

22 July 2020

Mental Health & 'Resilience'

The last 12 months have been, to put it bluntly, a tough year. Drought, bushfires, floods, global pandemic... A word that has been tossed around a lot over the last few months is 'resilience'. When referring to 'resilience', the connotation is often 'toughness'.

Resilience is defined as the ability to recover quickly from a challenge. And it's easy to understand why we often talk about human resilience in the face of natural disasters.

But it seems that resilient people are often painted as people who just 'brush it off' or 'get back up again' easily. They aren't. And that idea is killing us. Literally.

Farmer suicide is on the rise and we don't even have the stats yet to analyse the effects of the recent disasters. In the face of continued adversity, there is no doubting that our 'resilience' has been worn down.

A March 2017 research report from the Rural Flying Doctors states the following;

"Some researchers have suggested that the 'rural masculinist paradigm,' whereby rural males are 'made' to be physically and emotionally tough and strong and are able to solve any problem as 'no obstacle can beat them', has been normalised, even though it is not an accurate representation of rural men (Kölves et al., 2012). "The suicidal vulnerabilities attached to the rural masculinist paradigm are suicide risk factors which research has more uniquely linked to farmers," such as the unrelenting workload associated with running a farm, difficult financial and living conditions, and a perceived lack of control over factors linked with success, such as weather or government policy (Kölves et al., 2012, p. 12). Such factors can contribute to feelings of powerlessness amongst farmers, and suicide may be perceived as the action required to solve the negative emotions (Kölves et al., 2012)."

That is a terrifying statement. Farmers are killing themselves because they have been culturally shamed into believing that it is a better action than showing vulnerability.

We need to stop expecting farmers to just 'brush it off' or 'pick themselves back up', even if they are the toughest people we know.

What we need is real rural mental health assistance for farmers and their families.

We need individual coping strategies; not a one size fits all approach. There is no denying times are tough in the city, but the pressures of urban dwelling are different to the pressures of country life.

Committed to keeping you safer on Australian Farms

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.

Years of drought, raging bushfires, flash floods and global pandemics are not 'normal stresses of life' and make it quite difficult to 'work productively and fruitfully' on the land.

Australian farmers have been living in hyper vigilant states of awareness for months. Waking up to dust storms, or blankets of smoke, flash floods after years of drought or the news of border closures and economic upheaval has wreaked havoc on our nervous systems.

There are incredible initiatives out there that are doing a really important work to bring awareness and support to our farmers. The Naked Farmer, Sober in the Country, Mate Helping Mate, and Are You Bugged Mate, are all working hard to ensure that the long-held stigma that surrounds mental health discussions is removed for good.

So in these tough times, ask yourself what works for you – is it talking to your husband or talking to your wife? Is it taking a day off to go fishing? Is it girthing up the saddle on your stock horse and hitting the hills? Is it a cup of coffee with that friend you never have time to catch up with? Is it missing the morning meeting so that you can take your son or daughter for school drop-off? It might be a trip to the doctor, just to check in.

Taking some time for yourself, to do what you need to do, is worth every second lost on the farm if it means you are alive tomorrow.

If it takes a friend, or your pets, or a sport, or even if it takes the whole community to 'pick you back up' – reach out.

Resilience isn't always linked to toughness. You can be tough while struggling to make it through the day. Honestly, that probably makes you even tougher because you are still in the fight.

Resilient people are just people who have systems and strategies in place to help them deal with the challenges and adversities that come with living on the land. That's it.

So remember, when the going gets tough... the tough can still ask for help.

If you require immediate support please call;

Lifeline Australia: 13 11 14

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636