, yeah, you know, I did call them, and I was really able to get the help I needed. And I'm feeling so much better now. You know? So that is a tool that I know is so useful and helpful for so many in the state. And then when we're thinking more on the side of physical injury and those types of things, there is a nationwide program called AgrAbility, and the entire purpose of that program is to help keep farmers farming and keep farming accessible to everyone. So that is an organization that can provide plans and help people figure out how to, you know, adapt tractors and other farm equipment to accommodate wheelchairs or missing limbs and and other pieces like that as well.So those are 2 resources that I think are really, really great for farmers, especially when they find themselves in not so great circumstances.

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Emily Reno: Yeah. Yeah. And we'll make sure to throw those in the show notes too for folks so that they can circle back on those if they're interested in looking into them. Yeah. I'd be curious to know. And I know your position was created, so this would have been, like, right as things were beginning with the pandemic with this focus on the farm safety mental health work. But I'd be curious to know, and maybe you don't have the background information on this, but why the university suddenly decide that this is something worth investing in?

Emily Krekelberg: You know, I can't speak for the higher ups in the organization that make the decisions that they do. You know? I just know that for me, I was doing my work. And as you mentioned, I had previously been serving as director of the rural draft task force, and I started that role in April of 20 ninth, so a year before this new role. And so I do feel that part of it was just born out of the work of the rural stress task force and, you know, workforce task force. Task forces are really assigned to look at something and figure out what the issue is and provide some solutions. But then, you know, you need somebody that can implement those solutions. And so I do think part of that was born out of this. You know, I do also know that they had been wanting to kinda bring this position back for quite some time. And, you know, again, I can't speak for everything that happens at the university level with money and all of that, but it seems like the timing just kinda worked out right. And because of some of the really emergent needs among farmers in the state, you know, the university was in a position where, yeah, they were ready to kind of throw more resources at this and get more on that out, you know, and I'm so grateful for that. You know, I had always said, you know, I've mentioned my dream job And when I was an intern and then graduated and got my job in the counties doing dairy work, I said that was my dream job.And but I'm a firm believer that, you know, our dreams grow as we do. And so then my next dream

was to be a pharmacy educator for Ascension. And, you know, some people would say, well, Emily, that job doesn't exist. But now it does. And that's really, really cool.

Emily Krekelberg: You know? That is another dream come true. Truly, as dorky as that sounds, that's how I feel. So yeah. I think it just really was a combination of a lot of things that came together, and it was kind of a right place, right time situation as well for me. But I'm so grateful for that. So

Emily Reno: Yeah. And I'd be interested to know if it's part of that task force. I mean, I've looked at some stats regarding sort of suicide rates, right, within the farming community. But what kinds of information were you dealing with as that task force?

And was there anything that, like, stood out to you in terms of statistics or information or just, like, the impetus behind trying to address mental health?

Emily Krekelberg**:** Yeah. I mean, a big piece of that and a data point that, you know, we we use and that I use in my work as well, if you look at the, uh, rates of death by suicide in the state of Minnesota, and if you split out the 7 county metro and then greater Minnesota, so the other 80 counties in the state. Greater Minnesota has a higher suicide rate than the 7 county metro, which most people are usually surprised by, you know, for for a few reasons, the cheap 1 being that, you know, the 7 county metro holds a majority of the population in this state. But it does really shine a light on how, you know, this happens much much more often in rural areas, and why is that? You know? Is it just a coincidence, or what are the risk factors that we're missing? So that was really, you know, kind of, like you said, what was the impetus for this and kind of our charge as a task force was, you know, looking more into, you

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Emily Krekelberg: know, what are these risk factors that are making rural Minnesota, you know, a more a more deadly place when it comes to suicide versus the metro. So yeah. And so we were able to kinda use that to guide us and, you know, look into resource availability. That was a really big 1. You know? There's is more access to mental health care and hospitals with psychiatric units in the 7 county metro than there are in Greater Minnesota. So, yeah, some of those kind of environmental pieces were what we looked at and kind of, you know, what we wanted to look more deeply into. And then, of course, too, just going out and meeting with farmers and figuring out and and also with our rural communities. You know? This project wasn't just about farmers, uh, but all rural Minnesotans. And so we were in rural Minnesota and doing listening sessions and talking to county commissioners and, you know, finding where extension can fit among all of the other great organizations in our state. You know, every organization provides a specific set of services. And, you know, we had to remind ourselves many times that, you know, we cannot be everything to everyone.

Emily Krekelberg: We need to be really, really good at what we're good at, and then let the others who are really, really good at other things do their thing. So, yeah, really focused on what we can do from an education and an output standpoint on this. So even just sharing resources from other organizations that maybe aren't as integrated into the community. So, you know, serving as a conduit for that, making those connections. And then and especially, you know, obviously, when when the pandemic really started in earnest in, you know, about March of 20 20, you know, our group was already in place, and we were able to really quickly shift our work to the specific stressors that COVID brought.So we were working on things like making 2 week meal plans that, you know, were were meals you can make on a

really low budget and, you know, spending tips and and adjustments you can make when you have suddenly reduced income. So tackling some of those issues as well, which, you know, of course, we know is always important. It was really important in early 20 20. You know? So, yeah, that's you know, our group, we were put in a really unique position, I think, in that less than a year after our inception, this whole new thing came up.

Emily Krekelberg: And I feel like in a way, we kind of then became, like, the rural COVID 19 response team as well. But and that wasn't a bad thing, though. I mean, I think that's something I always love to share about extension is, you know, we really are an organization that tries to be nimble. We try to adapt really quickly to the changing circumstances around us. And I think that was a really great example of that is this is a team that, you know, we were established. We kind of had projects we were working on. But then when this came up, we were able to roll over what we were doing into that, you know, and some of our work was really applicable here. And, you know, that was just such a useful thing. I mean, I don't think anybody would have thought when the group started in 20 19 that that's what we'd be doing,

but it was. And that was, also on a personal note, I think really helpful for me because, you know, when the world shut down and we were all at home, it was really easy to feel helpless. And so it was really great to have that to be like, we are doing something. We are getting these resources out to people. We are creating, you know, new resources and informational tools for people. So that was really nice for me. It gave me a lot of meaning during what was a very difficult time, you know, for everyone. So yeah.

Emily Reno: Yeah. I'm really interested to hear more about risk factors. Like, what's placing these communities in a higher likelihood to have those higher rates? It's just like because I have some thoughts about it, but I wanna hear from you first and then and then I'll jump in and add my thoughts. Because this is a really big thing, and I'm even just reading I'm reading right now. The body keeps the score, and it's really fascinating. 1 of the research topics is related to this in particular, actually.

Emily Krekelberg: Yeah. So, you know, when we really look at this from, you know, like, the 40000 foot level based on research and clinical things, you know, some of the facts that we know for sure. In the United States, the highest risk group for suicide is middle aged white men. And so we also know that a large proportion of farmers in the US are middle aged white men. So just, you know, right there, just the population itself is a part of the larger population that is at the higher risk. And then, you know, some other and there hasn't been a ton of research done on specific risk factors in farming. The main 1 I use and now I can't think of the authors, but it was published in 2008. But, you know, and just gets that also some of the really unique stresses in farming that can increase risk factors, chief among them being the physical and mental demands of the work. You know, we know physically if we don't feel good, mentally, it's hard to feel good and vice versa. And so and that's like I said, that's been mentioned in some research. I wouldn't call it hard fact right now. It's a little bit more Emily's ideas.

Emily Krekelberg: But, you know, that's a really big 1. And then, you know, other things that can, you know, increase risk as well, you know, substance misuse. And this is where we can tie into the opioid crisis, which, you know, has rocked farm country just as much as as many other areas in the state and the country as well. And so when we're dealing with substance misuse, that is also, you know, increases in individual's risk for, you know, suicidal ideation or even an attempt. So that's 1 and, of course and and this is 1 I always get a little nervous talking about, but, you know, Minnesota has a really strong culture

around drinking. And I don't necessarily think that that's always a horrible, horrible thing, but I think it makes it very, very hard for people who do struggle with their alcohol consumption, you know. And, yeah, I've seen some things, you know, Emily. I have been to, you know, farms where I'm there in the middle of the day and the farmer's walking around with a beer in their hand. And, you know, so that's a really real part of this as well is that substance use. And, of course, that applies to other groups as well, but it's something that we have to mention with this.

Emily Reno: That's really interesting because even when I was asking that question, I was actually thinking it from the perspective of this, like, structural level. But you went right down to, like, the individual level, and I think that I mean, that hadn't even occurred to me. But I would be curious to know before I jump in too with my thoughts on this. Was there anything at the community level that you also saw as risk factors, or was that not really part of the work that you had been doing with that task force?

Emily Krekelberg: Yeah. I mean, I don't know if this, you know, really falls under the category of risk factors, but, of course, we know stigma and taboo are huge influencers socially in our world. And so, you know, that is a a big 1 that really came up a lot too is people just not seeking help because they are just, you know, too embarrassed or too proud or, you know, scared and you know, because because farmers are are really trained to be self reliant and self sustainable, and, you know, they are depended on by others. And so it can be hard for them to need to depend on someone else. So, yeah, again, not not sure that's really a risk factor, but, you know, those attitudes also play a role. And I think, yeah, that attitude of there's something wrong with me if I feel this way, and I'm better off not telling anybody about it, which we know is the opposite of what you should do. But yeah. But I'm curious to know what your thoughts are on this too. I'm sure there's things I didn't think of that you have ideas.

Emily Reno: Oh my gosh. Yes. I mean, so interesting because I so for those of you who are listening that maybe haven't introduced this background of what, you know, my studies have been, I am professionally trained in urban and regional planning, so I'm often thinking about at the physical, like, community built environment level, What are the things that have to be in place in order for people to do well in a community? And by do well, I mean, like, you know, live a fulfilling life and maybe we have access to all the services that they need. But then I also think about and this is related to the this research study in the book that I'm reading is that they talked about sort of the number 1 factor that allowed people to move through sort of processing childhood dramas was their social connection. And this is something that when you were talking about risk factors and, like, population size, right, versus in the Twin Cities, versus in Greater Minnesota, the first thing that came to my mind was how far the distance, literally the physical distance between people in rural places. You know, my closest friends, they live 15 minute drive down the highway. Right? It's not the neighbor that I get to walk across the street to. I have friends that are, you know, 30, 40 minutes in any given direction. And the convenience factor around socializing for me living in, you know, a town of 350 people, very different. Something that was coming to mind for me is thinking about what about the population size of the nearest community?

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Emily Reno: And the thing that's coming to my mind is that within rural communities, we have such a diversity of the size of even the town. So what is it like to be a farmer with the where the closest nearest town is 2500 people versus 10000? And how do the resources that are available through those communities also impact what you're talking about, the stigma? Right? And some of these bigger

towns, 10, 12, 15000 people, you just find so many different dynamics around the types of businesses that are there, the social environment. Oftentimes, like, the ethnic diversity looks different in those small cities, towns, whatever you wanna call them, than some of these, like, really tiny places. And I have a feeling that those could be linked together. And I think also worth mentioning is, you know, when you're talking about Sigma and Taboo, having this conversation the other day with folks about, you know, the ability to use some of the social services that are provided in 1 of these small communities out in our region. Because we have a large Somali population,

Emily Reno: just using the services and almost, like, outing yourself that you would be using these substances. And that would basically, like, have you being shunned by your community, sort of excluded. So you're not even able to come to these places for help because that is all automatically a red flag to the rest of your community that, oh, maybe I was doing something that's against our cultural norms. But I think the biggest 1 that comes to mind for me is just that social connection factor and how is it that having those support networks can get you through tough times mentally, emotionally, physically? And how is it this will be my big question. How is it that we ditch those things back together for people in rural places so that they do have that support and people who can't imagine themselves living out here suddenly can.

Emily Krekelberg: Yeah. I think those you know, all of those are such great points you made, Emily, and I agree. And, yeah, some of them, I'm like, oh, yeah. I could've said that. You know? And especially on the social connection piece. You know? That's another 1 of those kind of unique stressors that we assign to farming is just this isolation factor. You know, as I've already mentioned, farming is long hours. It's physically and mentally demanding, and you do most of it by yourself. And I I know that with some people who are not involved in farming, they're a little surprised to hear that, you know, because the American Family Farm, we talk all about that, you know, and I believe it's 97 percent of farms in the US are still family owned and operated. But just because, yeah, you work with your family every day, it's not like you're all in an office together. You know? You don't have your brother and your dad and your cousin in cubicles right around you. So, yeah, you may work with a lot of people in theory, but everybody on the farm is doing their own task. And so the work is usually very isolating.

Emily Krekelberg: And, you know, and I've just seen from my lived experience too, right, is during harvest or during planting when it's really busy, you know, perhaps those people you would turn to for sport, such as a spouse or partner or even spending time with your kids, you know, they're asleep. They're already in bed. And then you're up before them and out the door before them. So you are kind of in this accidental isolation a little bit. Then as stressors and other things start to take a hold, you just wanna continue to isolate, you know, which is such such an unfortunate flaw with our brains that we just feel the need, that we don't wanna burden other people with what we're going through.

Emily Krekelberg: You know? But, yeah, that is such a huge pivot, you know, being able to have those connections and even connections and social activity outside of the household too. Right? So being involved in your community, you know, volunteering with local groups, whether that's, you know, community organizations or your faith based community, anything like that. You know, all of that plays a really big role and, you know, you're absolutely right, Emily, that in, you know, these these towns and cities of varying sizes, we also get varying levels of community engagement activities and just general community building. You know? And, yeah, a lot of it is dependent on size, but a lot of it too is dependent on the community. You know? I'm in Southeast Minnesota, and there are some small towns down here

where, I mean, they have bustling local theaters and, you know, bring in nationally touring musicians and Mhmm. Are just doing a lot of things to really enrich their community.

Emily Krekelberg: I mean, while, you know, a town 10 miles away that's 3 times as big doesn't have any of that. You know? And so it is so, so variable, you know, from community to community. But, yes, you know, we know typically in our more metropolitan areas, our urban areas, there is usually just more and because there are more people and more money and more resources there. But, yeah, you know, some of our small towns, they really push through to provide a lot and, unfortunately, in some communities, they just don't have those opportunities.

Emily Reno: Yeah. I think you make a really good point. And for anybody, you know, any of our listeners that are sort of in that space thinking about, yeah, what are we doing to enrich our community and what more can be done is just a good question to be asking ourselves always think.

Emily Krekelberg: Yeah. Absolutely.

Emily Reno: 1 of the things that I wanted to touch on was this concept of ambiguous loss. I know that this is a focus area, um, area, um, that you're working in right now. I have a feeling that most people listening have never heard this term before. So could you first explain what that is and then maybe what are the sort of programs or services that you're building out around that topic?

Emily Krekelberg: Yeah. Yeah. You know, and you are absolutely right. Whenever I tell somebody for the first time, oh, I work in ambiguous loss in farming. And they'll go, what's that? You know? And then I start to explain it, and I go, right now, you're probably thinking of some ambiguous losses you've experienced, and you never knew that's what it was. And now you have a word for it. So ambiguous loss in its simplest definition, frustratingly simple because it doesn't explain much, it is a loss that lacks clarity. And so what that means kind of in the big scale when we look at, you know, things like grief and loss, you know, on a psychological level. Typically, when we experience a loss, it is a clear loss. And, you know, the easiest clear loss would be the death of someone in your life. Right? That's a very clear loss. I would even say, you know, things like if your house burns down, that's a very clear loss.

Emily Krekelberg: And what makes those losses clear is because both physically and psychologically, that thing is gone. So what I mean by that, because sometimes people, you know, get confused by well, psychologically, like, if someone I love dies, like, I still think about them all the time and still carry them with me. And and, yes, and I get that, but you also know that they are gone. Right? You know they're not gonna come back. So there is that psychological loss there, not in the sense in that you completely forget about them, but your brain knows that they are gone. Right? And obviously, physically, they're no longer around in your life. So clear loss has both a a physical and psychological loss tied to it. In ambiguous loss, there is a discongruence between the 2. So, basically, what that means is you have maybe physically lost something, but psychologically, you still hang on to it. It's not gone in your brain. Mhmm. You know, your brain hasn't signed it off. It's gone.

Emily Krekelberg: Or vice versa, there is physically something that is still present, but psychologically, you know, you no longer have a relationship to that thing or that person. So and I I know it still sounds a little murky. I'm gonna share some examples that will hopefully help. The most common example of ambiguous loss, well, kinda 2 most common, and these are really the ones that ambiguous loss theory kind of came out of and and, you know, was used to explain these things by so doctor Pauline Boff,

professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota, is really the pioneer of ambiguous loss theory. And she began to apply it to, for 1 example, families who have, you know, an aging parent with Alzheimer's. So that can be very stressful for the families we know. And it's stressful also because they are experiencing some grief, but it's from this ambiguous loss. So it's not totally clear what they're grieving because we know in an Alzheimer's situation, the person is physically still present. We can still go see them, hold their hands, whatever it may be. Psychologically, they're gone.

Emily Krekelberg: They're we no longer have that psychological connection we once had with them. So that is what makes that loss a little bit ambiguous because, again, there's that discongruence of, I can still see this thing. It's here, but there's just no connection to it anymore. And then, you know, on the other side, another example, you know, these are kind of dark examples, but another 1 would be like a missing child. Right? And so in that situation, you have a physical loss. You don't know where your child is. They're not in their bed at home at night. But psychologically, you know, you have to hope that they're still alive. And, you know, and and I think we've seen it all on the news. A lot of parents that have missing children, that is what they say. You know? My child is still alive. And that is, you know, not a wrong way to think about it, but that is an ambiguous loss. And so you still are gonna have some grief from that Because again, physically, this thing is gone.

Emily Krekelberg: It's missing. But because you still want it to be around and are still hoping it's around, you can't grieve it as a full clear loss. So those, you know, those are some really kind of severe high level examples, but ambiguous loss shows up in in smaller ways as well. And a really great example of that actually was COVID. You know, we suffered ambiguous losses left, right, and center. You know, some examples I like to give, especially, you know, parents who were perhaps struggling with their teens. Teenagers went through a lot of ambiguous loss. Like, it may sound silly, but not having a prom, not having a graduation, those were all ambiguous losses, you know, things that physically they no longer could go to or have, but psychologically, you know, they have waited their whole lives for these types of things. But, anyway, so like I was saying so, yeah, those pieces too, you know, were losses. And so, again, I also tell people, think about times in your life or even times right now where you just feel really stuck.

Emily Krekelberg: More often than not, that stuck feeling is coming from grief that you aren't letting yourself feel because you probably don't realize that that's what it is. Because if your loss is ambiguous, you didn't know you had it. So ambiguous loss is is kind of complicated to explain, and I've been working on in this topic for 3 years, you know, and I still haven't found, you know, the perfect way to describe it to people. But, you know, in the end, what it is, if it is a loss that is more often than not not recognized as a full loss. And, again, it has that discongruent. So you either physically still have something but are no longer psychologically connected to it or are psychologically still very connected to something even though physically it's absent. So, you know, again, I gave some examples around aging parents and missing children, but this theory also applies really directly to farming. Farming is wrought with ambiguous loss. So the work that we've been doing is really around, yeah, ambiguous loss and farming. And I mentioned doctor Pauline Boss, who is kind of credited as a pioneer of this theory.

Emily Krekelberg: She's wrote many, many books on it. And in 19 99, 2000, she released a booklet about ambiguous loss and harmony called Losing a Way of Life. And it was written as a workbook and had discussion ideas for families and was really meant to be a tool. And so that book was uncovered in, you know, the some filing cabinet in at extension on campus, and it made its way to me. And I was so excited about it and was like, we have to update this.

Emily Krekelberg: You know? Again, it was originally written in 2000, so thing things had changed in 20 years. But yeah. So we, I should say, myself and then my coauthor, Jennifer McGuire. So we got the blessing from Pauline Boss to work on this together, and we worked on it together because Jennifer comes from a family social science background and has worked with ambiguous loss theory related to LGBTQ youth. And then I, of course, come from an agricultural perspective and working in farm stress and working in farm health. So we kind of redooled this workbook and changed the name from losing a way of life to a changing way of life because we don't wanna look at ambiguous loss as this really negative bad thing that, you know, you'll never get over, that will destroy everything. You know? But it's gonna cause some change, and change, yes, can be uncomfortable. So, yeah, this book is really designed for farm families that may be, like I said, feeling stuck, experiencing, you know, what I call the the stress of grief and but it's kind of the silent stressor.

Emily Krekelberg: You maybe don't even realize it's grief that you're feeling. So we wrote this book, and it is a workbook. It's meant to be interactive for families to work with. But then, very fortunately, we were approached by some other people at the university working with the farm and ranch stress assistance network grant program through the USDA. And so we were able to also build a curriculum to go with this booklet as well. So, yes, it's a booklet that you can just hand to a farm family, and they can work on privately. But now what we're doing is we're actually training facilitators that will provide this program to farm families in more of a classroom type setting and really allow them to dig in deeper to the content and also have some guidance. You know? Of course, these topics are difficult, and I think the booklet is great. You know? Obviously, I wrote it, so I have to say that. But, you know, it is a tricky topic. And if it's something you're not familiar with and it's an uncomfortable topic anyways, it can be helpful to have some guidance as you go through it. So, you know, again, a very long winded answer, but that, you know, is a little bit about ambiguous loss and then what we are doing in extension with it right now, which is really trying to provide both resources and education on naming ambiguous loss and then confronting it. So both the booklet and this curriculum, the class especially, really talk about how, you know, in some cases with ambiguous loss, the grief will never really end.

Emily Krekelberg: You know? When we think of the death of a loved 1, we have the 5 stages of grief, and people think it's this really clean process that ends tied up with a bow. Grief really works like that and especially in case of ambiguous loss. And so we really focus on not hearing what the issue is, but really building resilience to be able to face it more easily and be able to continue with your life after you've experienced it as well. So I would say, you know, at its heart, this whole program, this whole booklet are really meant to help build resiliency in our family. So, yes, that's a little bit about the project. I could go on for days, but I think we'll leave it at that

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Emily Reno: I think that's great. And I think people would be curious to know. I mean, so it seems like you're gonna be working on training facilitators. As part of that process, will you be working with the facilitators to then be able to help them market of, like, okay. Here's upcoming classes that you could take through the people that we've trained. Like, have you thought through that part at all? Or

Emily Krekelberg: Yeah. So yes. You know, facilitators will be able to, you know, schedule and set up workshops in their local areas. And then, yes, the idea is that they will send their dates and locations to us so we can advertise them and have them on our website so people can find them. So, yeah, that's you

know? And, again, this is a fresh project. We're obviously just kind of getting into launching it and training our facilitators. So it's a really exciting time, but, yeah, there are also those pieces that we're still figuring out as we go. But, yes, the big piece right now is looking, you know, doing trained facilitators and people who, you know, work with farm families and have a passion for helping them. That's really who we're looking for. So that's what I tell people, and they go, well, can I be a facilitator? And I'm like, do you work with farm families and you wanna help them? Then, yes. Those are the qualifiers.

Emily Reno: Yeah. And I really appreciate what you said about helping people build resilience because I think that's so much of sort my theory behind working with future farmers as well through my own courses. It's not about controlling the outcome or the environment around you. It's how do you build up the mental agility to be able to process what's happening and not feel you're, like, you're a victim to it Mhmm. And really taking responsibility for how you react to the things that are gonna happen in your life inevitably, right, that aren't gonna be so enjoyable. Yeah. And that takes time. Right? That's a process. It is a lifelong process. I know I've certainly got a lot more work to do on that front. Yeah. But I think yeah. It's a muscle. You know? You strengthen it over time, and I think there's so many amazing people out there that are doing a lot of research and work to make it easier to learn what are those particular habits, practices, tools, things you can have in your back pocket to be like, yes. This is what I can do on a daily, weekly, monthly basis in order to help strengthen that muscle so that the next time that something really awful happens, it's not gonna completely tear me.

Emily Krekelberg: And I tell people that, for me, I think resilience really starts with mindfulness. And I think that's, uh, you know, I like to tell people to start there. Like, you know, you don't you don't need to do anything subtle right now, but just be more mindful, more self aware. You know? I call it throughout the day, I do gut checks where I just stop and I go, okay. What am I feeling right now? And also checking in, like, you know, with my biofeedback. Like, do I feel warm? Do I feel like I have a stomachache or a headache? Is my heart beating faster?

Emily Krekelberg: Is my breathing different? And, yeah, just that is such a great first step to bring you into resiliency because I think it really starts with being able to connect with yourself and being able to recognize these different feelings and thoughts within yourself. Right? And then you learn how to harness that and use it to build resiliency. But it really starts with that. It's just checking in with yourself and not ignoring what you're feeling throughout the day and really thinking about what is this tied to? Why might I feel this way?

Emily Reno: Yeah. I think that, like, there's a certain level of presence that is required in order to, yeah, even have the consciousness to see if there is something that's off. And, yeah, mindfulness is definitely the way inside. I think a lot of the people who are, you know, tuning into this are very much already on that boat and hopefully have some practices of their own. But and and I think that lends itself really well to thinking about, you know, within this course that I'll be offering starting in November called Aligned Farm Design. It's a new 6 week course. It's really geared towards future farmers. We're gonna be talking a lot about, you know, personal identity, human design, you know, looking at the neuroscience behind manifestation to really understand, like, what is this link between mindset, thought patterns, how is it possible to actually reshape your reality by retraining your thoughts. And so much of that process has to do with healing. And I think that when you talk about sort of ambiguous loss, right, where is that stemming from, what happened in order for you to lose something, I'd be

curious to know what do you think is missing and needed in terms of normalizing the conversations that we have around healing?

Emily Krekelberg: Yeah. You know, I think a lot of it just stems from, you know and I well, and when I work with so I do some work with rural youth as well through our 4 8 program on, you know, stress management.And, you know, we like to talk to them about, you know sorry. I just completely lost my train of thought. Let me even read your question here. Okay. Yes. So, you know, we talked to youth about, you know, feeling your feelings and learning to name your feelings. And I think that that is such a big thing and, you know, talking about ambiguous loss, and I was mentioning grief. And, you know, that's, like, a big thing. Like, just telling people that you know are experiencing grief, like, it's okay to cry, and it's okay to be mad and scream. And so I think, you know, that is such an important part of healing is allowing ourselves to really think about and recognize what we've been through, whether that is grief, whether that is trauma, whether that is some combination of those and other factors as well.

Emily Krekelberg: It's really allowing people to, you know, do the work to kind of dig in on what they've been through and, you know, letting themselves feel. It's it's easy, uh, but, you know, feeling is healing. That's what I think is such a big piece of this. And, you know, we've maybe heard before I forget who first coined it. Right?

Emily Krekelberg: But that is, you know, when something bad happens or somebody perhaps does something they shouldn't, instead of saying what did you do, you can say, what happened to you? You know? Or, like, what, like, what has been going on? Because, obviously, the things we do are very much influenced by the things we have done previously and by the thoughts that we have about ourselves and, you know, by the thoughts that others have about us too. And so, you know, it's so hard because I again, I wish there was just 1, like, perfect solution of how we could confront this issue. But, unfortunately, that's not how our world works. So, yeah, I think when we just think about feeling and talking about feeling, it's also about, you know, sharing that, and that's something that I really strive to do in my work. You know, I already mentioned I love to share personal stories, you know, not just about my family, but about myself. And I've had my own struggles with mental health and with mental illness and with self harm. And the thing that I do is I tell anybody and everybody that will listen about it.

Emily Krekelberg: And being able to just share that story and remind myself of what that was and how that felt and also how far I've come helps me to continue to heal. So I think a role that we can all play is sharing our story and also, in merging others, you know, when they share their story and acknowledging that their story is hard and painful and influence them. But what they're doing is so good and brave, you know. I think it really starts there.

Emily Reno:Yeah. And I think it ties back to sort of our earlier point about that social connection piece. Right? Like, do you feel that within your own personal network, you have others that you can trust to be able to share those feelings when something isn't going right or that you're in an environment where you can ask the other person freely and openly about how they're feeling and and know that they're going to be honest and transparent with you and how they respond. I think that's critical and a lot of it I mean, this will be something that I it's just sort of I harp on all the time. It's like, in order to change your external environment, you have to start with you. And I know that's been a super, super hard lesson for me to learn. It's like, I didn't start to feel like I had good personal relationships or friendships until I was

comfortable enough sharing with other people that I was human, that I had issues, that I wasn't okay, and that the stresses of my, you know, perfectionism were actually, like, not healthy.

Emily Krekelberg: Yeah.

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Emily Reno: And then it was like, okay. Once suddenly, Emily wasn't a superhuman anymore, and she had real frailties, and she, you know, was she had moments when she cried too. That suddenly it was okay to not be okay around Emily. And I think that that's really powerful and it's been a really hard lesson to learn, but just goes to show how powerful it can be. When you do just show up in all of who you are in all the messiness, I think we need more of that.

Emily Krekelberg: Yeah. Absolutely. And I think it's so important to reinforce that in yourself, which it sounds like you do. And I know very similar to you, something I will say to myself, you know, I'll be like, Wonder Woman needs a break too. Right? You know? And then and yeah. Now, you know, I kind of refer to myself as Wonder Woman and so I'm like, Wonder Woman needs a break. Like, Wonder Woman needs to drink some water. You know? Like, allowing ourselves like, you can still be that superhero to yourself and take good care of yourself. Like, there are space there's space for both, you know. Most definitely.

Emily Reno: Yeah. So okay. For people who are interested in learning more about maybe the programming that you do and they wanna find out more information, where would they go to either get into you directly or just find out more about some of these programmings and services? That

Emily Krekelberg: Yeah.So you can visit the extension website with which is extension dot u m n dot d u. and so there, you can find farm safety information. If you search for ambiguous loss, you can find more information about that workbook, the curriculum. And, uh, next week, we should have our next round of facilitator training posted on there as well. So if you're interested in that, check that out. If you would like to get a hold of me personally, you can email me at krek0033@umn.edu . You can also find me on Twitter atm underscore krekelberg. So that's m e m underscore krekelberg, and I will not spell out Krekelberg for you right now. I'm sure Emily will put that in the show notes. And please feel free to reach out and engage with me and and with our programming. I'm always happy to talk to more people and and find ways that I can expand what I'm doing to better help more people.

Emily Reno: Most definitely. Well, I'm so grateful for your time, Emily, and just all the work that you're doing. I know that there are so many farm families in the state of Minnesota that are benefiting from your work. So we're just really excited to have you here as a resource and, uh, very excited to continue to think about, you know, how we can support you in that work that you're doing.

Emily Krekelberg: Yeah. Well, thank you again so much for having me, Emily. And, you know, it's such an honor for me to speak to somebody that I admire so much. You're so inspiring with your spirit and your determination, you know, and there's power in being named Emily. I think that very firmly. So it's yeah. So it's such an honor for me to be able to be on and chat with you and talk about what I'm doing. And I'm so excited to see, you know, what you do in the future, what Nez Plata does in the future, and how I can be a part of it too. Awesome.

00:56:00

Emily Reno: Thank you.

Thanks for listening to another episode of the Transcendent Farmer podcast. If you love this conversation as much as we did, feel free to share the love by passing it along to a friend or fellow farmer, and be sure to subscribe so that you don't miss another episode. Until next time, friends.