

# Learning to ask for help

*In drought-stricken Australia, farmers struggle with mental health*

*Editor's note: As we all look ahead to dryer times (there's a drought alert for this coming season in the Okanogan and Methow basins), what can be learned from farmers on the other side of the world, dealing with similar challenges? Step one: start talking about mental health*

By Ashley Ahearn

When Andrew Hipwell thinks back on the Millennium drought that drove him out of the dairy farming business a few years ago, he sighs and folds his strong, weathered hands.

"I've never seen anything like it," he said.

The word that immediately springs to mind to describe how he felt: "Tired."

Hipwell remembers the drought as a very dark period in his life. Water prices rose so high he couldn't afford to irrigate his pastures. Instead of letting his dairy cows out to graze all day, he had to buy feed, at a much higher cost.

"You get up and milk and then it's a full day of feeding animals. You're just a slave to your cows, just feeding and feeding," he said. His days started at 5 a.m. and wouldn't end until 10 or 11 p.m. "You'd work weekends, wouldn't go to local footie. You'd just work. Just stay at home and worked because it was so intense."

The drought went on for years and Hipwell barely stayed afloat. He said he just kept his head down, and mostly kept to himself.

"I've got a young family now and when the boys started playing football and I got involved again in the footie club and other things, people said to me, 'We didn't see you for 10 years,' 'Yeah, cuz I was at home.' A lot of people withdrew from the social side of things."

In hindsight, Hipwell said he wished he'd asked for help, or reached out to family members for emotional support during those hard times.

"That's the one thing farmers won't do. They just won't ask for help. That's my biggest thing I learned out of the Millennium drought was probably ask for a bit more help," he said.

## Changing way of life

Australia's no stranger to drought, and Hipwell's from a family of dairy farmers that goes back generations in southeastern Australia. Drought is a part of life here, but since the turn of the century, intense dry periods stretch longer and come at more-frequent intervals (the region is experiencing drought again now), punctuated by farm-wrecking floods. Just as farmers are getting their legs back under them financially,

another extreme weather event sweeps through and sets them back again. Climate change is putting many of the farmers here out of business.

Dairy farms in the Murray-Goulburn basin produce a quarter of Australia's milk. However, since the Millennium drought took hold in the early 2000s, 60% of the farms in this region have shut down or been absorbed into larger dairy operations.

Hipwell says the thinking among farmers has always been: Just work harder. This too shall pass. Next season will be different. It will rain.

Farmers, whether they're in the heartland of the United States or the dairy land of Australia, seem to embody a combination of tragic optimism and the gambler's obsessive determination to hang on for one more roll of the dice.

Andrew Hipwell is no different.

"There's a strong belief that we've been farming here we've got to go another generation and another generation," he said.

Hipwell sold his dairy cows three years ago and got out of the business. He still has the family farmland but now he grows drought-tolerant crops and raises a few beef cattle. He took a job in town to supplement the farm income.

"You ask me 10 years ago would I be doing what I'm doing now, I wouldn't have thought so. I thought I'd still be dairy farming," Hipwell said. "I understand myself by what I do."

## The suicide risk

Climate change — in the form of radically variable weather, more-severe droughts, higher prices on water and feed and longer hours of work — has translated into more than a threat to the economic viability of farms in this part of the world. It presents a threat to the very identity of the people that farm here, and that can have deleterious effects on mental health.

Anthony Hogan was part of a team that surveyed the social and economic impacts of the Millennium drought on farmers across Australia. He is an honorary professor of sociology at Sydney University and has worked as a counselor and therapist.

"Males in rural, remote Australia are twice as likely as city males to kill themselves," Hogan said. "The leading cause of death in outback Australia is land transport accidents. Which is code for: single-vehicle accidents. Line yourself up with a tree, with three or four cans of petrol in the back of the ute [pickup] with the lids off, and as you're about to hit the tree throw the cigarette in the back. Make sure you do it properly," he said. Securing a life insurance payout is, for some farmers, a final

attempt at providing for their families and keeping their farms viable for future generations. "These are the kind of scenarios we talk about. And the figures are there and they're undeniable and they're sustained," Hogan said.

A study of Australian farmers, published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, found a 15% increase in suicide among men between the age of 30-49 during periods of drought.

Perhaps not unlike in the United States, Hogan says Australians have a strong attachment to the concept of "the rural idol" — which might be compared to the Marlborough man of the American West. When Australia was a struggling penal colony, close to starvation, farmers were national heroes.

"In Australia we have a long culture about the stoic farmer who's inherited the family farm from generation to generation, maintains the farm, feeds the country and hands on a good asset to the next generation," Hogan said.

But, Hogan explained, that identity is under threat. "As these shocks accumulate you can't see a future for yourself but you have a responsibility. You are supposed to be able to manage all this. You are supposed to be able to hold yourself together. You are supposed to produce during tough times and hand on the legacy." It's a convergence of factors that essentially amounts to "identity destabilization."

"My whole place in the world, my meaning, my sense of continuity, coupled with financial nonviability creates this nasty little hotbox of mental insecurity and mental health problems and that's the window in which people I think see suicide as an option, as a decision," he said.

No one is claiming that climate change or the Millennium drought caused the rise in rural male suicides, but the correlation is worth noting. At the very least, Hogan and others say, the rise in suicides drew attention to the issue of mental health — and the stigma that is often attached to confronting it — in rural communities.

## Leading from Within

Jenny O'Connell has silver hair and dark, warm eyes. She is a clinical social worker and practicing therapist who has lived in Shepparton, the "urban" center of the Murray-Goulburn dairy region, for 50 years. She raised her two daughters here. Her husband, Patrick, sold real estate and was active in the local football, cricket and theater clubs.

Over the years, she's gained the trust of many farmers who have sought her out for counseling. O'Connell knows the journey from farm to therapy is not

an easy one, and that when it comes to mental health, there is an urban-rural divide.

"Rural people won't ask for help because they're very proud and independent. In smaller communities, they don't want to be identified as having issues and worry that people will know who they are and think of them as a failure," she said.

There is stigma attached to seeking help with mental illness in many communities. Farmers are not unique, O'Connell said, but they are perhaps more skeptical of receiving help from outsiders who do not understand their cultural values.

"Quite often when there is some kind of catastrophic event people come from outside but the locals don't accept them very well because they're not local," O'Connell said. "They won't trust and they won't buy in fully to the support that's available."

O'Connell and her husband started a program called "Leading from Within," which was designed to bring people in their community together in small groups to provide trauma recovery and suicide prevention support. She would hear about families or individuals who perhaps shared a common background or set of challenges, and would reach out to them. Other participants would be referred to her by rural financial counselors, government employees who work with farmers to develop better business strategies and farm management tactics. O'Connell would then put together small groups of four to six people who would meet regularly over the course of a year or so.

In 2004, as the Millennium drought was in full swing, the O'Connells tailored some of their programs for farmers who were struggling with drought and had experienced suicide in their community.

"We would run sessions and come away absolutely humbled. Absolutely in awe of the courage that people have shown to express this deepest stuff," Jenny O'Connell said. "The women often lead. They will say things and when they're in a group together we can check with the men and the men will slowly go, 'Yeah that's right.'"

Jenny said that leading the groups with her husband helped create a more open dynamic. "Patrick can talk about things he knows are common with men. He'll say things like, 'You know we're pretty hopeless buggers aren't we? We always cover our feelings and pretend we don't have them but sometimes we don't feel that way, do we?' The guys will find that easier to relate to and often then start to share really deep stuff."

Jenny O'Connell says that farmers are happy to share ideas and information about what they're doing, but she said sharing vulnerability is a bigger ask.

"This is the thing about the groups we run, is the level that people connect at is so different from the normal, everyday 'How are you going, mate?' 'Fine thanks' sort of interactions," O'Connell said. "People learn to say, 'How are you really? I know there have been some

tough times recently, what's happening for you?' What we find from Leading from Within is that people yearn for that depth of conversation once they've crossed the barrier of 'OK I can trust and I've got the courage to share this stuff.' The feeling of relief is massive because they're there, held, in this container of people who are totally with them emotionally, psychologically and Patrick and my job is to hold that container strong, but so does the rest of the group."

Farming can be solitary work, and as Andrew Hipwell, the former dairy farmer said, during the drought his inclination was to turn inward and just work harder. O'Connell said that response was not uncommon, throughout the agricultural community, during the Millennium drought, and that it was hard to coax people off their farms and into a group session. However, a big part of helping people get through that difficult period was helping them understand that they were not the only ones experiencing this hardship, and, by translation, that their economic struggles were not an indication of a personal failure (i.e. not working hard enough), but rather an indication of larger forces.

O'Connell used her experience treating trauma victims to help farmers grapple with the emotional toll of the drought. She explained the way trauma works to her groups, walking them through the "fight or flight" response humans have in the face of a traumatic experience. She said for some, suicide can start to seem like the only way of trying to regulate or escape from an absolutely overwhelming emotional state experienced over a prolonged period of time.

"If people learn other strategies for regulating their nervous systems they don't have to go there," she said. "When people come for help that's part of what we teach them, the neuroscience of trauma and how to cope. So when they learn how to manage their own nervous systems they can see that there is another option."

This kind of community-centered network can take years to build and often works in wonderful and unexpected ways. But taking that first step and choosing to make the phone call or get into the pickup truck and head into town to meet with a therapist is often the hardest part of the mental health journey.

## 'It was hell'

Nick James and his wife, Georgina, run a 3,300-acre sheep farm outside of Shepparton. Nick is 32, with three little girls under the age of 5. He has an easy laugh and an upbeat, positive way of talking, which seems to clash with the expanse of lifeless dry brown

landscape that surrounds him.

These past few years have been hard for James. Water prices keep rising and he's had to borrow money to keep his sheep farm going, while trying to adapt his farming practices for drier times ahead. He's storing more hay and keeping his sheep in smaller controlled feeding areas because it's too expensive to irrigate the fields where they'd normally be let out to graze.

## Too much to handle

There was a period, a few years ago, where it all seemed like too much to handle. James said he was in a dark place.

"I'd lost me sting. I was just down and out." James said he was drinking a lot, throughout the day, and sometimes staying in bed for days in a row. "That's when I realized I'd hit rock bottom."

James said it was his wife who helped him face his struggles with mental health.

"Georgie is pretty stubborn," James said, chuckling. "She didn't give me an option. She said, 'We're going to have to do something about this, you know?' and we were lucky enough to get some help off Jenny [O'Connell]. It's turned my life around. It's the best thing I've ever done."

But those first trips into town to see Jenny were some of the hardest.

"It was hell," James kicked the dirt. "I think probably the worst thing of it is you think you're a bit of a failure. You think, 'What am I doing here? I'm bigger than this. I'm a grown man.' But yeah, when you get yourself in the zone and you listen to what the experts have got to say and you get yourself right, it's the best thing you can ever do for yourself."

Nick James is worried about climate change and what it means for his farm, and the broader community. He says he still "battles" with depression and anxiety about the future, and worries about what will happen if they don't get good rains this fall. But he says that he feels better-equipped, mentally, to handle whatever nature throws at him next. He acknowledges the stigma attached to getting therapy, especially in a small community like this one. He used to keep his visits with Jenny O'Connell a secret.

"Now I really don't give a s\*\*\*," he said, shrugging his broad shoulders. "I'd rather tell someone I'm going to see a counselor or therapist and what a world of good it's doing me, and hopefully that might change someone else's mind that's going through a hard time."

Photo by Ashley Ahearn

**Australian sheep farmer Nick James struggled to run his farm when costs kept rising and water grew scarce. Talking about his mental health, and getting help from a local counselor, has helped him keep going.**

