

Rural issues - stress management

The pressures of financial hardship on people living in rural communities can bring stress, depression, relationship breakdown, increased use of alcohol, drugs and cigarettes, and increased risk of farm accidents. It is important to devise a stress management plan to help you and your family get through the difficult times. See your doctor or health professional for further information and advice.

Are you stressed? Some warning signs

Sometimes we don't realise how stressful life has become. Some of the warning signs that you may be under considerable stress include:

- Problems with concentration or memory
- Lack of energy and motivation
- Lack of interest in once-pleasurable activities, such as socialising or sex
- Sleeping problems, such as insomnia, early waking or oversleeping
- Changes in appetite, such as eating too little or too much
- Mood changes, such as irritability
- Physical problems such as constant headaches or stomach aches
- Heart palpitations and breathlessness
- Longer term general ill health.

Continued chronic stress can lead to depression. Some warning signs are:

- A constant feeling of sadness
- Feelings of guilt and hopelessness
- Persistent thoughts of suicide.

Take steps to avoid burn-out

Chronic stress causes 'burn-out', which is complete physical, emotional and mental exhaustion. Try to look after yourself because stress and depression hamper your ability to make rational decisions. Suggestions on how to avoid burn-out include:

- Develop a workable business plan - it's one of the best things you can do for yourself and your family. Stress is often caused by feeling out of control.
- Keep the lines of communication open. Talk with your family members about how you feel, and encourage them to do the same.
- Find out what relaxes you and do it on a regular basis. This could be meditation, sports, home renovations, crafts, reading or whatever happily distracts you from your pressures.
- Network with others in the community. Swap ideas on strategies.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Take time to exercise regularly. Being fit helps your body cope with the rigours of stress, while exercise allows your body to 'burn off' stress chemicals like adrenaline.

Ask for help

People in rural communities are generally proud of their self-sufficiency and independence, which can make it hard to ask for help. Suggestions include:

- If asking for help seems too hard, make a pact with yourself to help others when your situation improves.
- Remember that chronic stress isn't an agricultural problem, it's a health issue. Seek advice from your local doctor or health professional if you have any of the symptoms of chronic stress.
- Psychologists and psychiatrists aren't just for mentally ill people - these professionals can offer valuable advice on stress management.
- If you feel embarrassed about getting welfare support, Centrelink officers can sometimes make house calls.
- If you are experiencing hard times, your neighbours might be too. Sharing your experiences can help.
- Find out about the services in your local area. There may be more organisations willing to help than you realise.
- Charities such as the Salvation Army, Red Cross, the Smith Family and St Vincent de Paul offer food parcels and household items for families in need.
- Many government and community organisations offer seminars and forums. These can be opportunities to gather information and meet people who may be able to help you.

Relationship problems

During the hard times, rural communities and families tend to rally together and concentrate on survival. In many cases, relationship problems don't surface until the crisis is over. It may seem that the pressure of keeping the farm or business going is too much, or that the relationships have suffered from lack of time and attention. Many rural people are unable to access counselling services because of distance or the need to maintain privacy. Suggestions include:

- Try to make time for your relationships, even if it means simply sharing one meal as a family each day.
- Share your thoughts and feelings as honestly as you can. Encourage an environment where everyone feels comfortable and safe enough to say what they feel.
- Whenever possible, keep up your social life during the hard times.
- Some organisations have mobile counsellors that come out to you, such as the Salvation Army. However, these services are limited.
- Phone counselling is a cheap and confidential option.

Boost your resilience

People who cope best with hard times tend to have one trait in common: resilience. The characteristics of the resilient people include:

- High self-esteem.
- A positive outlook on life.
- Acceptance of those things that can't be changed.
- A flexible outlook, and the ability to change plans mid-stream.
- Honest and open communication with loved ones.
- The ability to 'switch off' worries and concerns.
- The philosophy that hard times are a valuable learning experience, rather than a punishment.
- The feeling that they have at least a degree of control over their lives.
- A sense of belonging to the wider community.

Where to get help

- Department of Primary Industries and Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), Customer Service Centre Tel. 136 186
- Victorian Bushfire Information Line Tel. 1800 240 667 (TTY for the deaf - 1800 122 969)
- Bush Support Line 24-hour service Tel. 1800 805 391
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- Australian Women in Agriculture Tel. (03) 5437 3274
- Commonwealth Regional Information Service Tel. 1800 026 222
- Rural Women's Network
- Farmsafe Australia Tel. (02) 6752 8210

- MoneyHelp Tel. 1800 149 689 Monday to Friday, 9.30 am to 5.00 pm — a free financial counselling and debt advice phone service for Victorians (includes interpreter services)

Things to remember

- Stress is often caused by feeling out of control, so it is important to devise a workable business plan.
- Eat a healthy diet and take time to exercise regularly.
- Seek advice from your local doctor or health professional if you are experiencing any of the symptoms of chronic stress.

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DHS - Emergency Management

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