

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

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Summary

- Pressures of farming.
- Resilience and wellness.
- Stress and burnout.
- Significance of personality and values in dealing with stress.
- Handling the unexpected.
- Principles of keeping well.

The pressures of farming

As farmers we focus on the sustainability of our land, machinery, stock and business, but what about the sustainability of our 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 payouts. 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.

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

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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 impairs 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.

Significance of personality and values

Values can be defined as principles or standards of behaviour. They are what we use as a base for judging what is important in life. They are what drive us. They are the things which bring us joy. If we do not have an element of our values in our life, we can lose our ambition and life can feel like hard work.

Our natural values come from our personality; usually these tend to be our primary values. Our learned values come from experience and intelligence and are often our secondary values. Values often fall into four main themes which are linked to personality as each personality tends naturally toward a certain value or theme. Therefore understanding your personality is key to understanding your values.

For example, some personalities are primarily motivated and driven by winning and being the best; others by being right and responsible; others by harmony and relationships, while another again is motivated by fun and the feeling of discovery. Therefore different things will stress people in different ways. Some will find it significantly stressful when they are stagnant and feel they are not progressing, others when things are chaotic and messy. Some people can handle being stagnant or surrounded by disorder, but find conflict with people very upsetting. Others may not take conflict to heart but find themselves exceptionally stressed when they are forced to work within a system or unable to share their ideas.

Personality and values also reflect why we might go into farming. It may be to generate wealth for security. It could be to do what we love every day. Some of us may want to prove to others what we are capable of, or are driven by, a desire to follow family tradition. We may be motivated by creating career opportunities for our children. The important thing is to understand what our values are and how our decisions and reactions to things are directly linked to them.

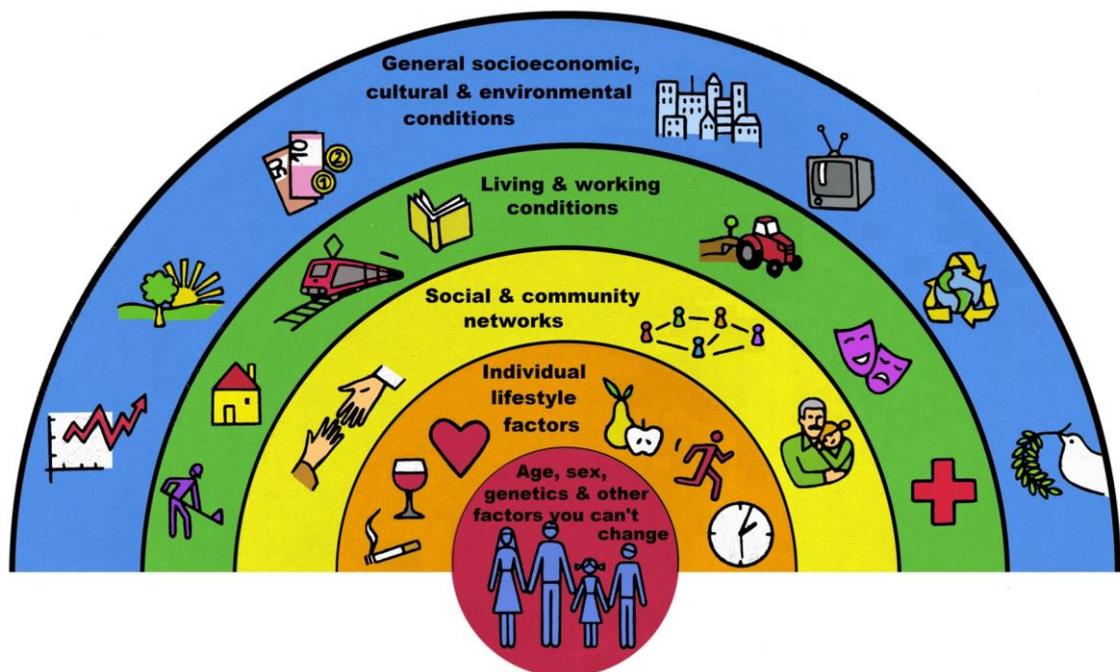
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Handling the unexpected

Handling the unexpected can be difficult. It is helpful to understand that there are two kinds of unexpected situations. One type involves things that were never going to stay the same but which we just hoped would have; things like environment, commodity prices, relationships, and aging (so really we should have expected them). Another type involves things which we truly did not see coming such as accidents, ill health, break downs or natural disasters.

The irony of handling the unexpected is that the key to handling it well is to not to be surprised by it; in other words to *expect* the unexpected. Unexpected things are going to happen no matter how organised we are or how much we plan. Therefore, we must have an attitude where we expect change and focus only on the things we can control.

Focusing on things we can control is good for our wellbeing. Using the Dahlgreen & Whitehead model below, the things that lie closer to the centre are more in our control and more worth worrying about.



The good news

Research shows that while our ability to be resilient is 50% genetic, 40% of resilience is related to our choices, with only 10% 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 as well as making healthy food choices helps to keep us

sharp and resilient. Therefore the principles of wellness could be described as the diagram below.

THE FIVE ELEMENTS THAT HELP US STAY WELL AND HAPPY



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 is only raining (or not raining) over our farm. Only when we connect with others do we realise that there are thousands of 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 feel 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.

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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 more nutritious foods 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 all make 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.

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.

DiaryNZ 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/yr
- 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:

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- Turn your phone off at 6.00pm 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 6.00pm to 9.00pm 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.

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

Dahlgren & Whitehead. 1991.

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

Reeves and Allison. 2009-2011.

DairyNZ. People Productivity Kit