

Life is tough – deal with it

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We often hear that farming is tough. We hear that it suffers challenges from sources of nature, economics, weather, family. We hear of the rates of depression, anxiety and sadness and unfortunately of the consequences of these, including suicides, bankruptcy, family and domestic violence.

My message though is that is what it is; we need to recognise that everyone who chooses to live and work in the agricultural sector is going to feel some level of anxiety, sadness and depression from these challenges at some time. Our challenge is how we will chose to response to these challenges.

Hence my comment – life is tough. We need to accept that and develop strategies to deal with what we encounter.

One of the ways - and in my opinion the way – to deal with this is to develop strategies to build emotional and psychological resilience. I define resilience as the willingness and capacity to accept that we are all going to go through good and bad times, the ability to understand our own reactions to these experiences and have strategies to manage these reactions.

Statistics tell us that:

- one in five Australians will have a mental illness each year. I see mental illness as a product of a failure to relate well to yourself and your world at an emotional, psychological and spiritual level
- 13% of Australians will experience some form of anxiety disorder
- 20% of Australians will experience depression – a mood disorder – at some time
- ‘stress related illnesses’ are estimated to cost Australian business around \$30B a year
- suicide and attempted suicide rates in Australia are the highest in the world
- an estimated 5,400,000 prescriptions for anti-depressive drugs were written in 2009/10

All this points to a need to be resilient in ‘normal’ life and, as I often say to the teenagers I work with, life happens to you



BEING INVOLVED IN GROUPS AND NETWORKS HAS MANY BENEFITS. STAYING INVOLVED WITH OTHERS WHEN THINGS ARE TOUGH CAN HELP MAINTAIN PERSPECTIVE.

through your relationships, career, health, financial issues and other aspects.

There are many ways to develop resilience. My experience indicates that some of the more effective ways include:

Acceptance

Sometimes in life, if it looks like a dog, barks like a dog and smells like a dog it's a dog, not a cat, and needs to be dealt in that manner. Accept where you are in life and what life is throwing at you.

Become adept at knowing what you can control as opposed to wasting energy on what you can't control. Be realistic about this. One of my first questions to clients encountering tough times is ‘what can we do about this - or at least parts of this?’. We might feel overwhelmed, but are there parts we can address to get some positive return for our efforts?

Listen to your inner voice

This is a big one. Quick, think about the worst situation you have experienced in your life! What was it? How did you respond? What was your self-talk – in other words, what did you hear yourself say when you were being challenged? I bet you were thinking about yourself in

negative terms. If you were, this ‘self-talk’ is likely to have influenced your actions and influenced how other people interacted with you.

I was working with some dairy farmers in central Victoria in the mid 1990s. These people were experiencing one of the worst droughts on record. You may remember the times - incomes were down, prices were up, suicides unfortunately were also up. People were leaving their farms.

At that time I repeatedly heard people – women and men – say what terrible farmers they must be. But if there is no rain and in fact no water, it is very hard to do anything of significance on the farm! They were talking themselves down with negative self-talk; depowering themselves by the very way they spoke about themselves!

I have heard people describe themselves as ‘broken-arse’ farmers and have to struggle to stop myself laughing out loud. Broken? They were (and still are) running very successful small businesses, had advanced negotiation skills, practical problem-solving skills, a high work ethic, they were smart – they know how to make a dollar – and most had well-advanced information technology skills. But they

had overlooked those attributes and their self-talk was so forceful and they overwhelming that they were starting to believe their own rhetoric.

Change your self-talk

When you are undergoing change, listen to how you and others talk about yourselves. If this self-talk is negative, as it almost invariably is, challenge it and where possible reframe it. Is there another way of describing the situation to yourself? What would that sound like?

Simply reframing your self-talk won't make the problems or challenges go away, but a change in self-talk may move you away from flight/flight/freeze responses to problem-solving behaviour.

Stay involved

Relative isolation is one of the challenges facing people in the agricultural sector. Look for ways of being connected with the community through work, volunteering, sporting clubs, charity clubs and so on. Get your mates involved in the clubs and activities too.

People commonly withdraw into themselves – for a wide range of rational and irrational reasons – when they experience bad times.

Some of the people I work with have withdrawn because they are 'ashamed' of where they have ended up; believing they are weak and that no one else has ever experienced this situation. Wrong! It's critical to keep involved for many positive reasons – the ability to contribute, to be valued and, critically, to maintain perspective. The more people you interact with, the greater the likelihood that you will meet people who have experienced, survived and grown through similar experiences to those you are experiencing.

If you can't look after yourself you can't look after your mates, your family or the business.

I understand this is tough in regional and rural communities. The demands of work and the isolation experienced by many farmers and others can hinder their ability to be as involved as they might want to be, but there is also scope to engage through the virtual community. I know we hear bad things about social media like twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and so on, but used properly they can be valuable tools (broadband willing, of course).

Get comfortable with feelings

This applies especially to us blokes. We all go through good and bad times – a recurring theme of this paper – and it is important that we can articulate our emotions through these times, whatever they may be.

There are heaps of self-help books on this topic and the techniques are simple, but I need to say they are still hard to do. However, it is just so beneficial for everyone, including blokes, to learn and get comfortable with their feelings and be able to express them.

Surround yourself with positive people

Individuals have the ability to either build people up or drag them down. Which are you good at and what type of people do you have around you? I am often challenged by my clients asking why they are surrounded by negative, sad people. My answer is because they are sad and

negative. One of the amazing things about life is that positive people attract positive people, with all the benefits of that, and negative people attract negative people ... and everything that goes with that! Make the choice to be positive and reap the benefits.

Look after yourself

If you can't look after yourself you can't look after your mates, your family or the business. This is a basic truth. Look after your health. As you get older you realise that your parents knew what they were talking about – your health is your most important asset.

I know it is hard in regional and rural Australia but do see a doctor and dentist. Make it part of your schedule at least twice a year – every year. Look after yourself on the broadest levels. The western approach to medicine is not the only approach. Think about other ways – the Eastern methods, massages, reiki and similar.

Do the simple things we all know about. Try to get enough good-quality sleep. Don't smoke. Do exercise, drink water, watch what you eat and have a couple of alcohol-free days a week. (No need to go absolutely 'on the wagon' – unless you want to, of course).

These are just some ways to build emotional resilience.

As a final note: maintaining this is an ongoing exercise. Having a plan and looking at it once is not enough. It needs to be part of your life and that of your partner and others in your life who you value.

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