

Getting ready for the harvest ride

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Many people reading this will be readying themselves for an extremely busy harvesting period where long hours will be worked mostly in isolation.

While this period will be demanding on the individual, it will also pose **challenges for the family and in some cases the community.**

The family will face periods of separation from each other. The community may suffer from a lack of involvement in sporting and civic activities.

To ensure everyone is best able to cope with this period, take some time to **prepare** yourself, your family, your mates and, if need be, your community.

In a way, personal preparation is the easiest. You know what to expect. You know the hours will be demanding, that there will be periods of sleep deprivation, that things will go wrong and that you will find stuff that wouldn't normally worry you to be highly annoying. Prepare yourself to deal with this. A technique you may find useful is to write down a description of your good days – what happens, how you feel, the joyful emotions you experience. In the coming challenging days occasionally read your described experience and remind yourself that once harvest is over, those joyful times will return.

In the really busy times it can feel like you are in a dark space and may never get out of it. You will, of course.

Train yourself to have 20-minute (no more) 'power' naps during your work day (as long as all the WHS issues are looked after and you are safe.) When things are particularly hectic quality sleep (six to eight hours) may be difficult to achieve, so have refresher 'naps' during the day. Tell your mates what you are doing so you aren't disturbed, find a good location, slow your breathing, empty your thoughts and relax. Put a timer on for the period of time you wish to sleep and doze off.

Refrain from overdoing the alcohol during this period. There is no need to totally refrain (unless you want to of course), just back off it while the pressure is on. If you don't already, have two or three alcohol-



HARVEST TIME BRINGS PRESSURE, STRESS AND HUGE WORKLOADS. PERSONAL PREPARATION AND GOOD COMMUNICATION IN THE LEAD-UP TO HARVEST AND DURING THIS HIGH-STRESS PERIOD WILL BENEFIT FARMERS AND WORKERS, THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES.

free days a week. (This should be part of your 'normal' routine anyway).

Drink plenty of water to keep yourself hydrated. You can calculate a benchmark for daily water consumption by multiplying your weight by three and dividing by 100, which will give you a volume in litres, but you may need to drink more than that during this hot, high-stress period. (You can monitor your hydration by checking the colour of your urine. The darker it is the more water you need to drink.)

Preparing the family is more challenging. Tell people what they can expect during the harvest period. Let the kids (especially the younger ones) know that one or both of their parents may not be available to do family things for this period of time. Tell them why, and more importantly make them feel proud of you both for what you are doing.

Plan how family matters such as sport and school will be handled. Consider involving neighbours with similar challenges in the solutions. Can child transport responsibilities, for example, be shared with neighbours? (Remember that what goes around comes around in these types of matters.)

Consider how you talk with your children. Don't create too much pressure on them to 'step up' and take on additional responsibilities. Children need to be children. They are highly adaptable as long as they feel safe and secure. Keep re-assuring them that once the busy period is over, things will return to routine

and you will be able to spend more time with them – and make sure you do.

Importantly, prepare the house so that when you do get some time at home you can catch up with some sleep. If there is an opportunity to sleep during the day but this is not your normal routine, inform other people in the house of the need to reduce noise, movement, etc. Be fair about this but it is all about looking after yourself so you can look after your family, your mates and your business.

During this time, particularly later in the harvest period, when the cumulative effects of the long hours and work load really start to kick in, tell people in the house how you are feeling and that these feelings are generated by the excessive work load and everything that comes with it, rather than getting cranky with them.

If things still get too much and you find yourself exploding at things that normally wouldn't affect you and are no one's 'fault', a personal touch, such as a cuddle or hug, and an apology is the best solution. Reassure people around you that it's not 'them' and for that matter that it's not you; it's just the situation and things will be resolved.

As the busy period winds down, plan a celebration with the family to acknowledge that you are over the hump, to thank people for their support and look forward to the future.

Inform your mates about your commitments and the pressures harvest

will impose and, during harvest, allow time to keep an eye on them to see they are OK. For those you are working with, work out and explain the expected workload, time lines and requirements. Plan as much as you can around the things you can control. Nothing causes more emotional concern than focusing on issues we can't control because that makes us start to feel we can't control anything, leading to periods of despair. Make sure the things that you can control are under control.

Keep up the communication during these periods of busy-ness. Maintain the pre and post-work 'tool box' discussions and use these times to observe and ask questions about how people are coping with the work and time demands. If you notice some change in behavior don't be afraid to say so. Ask the question 'how are you going?' and follow up with 'I am seeing this behaviour in you and that is not typically you. Is there anything I can do to help?' Expect denial initially – 'all good' is the common response but keep talking with people you are concerned about.

Don't label the behavior; just focus on what is happening. People can deny labels but they can't deny behavior.

If you work with contractors, remember that your legal obligations to them are just as strong as those to your own employees. Ensure that work place health and safety requirements, especially around the fatigue management issues, are addressed. If you think the burden of compliance takes away from your capacity to do 'real work', as is often suggested to me, think for a second about the disruption to your work capacity if there were an injury or something worse.

A great way to deal with this issue with your work mates is to consider how you would like to be treated during periods of high workload. Usually the answer I get back from people when I ask this question includes words such as respect, flexibility, give and take, and fairly. This feedback contains wisdom that can be applied in everyday life!

One last point about dealing with work-mates. As with family, have a celebration with the team after the peak has passed to celebrate the achievements and efforts. Consider the value of combining the family and work celebrations as a strategy to increase the culture of your community.

Please consider how you deal with your community during these busy periods.

The rural sector is characterised by people who get involved in community activities and do a fair amount of volunteer work on behalf of community members. It has also been described as the lost tribe because it 'goes missing' at certain times within the year. Manage this expectation.

During peak times such as harvest and seeding the professional responsibilities of farmers and other individuals mean the wider community loses their involvement and support. Have a conversation within the community about how this will be managed and what options are available during these periods. The good thing is that typically a percentage of the community is facing the same challenges, so there is a measure of understanding about the issues. Talk with people involved,

plan how to deal with the situation and, as suggested previously, have a celebration at the end of the peak pressure period.

It is to everyone's advantage to plan how to deal with these absences. A shared solution adds to community resilience and connectivity.

Common themes for all these groups – family, mates, employees and community – is the need to acknowledge, plan, communicate to share ideas and solutions, contribute, to give and accept help and the need to celebrate.

Good luck with it and enjoy the experience.

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