DOWN ON THE FARM

Mental Health and Rural Families in the South

Things are tough for dairy farmers at the moment. That is not unusual, as business in the agricultural and horticultural sectors is cyclical. If dairy is down, venison, lamb and beef are likely to be up and vice versa. Rural challenges, whether from the economy, drought or other unforeseen elements, can weigh heavily on many minds. Stress and depression are often hidden problems not only for farmers and their partners or spouses but also their children.

While help is available, there can be a tendency to focus on the farmer more than other family members. The first *Down on the Farm* special feature was published in 2010. Today, thanks to support from the Frozen Funds Charitable Trust through a NZ Mental Health media grant, we return to the important topic of mental health and rural families in the South. In this four-page special feature, Southern Rural Life reporter YVONNE O’HARA looks at support options for farming families under stress. The message is clear: It is OK to ask for help.

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**Farmstrong Live Well**
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**Healthline**
0800 611-116

**The Mental Health Foundation**
info@mentalhealth.org.nz
www.mentalhealth.org.nz

**Lifeline**
0800 543-354

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**Schools alert to family issues**

Unusual behaviour at school is sometimes a result of problems and pressures at home.

Schools can be a haven for children. Teachers are often among the first to notice if a pupil has a problem at home.

When a farming parent is depressed, has mental health issues or is under stress, their children may be similarly worried, and their children will often sense the tension at home.

Trouble at home could often play out at school, Limehills School principal Jim Turrell said.

The school is in the middle of Southland dairy country and is expecting a roll of more than 180 children from 119 farming families in June.

Mr Turrell said his school’s eight teachers not only looked after their pupils’ educational requirements, but were often aware of wellbeing or welfare issues, including problems and pressures at home as a result of industry downturns.

Those pressures might be financial worries, which could include bank debt restructuring or repayment requirements, or the threat of unemployment, which might affect accommodation.

There might also be health concerns, marriage break-ups and domestic violence, all of which could affect the children.

While parents struggled with their own problems, their children were usually aware of what was happening, and might react to the tension, often through behaviour issues at school.

“Most teachers have a very good radar around kids’ behaviour,” Mr Turrell said.

Behavioural issues could range from not completing homework, to missing school, to formerly quiet children becoming loud, bullying or disruptive, or high-energy and involved children becoming quiet and withdrawn.

“We have seen children who don’t know which school they will be starting at, or even if their parents will have a job,” he said.

“We tend to be sensitive around that [the changes the pupils are going through] and our teachers are pretty well connected to the rural sector.

“They tend to cut them a little more slack.”

Mr Turrell said if the school became concerned about a particular child or family, it had access to extensive support services, including medical and counselling professionals, welfare and support agencies, community workers and mental health professionals, all of whom it could ask for help on the child’s and parents’ behalf.

The group would develop action plans to help both the child and the family.

The support network involvement was always with parental permission and was a strictly confidential.

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**WHAT TO WATCH FOR**

Children can be affected by issues at home, which can be displayed through unusual behaviour at school. These behaviours could include:

- Emotional, for example, anxiety or depression
- Behavioural, including aggression, disrupting class
- Poor school performance, truancy
- Physical, such as sleeping or medical problems

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**Take time to reach out**

A simple phone call or a visit with some baking can make all the difference for someone watching their husband or partner struggle with stress or depression. Rural Women New Zealand’s Margaret Pittaway says.

The RNZN national councillor for the lower South Island said she had seen how economic downturns, heavy snows, extensive drought and rural isolation could affect a farming family.

The time taken by neighbours, extended family or rural professional to reach out was important for women who saw their husbands or partners unhappy and worried as they worked long hours and wrestled with cutting costs and paying bills.

They might, themselves, be dealing with domestic violence, children in trouble at school, and their own anxieties.

“Women are often fully involved in the farm, as well as running the house, looking after the children and doing accounts, and are often forgotten about [when farmers face climatic or economic issues or events],” Mrs Pittaway said.

She had heard instances of domestic violence, either verbal or physical, which was hidden and secret, she said.

“We need to make people aware that it is a real problem.”

Fitness, family fun important

The need to invest in your own wellbeing is a key message for farmers and their families, Farmstrong project manager Gerard Vaughan says.

The Farmstrong programme, founded by FMG and the Mental Health Foundation, promoted keeping farmers and their families healthy through eating and sleeping properly, keeping physically fit and looking after their mental wellbeing, including spending time off the farm with the family, he said.

The programme had been running for nearly a year, holding its well-supported Farmstrong and Fit4Farmers walks, run and cycle challenges.

“The support for the challenge has been fantastic,” Mr Vaughan said.

The goal was collectively 4 million kilometres of physical activity by July 2.

Organisers would evaluate the programme’s success and analyse responses to surveys about mental wellbeing completed by participants. They would then work out Farmstrong’s programme for the next 18 months.

A key focus was promoting family time off the farm.

“There is always work to be done on the farm but it is also important to have good-quality family time.”
Working with the ‘invisible’ children
Helping the young deal with a parent’s mental illness

It is estimated 15% to 20% of urban and rural children in New Zealand live in families where at least one parent has a mental illness or addiction, Invercargill councillor Debbie Anderson says.

Research projects and literature reviews had indicated that of those children, more than 40% were likely to be at a higher risk of developing their own long-term, minor or major problems, Mrs Anderson, formerly of Children of Parents with Mental Illness or Addictions (COPMIA) in Southland, said.

Those children were considered “invisible” as they were often overlooked when the adults were receiving help from mental health/addiction services.

“The children can be considered ‘invisible’ as there are no statistics to show how many are affected by stress or in regard to mental illness in the home,” Mrs Anderson said.

The same research showed the children’s resiliency depended on the level of support they received from trained workers and extended family.

As a former COPMIA worker with Able Southern Family Support (originally Supporting Families Southland), Mrs Anderson had worked extensively with those “invisible” children.

She provided support programs designed to help children the tools to cope.

Although most of her clients were urban, some were from rural backgrounds, including farm families, and many had only one parent at home, she said.

Some farmers experienced stress, anxiety, addiction to alcohol or drugs, depression and other mental health issues, but there was a tendency for them to be stoic, deny they had problems or refuse to ask for help.

Because they loved them, the spouses, partners and children were also affected by the stress and worry.

Mrs Anderson said children would be referred to her or her colleagues from social support services, mental health workers, community agencies or schools.

There might be conflict within the family, a lack of money or transport, or access to services.

Children old enough might understand what their parents were going through and why. But younger children often made sense of a parent’s illness by taking responsibility or blaming themselves.

The parents might think that by keeping the facts from them, they were protecting the children, but that could lead to the children making up stories that were worse than the reality.

“They might think ‘I was naughty and it made her sick’ or ‘Mum is my responsibility’, or ‘Mum doesn’t love me as I am bad’, and they cannot understand that mum is dealing with her own issues,” Mrs Anderson said.

Often the first indication a child was struggling at home was behavioural issues, she said. They might bully or be bullied at school, they could become aggressive or destructive towards themselves or others, or they could withdraw and not connect with their environment.

Sometimes children took on the caregiver role to the ill parent or siblings.

After getting parental consent to help the children under 10, Mrs Anderson would work on building the children’s trust and confidence and to emphasise that whatever happened, “wasn’t their fault”.

She encouraged them to talk about what they had seen, and what worried them.

“I want to give them the tools to develop resilience.”

Mrs Anderson said she had seen some of the children she had worked with, who had been really hurt, go off to university and get on with their lives.

“There is some real strength in these kids.”

Causes of vulnerability many and varied

Counselling service deals with issues across the spectrum

Vulnerability takes many forms and comes from many backgrounds.

Struan Macdonald is a social worker and counsellor with Adventure Development in Invercargill.

His role is to help young people work through mental health difficulties or address substance-related problems.

Mr Macdonald said his clients, many of whom came from rural backgrounds, were generally aged from 14-24, with the 15-18 age group the most prevalent.

Many of the young people he saw professionally had underlying difficulties that had made them vulnerable to drug and alcohol issues.

“Vulnerability is the same irrespective of where you are urban or rural-based,” Mr Macdonald said.

Young people from families from across the social and economic spectrums could be affected, he said.

Sometimes there were pre-existing mental health difficulties, such as anxiety or depression, or issues in the family, such as parental separation or a parent having mental health difficulties.

Sometimes parents were missing substances and this could create real problems, too.

Issues could also be created by outside factors. For example, it was common to find an unexpected change in one parent’s behaviour, one parent in particular who had substance-related difficulties had

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But it was important not to forget people were very resilient and generally moved on in a positive way.

“Our referrals come from the Prohama Service, community workers, Child Youth and Family, the police, Youth Justice, and very often from parents who are concerned about their young people,” Mr Macdonald said.

“A lot of referrals come from schools.”

If a client was under 16, Mr Macdonald would involve the parents as much as possible to determine background and other issues, as well as explaining what the service was, confidentiality, the assessment process and anticipated outcomes.

For those over 16, confidentiality wishes were respected. He was encouraged parental involvement.

He would discuss goals and ambitions, and try to develop their decision-making, he said.

Counselling was tailored to the specific needs of the client.

“If there is a need to cut down or stop using drugs or alcohol, we develop a strategy to help them do that.”

“We use a harm-reduction approach and develop a relapse-prevention plan to help ensure that positive changes are sustained in the long term . . .

“About 80% or more will see some change through harm reduction or either decreasing or stopping substance use, and taking steps to reduce involvement with police, or by re-entering education or the workforce.”

Help at hand

All services are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week unless otherwise specified.

HELP FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Youthline 0800 376-633, free text 234 or email talk@youthline.co.nz

The lowdown www.thelowdown.co.nz team@thelowdown.co.nz free text 5626

What’s Up 0800 942-8767 (for 5-18 year olds).

Phone-counselling is available Monday to Friday, 1pm-10pm and weekends, 3pm-6pm.

Online chat is available 7pm-10pm daily.

Help Line 0800 54 37 45 (0800 kidsline) aimed at children up to 14 years of age, 4pm to 6pm weekdays.

HELP FOR PARENTS, FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Commonground A website hub providing parents, family, whanau and friends with access to information, tools and support to help a young person who is struggling.

Parent Help 0800 568-856

Family Services 211 Helpline 0800 211-211 for help finding (and direct transfer to) community-based health and social support services in your area.

Skylight 0800 256-100 (for support through trauma, loss and grief) 10am-9pm weekdays.

Supporting Families In Mental illness 0800 732-858 (for families and whanau supporting a loved one who has a mental illness).

DEPRESSION-SPECIFIC HELPLINES

Depression Helpline 0800 111-757 (to talk to a trained counsellor about how you are feeling or to ask any questions).

www.depression.org.nz

SPARX.org.nz Online e-therapy tool provided by the University of Auckland that helps young people learn skills to deal with being down, depressed or stressed.
Rural support a matter of trust

Confidentiality in dealing with farming families ‘of utmost importance’

Calls to the Southland Rural Support Trust have doubled in the past year, trust chairman John Kennedy, of John Winton, says. “We usually receive around 60 calls a year on average, but numbers had increased by one and a half to double what we normally get,” Mr Kennedy said.

He attributed the increase to a loss of economic times as well as a better education and recognition of stress-related issues. “There has been an upsurge in self-referrals (from farmers) as we have been pushing hard for people to recognise issues within their own families and with neighbours. However, in general it is the wives who will call us with concerns around farming families.”

More referrals were coming from rural professional as well, he said. In addition to the rural support trusts, there are lots of organisations able to assist farmers, including Beef and Lamb NZ, Federated Farmers, DairyNZ and Rural Women New Zealand.

Demand for support doubles in past year

What the signs & symptoms

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

- Persistent, sad or depressed mood — such as feeling empty, having no feelings, or feeling wistful
- Loss of interest and pleasure in usual activities — this includes loss of appetite
- Irritable mood — especially in younger people, and in men.
- Changes in sleeping patterns. Most commonly reduced sleep.
- Some people sleep too much.
- Most people feel a loss of energy and a feeling of being dragged down.

- Thoughts of worthlessness or guilt resulting in withdrawal and contact with others

- Difficulty thinking clearly — unable to concentrate on tasks such as reading the paper or watching television.
- Daytime sleeping difficulties.
- Thoughts of hopelessness and death. Some may feel there is no hope in life, wish they were dead or have thoughts of suicide.

If you or all of the above goes on for more than two or three weeks, seek help.

HOW DO I REDUCE FEELINGS OF DEPRESSION?

- Try to tell someone how you feel.
- Avoid situations that may contribute to depression.
- Physical activity can help.
- Eat a balanced diet with lots of fruit and vegetables.
- Avoid alcohol (a depressant) and illicit drugs — they may provide short-term relief, but will make you feel worse in the long run.
- Do something you enjoy.
- Check your stress — are you driving yourself too hard?
- Take a break — sleep out of your normal routine for a few days or a week.
- Use music, yoga or meditation to help keep you relaxed.
- Get enough sleep.
- Refer to resources online at: <www.depression.org.nz> and www.mentalhealth.org.nz

WHERE DO I GO TO GET HELP IF I AM DEPRESSED?

- If you think you are depressed, the best place to start is your doctor or health service. If you would like a check-up to see if there are physical problems or medicines causing your depression, your healthcare provider can help you get the treatment you need.
- Talk to anyone who can support you to find help for your depression such as friends or family whom, religious or spiritual support services or marae-based and culturally-based community support services.

GoodYarn workshops help to detect stress

Rural professionals are often in a position to spot if their farming clients, and their families, are struggling, depressed, anxious or under stress.

They need to know how to have the “Are you OK and how’s it going?” conversation.

Many organisations, such as DairyNZ, Federated Farmers, Beef and Lamb New Zealand, encourage staff who are in regular contact with farming clients to learn how to approach these people. They usually need a little bit of extra support, to tactfully

ask the right questions, and to point people in the direction of help.

GoodYarn workshops are designed to provide agribusiness professionals with the tools to do that, without breaking confidentiality, trust, business relationships and friendships.

Developed by WellSouth Primary Health Network’s health promotion specialist, Katie Jahke, in 2014, it was originally called “Rural Life, Keeping the Balance”. It is run for farmers and farming groups throughout Otago and Southland by Lindsay Wright, who is also the Southland Rural Support Trust co-ordinator.

“We started to get more and more inquiries from people in other parts of the country wanting to roll out the workshops in their areas,” Ms Jahke said.

Now it had developed into the GoodYarn frame, licensed to DairyNZ and other groups running the two-hour sessions in other regions.

GoodYarn is a workshop to help agribusiness professionals be aware of stress-related issues and how to initiate a conversation about the subject with the client. “We have got anecdotal evidence that the rural support trusts are receiving referrals as a result of workshops.” Ms Jahke said.

“The feedback has been really positive, really encouraging and we seem to be going in the right direction.”

Contacts

- Both the Otago and Southland rural support trusts can be contacted on 0800 277 295. The Trust co-ordinators: Tuike Hone 027 279 0240 or Pat Macaulay 027 201 9621. Southland co-ordinator: Lindsay Wright 027 222 3125.

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