

THE RESILIENT FARMER – KEEPING YOURSELF STRONG AMIDST THE EVER-INCREASING PRESSURES OF FARMING

Dana Carver
DairyNZ

Summary

- The pressures of farming
- Resilience and wellness
- Stress and burnout
- Wellness research
- Farmer wellness statistics
- What to do when we are worried about our health or someone else's

The pressures of farming

As farmers we focus on the sustainability of our land, machinery, stock and business; but what about our sustainability as people? The pressures of farming are not small. They consist of nutrient limitations, water limitations, health and safety regulations, high debt levels and high staff turnover as well as volatile weather and volatile pay outs. All of this creates intense workloads. On top of this we are subject to negative public perceptions and, finally, many of us are isolated.

Some of these pressures have always existed, but many are new and most are not going away. Therefore, we must be resilient if we hope to thrive in this industry. The good news is that resilience and wellness can be improved and maintained by putting simple things in place.

Notes:

Resilience and wellness

Resilience is often described as a personal characteristic that allows a person to bounce back when they are faced with great challenge or loss. Truly resilient people, however, seem to do more than bounce back. They bounce forward. They gain strength from the challenges and learn valuable lessons from loss.

When studying resilience, Reeves and Allison (2009-2011) found that resilient people are people who understand change and are constantly learning. They are people who plan and budget well during good times. They know all of their critical indicators and spend time only on what's most important. They celebrate wins and they regularly cultivate their networks.

But where do they get the strength to do all of this? They keep themselves well by making time for the things which revitalise them physically, emotionally and intellectually. This personal renewal generates the energy they need to be sharp in the face of difficult times. In a nutshell, they keep themselves well.

The world health organisation's definition of wellness is *a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, copes with the normal stresses of life, works productively and fruitfully and makes a contribution to his or her community*. As stated in this definition, wellness is directly related to stress. Therefore it's essential to understand stress, if we are to understand wellness.

Understanding stress

Stress can be good. Good stress fosters challenge and motivation. It exists when we see a goal and we can picture how we might reach it. This is the kind of stress that gets us out of bed in the morning. However, when we have too many challenges at once so that we struggle to see how we might find a solution to them all, it becomes excessive stress. When we experience excessive stress for too long this can lead to burnout which is emotional, mental and physical exhaustion. Burnout can lead to mental illness which is a disorganisation of the mind and emotions which impair normal functioning. Ultimately this can lead to suicidal feelings or the lack of will to live.

No human being is stagnant and therefore we move from moments of feeling as if we are thriving and achieving to moments where we feel we are only just surviving or, worse, burning out. The key is to understand that prolonged stress can cause high blood pressure, depression, anxiety, heart disease, a weakened immune system, body aches and joint weakness as well as the inability to concentrate and complete tasks. Therefore we need to catch ourselves when we feel we are just surviving and put things in place to avoid burning out. Have a look at the scale below. Where are you now? Are you moving toward burning out? If so, there are things you can put in place to help you get back on track.

Thriving - Surrounded by successes, alert, active, positive, excited about possibilities, rarely sick, no *need* for coffee or alcohol.

Achieving - On top of things and motivated but tired and/or forgetful, get the flu a few times a year, need pick me ups a few times a week.

Surviving - Managing most things but dropping a few balls, often disinterested, irritable, and rely on caffeine and or alcohol daily.

Burning Out - Not keeping up with responsibilities, overwhelmed, lacking confidence, belligerent, relationships failing, sick a lot.

Burnt Out - Have lost mobility and/or grip on reality.

The good news

While research shows that our ability to be resilient is 50% genetic, 40% of resilience is related to our choices, while only 10% is related to what happens to us. This is great news because it means resilience and wellness can be improved by our own actions and choices.

The 2005 UK foresight project found that there are five key ways to wellbeing; connecting, giving, being active, taking notice and learning. Having a clear plan also goes a long way in creating peace of mind and making healthy food choices helps to keep us sharp and resilient. Therefore the principles of wellness could be described as the diagram below.

Notes:

The Principles of Wellness



Connect and Give

Realising that we are not alone in our struggles is essential to human survival. There are times when we are sure that it only raining (or not raining) over our farm. Only when we connect with others do we realise that there are many people in the same situation. This gives us the perspective we need in order to avoid blaming ourselves during tough times.

It is also a basic human need to be useful. Being able to use a skill or talent in order to help others goes a long way for our own wellness. Sometimes making someone laugh and giving them time can make us feel as good as it does the person we are helping.

Keep Learning

There are two reasons learning is important. The first is that it stimulates our mind to continue to make connections and to grow; it physiologically keeps our brains alive and active. The second is that the world is always changing and moving and if we do not keep up to date, we will become isolated. Knowledge allows us to surprise ourselves, to remember what we are capable of and also to connect with the brilliant minds which are constantly discovering new ways of doing things.

Be Active and eat well

Being active and being busy are two different things. Being busy means you have many things to do. Being active means you are stimulating your muscles (this includes your heart and lungs) so that they remain, or grow, strong. This only happens when we move our body and get

our heart beating above a normal rate. The best way to keep our body active is to exercise for twenty minutes a day at least three times a week (ideally five times) to a point where we are puffed and struggling to talk.

Eating well means making sure our body gets nutritious foods rather than highly processed foods. In order for our body to work at its potential we need to fuel it with the antioxidants, vitamins, minerals and protein that fruits, veggies and fresh foods give it. Items such as white breads, crackers, biscuits, baking, fried foods and high-sugar items do not give our body what it needs to be sharp and should be eaten at a minimum if we want to stay well.

Rest and take notice

Rest allows us to recover and comes in a number of different ways. Some of the main forms of rest are getting a good 8 hours a night of consistent sleep as often as we can. At certain times of year this may not be possible, but that means we must make all the effort during the less busy times to ensure we get the sleep we need. Getting off farm for a few days in a row, ideally a week, is another form of important rest as it allows our adrenaline to drop and helps us remember that there is more to life than work. Ironically, we come back refreshed and sharper for it.

Taking notice is simply about slowing down and noticing the things you enjoy. This could be the land around you, the sunset, or the sound of your children laughing. It could be good food, good company, art, or hunting. Remember what you enjoy and take the time to do it and notice it.

Be safe and have a plan

Having a plan, even a rough one, creates peace of mind. It is far better to look our fears in the face and come up with a plan to move forward than to put our head in the sand and pretend they are not there. In the end, the things we are afraid of and which we are not facing begin to control our behaviour. They can make us react in anger. They can make us isolate ourselves. They can take the things we love from us.

Notes:

Having protection, insurances and a plan to keep these fears at bay is a strong influencer in feeling well and enjoying life.

Farmer wellness statistics

While only a few of these principles require money, they all require time. Even making the right food choices requires time in that we need to plan to have these healthy foods available. We farmers feel we are so short on time that we can't possibly squeeze in anything else but the reality is that if we don't find time for wellness, we will eventually find time for illness. We may have to ask ourselves the hard question of what do we prefer, a holiday or a hospital? Both require us to take time off work. The following statistics show just how important it is that we, as farmers, begin to make time for the principles of wellness.

DairyNZ 2011-2013 Health Pitstops:

- 14% farmers reported high/very high total burnt out scores.
- 32% reported pain that interfered with their work (backs, knees, shoulders).
- 57% male farmers have high blood pressure.
- 41% all farmers have high cholesterol (referred to GP).
- Disease (cancer, cardiovascular, diabetes, respiratory) all highest for rural populations

Suicide Statistics (Walker, 2012; Tipples and Greenhalgh, 2012).

- 25 rural suicide deaths per year (19.5/100000, 50% higher than urban population).
- Estimated 20-180 attempted suicides/year.
- No. 2 behind motor vehicle related deaths, twice that of farm vehicle deaths.
- Peaks in spring (August) and Autumn (Feb-May).

Neilson survey 2014:

- Farmers are 31% more concerned about the impact of stress on their health than the general population.
- 23% more farmers compared to the general population worry about work all the time.
- 67% more farmers compared to the general population agree that "life is a constant struggle".

As we can see, making time for wellness matters. But how can we avoid wellness being just another pressure we put on ourselves? The answer is to keep it simple. Here are a few examples of simple things that you can do which do not cost money or take up much time and will make all the difference to your health:

- Turn your phone off at 6pm so that you can relieve your body of being on constant alert to the farm. Let your staff know you will have your phone off from 6pm to 9pm every night and that if there is an emergency to come and find you.

- A few times a week, jog to the cow shed in the morning and jog home at the end of the shift or day (start with a brisk walk and build up to a jog if you need to).
- Create a games night with your family once a fortnight where you turn off the TV and spend a few hours playing games and laughing together.
- Keep a supply of accessible fresh fruit in your home and cow shed and choose this fruit over biscuits and baking as often as possible.
- Attend discussion groups at least a few times a year.

These modest and often under-estimated things are the way to wellness.

When something is wrong

So how do we know if someone is suffering from excessive stress? The surest sign is a fairly sudden change in mood, personality or behaviour which lasts for several weeks.

Specifically, you might notice a number of the following:

- Continually tired and run down
- Often sick with colds, flus or tummy bugs
- Constantly irritable or frequent arguing with friends, family and work colleagues
- Lack of appetite or quick and noticeable weight loss or weight gain
- Dependent on caffeine to get through the day
- Making self-degrading comments (I'm useless, I'm going nowhere, I can't do anything right)
- Prolonged disinterest in jobs or things which once created engagement and satisfaction.

If you do notice these things have a cuppa with them and ask them how they are. When they start to talk:

- Be on their side- let them talk!
- Show understanding and sympathy
- Don't judge them
- Avoid offering advice
- Avoid making comparisons
- Don't try to minimise their pain or act like it's not a big deal.

Notes:

If you are worried a farmer may already be depressed:

- Encourage them to speak to their health practitioner.
- Encourage them to talk to someone about it. These numbers are good:
 - Rural Support Trust 0800 787 254
 - Depression helpline 0800 111 757.

If you are worried a farmer is suicidal:

- Get professional help. Do everything in your power to get a suicidal person the help he or she needs. Call a crisis line for advice and referrals. Encourage the person to see a mental health professional, help locate a treatment facility, or take them to a doctor or A&E immediately.
- Call these numbers for support. These numbers are to help you respond to the suicidal person. Never give a suicidal person a phone number and leave them alone
 - Samaritans 0800 726 666
 - Lifeline 0800 543 354.

Conclusion

Farming is stressful and the majority of these stresses are here to stay. Therefore it is essential that we learn to be resilient and sharp by keeping ourselves well. To keep well we must rest and take notice, be active and eat well, keep learning, connect, give and have a plan for challenges. More importantly, we need to remember that life is just as much about happiness, lifestyle and family as it is about production, profit and efficiency.

References and resources

DairyNZ Health Pitstops data

Suicide Statistics (Walker, 2012; Tipples and Greenhalgh, 2012)

Reeves and Allison (2009-2011)

DairyNZ People Productivity Kit