

Farmer Resilience Matters

by Lora Hagemann RCHom(NZ), PhD(USA)

First published in March 2014 at www.energiclinic.co.nz

Copyright by the author

If you work in the New Zealand primary sector or have ties to the rural community, the following scenario would not be hard to imagine...

It's mid-September and calving season hasn't quite finished. The weather has been cold and rainy for the past few days and some of the newest calves have runny poos – Is this a sign of a rota virus or coccidiosis infection? -- you wonder. A major cleanout of that shed has just been added to today's To-Do List. But first, complete the morning's milking. The hired hand is still down with the flu – maybe back in his gumboots tomorrow. Your partner can't help at the moment – the kids missed the school bus this morning and she's driven them into town. Mating starts in a few weeks, the effluent pit needs tending to and the bank loan officer is visiting yet again next week to talk about finances. The uncertainties are never ending and you could get really anxious about it all – if you allowed yourself to think too much about it. That holiday week to the family bach seems eons ago, but thank heavens for the rugby tonight.

Similar scenarios can be generated for dry stock, horticulture, forestry or other types of farming operations. Good people working hard to do what matters.

And indeed, what they do does matter -- even by the simplest statistics. More than half of New Zealand's export revenues come from biologically-based commodities and value-added products, while only one-seventh of New Zealand's population reside in rural communities. The fact that relatively few people contribute so much to New Zealand's wealth (and provide those of us who service the rural sector a steady job) means a lot is riding on rural people remaining productive. And the pressures that they face daily, both physical and mental, can add up to over-stress.

Stress comes at a cost

Studies show that workforce illness due to simple and chronic illnesses and over-stress costs employers billions of dollars in lost productivity even if their unwell employees still come to work

(www.scoop.co.nz/stories/BU0904/S00050.htm). One might rationally extend this insight to the rural sector where the notion of 'just getting on with it' is very ingrained. More recently, social researchers from AgResearch Ltd, in conjunction with health professionals from the New Zealand Institute of Rural Health (NZIRH), found that the prevalence of emotional ill-health in dairy farmers they surveyed

Farmers are

TOUGH

So...



Keeping rural communities strong

**Let a mate keep
your back.**

- ☞ Lack of energy and drive
- ☞ Difficulties in concentrating and making decisions
- ☞ Changes in eating habits or sleep patterns
- ☞ Chronic back, neck or head pain
- ☞ Persistent digestive tract problems
- ☞ Heart palpitations
- ☞ Sustained withdrawn mood or behaviour
- ☞ Feeling on edge or more emotional
- ☞ Using alcohol or drugs to relieve or forget stress
- ☞ Thoughts of self-harm or urges to hurt others

**Don't let a mate
tough it out**

through their Health PitStops set up at farmer gatherings (www.nzirh.org.nz/dairynz/health-pitstops/) was consistently higher than the national average – including twice the reported rates of depression and anxiety. Even more worryingly, the researchers found that farmers were very unlikely to talk to someone – neither a friend, family member nor a health professional – about their situation (although, a family member or friend was the more preferred option over a health professional if the farmer *did* eventually choose to speak to someone). The AgResearch-NZIRH Farmer Wellness study didn't go far enough to elucidate why farmers didn't generally seek assistance, but having grown up on a farm myself, I might speculate that the rural culture of self-sufficiency, stoicism and pragmatism might be a contributing factor. Sometimes your foremost strengths can become your greatest limitations depending on circumstances.

If you or a loved one is experiencing depression, anxiety or other serious emotional ill-health, I can't stress enough to seek help sooner rather than later. At the very least, you can contact Rural Support Trust (www.rural-support.org.nz) for more information or see www.depression.org.nz for self-help. But also consider contacting your health practitioner (whether they are your GP, or a complimentary or alternative practitioner). Sometimes just a little intervention from a health expert early on can go a long way to preventing major breakdowns later. Just like a ute engine.

Be mindful and build your resilience

While attention is paid to people experiencing depression and anxiety, it is vital not to forget that less severe mental/emotional ill-health – such as disengagement/lack of interest, or burn-out and exhaustion – are also debilitating and very much more prevalent. The AgResearch-NZIRH Farmer Wellness study found that three out of four farmers surveyed reported moderate-to-high levels of exhaustion and nine out of 10 farmers surveyed had progressed to moderate-to-high levels of burn-out. While the incidence of these states of ill-health may vary throughout the farming calendar (when times of seasonally higher workload lead to higher incidences of overstress and mental/emotional ill-health), the more robust or resilient one's base-line constitution is, the less likely one succumbs to physical, emotional or mental ill-health.

So what is 'resilience'? It means the ability of a person (or a community, ecosystem or animal, etc) to bounce back from a change, perturbation or misfortune. In medicine, 'homeostasis' is also used to describe this phenomenon. For example, the quicker your heart rate returns to its resting level (or homeostasis) following running after livestock that has got through the fence, the physically healthier you are expected to be. Resilience at the mental/emotional level refers to the ability to come to terms with experiences that has triggered a distressed mental/emotional response. These trigger experiences might be the death of a loved one or other (smaller) losses, accidents and natural disasters (like an earthquake) or social conflicts (like quarrels and employment disputes). Another way to describe resilience might be the ability to 'achieve a state of acceptance' about a situation in a relatively short space of time. Resilience does *not* mean that you avoid, suppress or simply ignore what you feel. In many cases, going through a range of emotional states (such as the well described grief process) is an important part of healing and achieving acceptance after such a life-changing event.

In a recent *North & South (NZ)* magazine article (*The Survivor Gene*; January 2014 issue), author Donna Chisholm succinctly summarises that resilience is a complex combination of our genetics (or innate disposition), our to-date environmental impacts (including wear-n-tear with age, previous illnesses and how well we look after ourselves mentally, emotionally and physically) and our social support networks. I think that when we take care of ourselves, we are take 'mindful action' and give ourselves the best opportunity to remain resilient regardless of what life throws at us. 'Mindful

action' consists of: breathing in the right way (deep and slow as in meditation, yoga or Pilates), eating in the right way (healthy food, plenty of clean water, avoidance of alcohol, smoking and other mood altering substances), moving in the right way (healthful exercise, taking relaxation time-out from responsibilities) and connecting with others in the right way (communing with nature, growing loving and caring relationships, maintaining positive and supportive social networks, developing your spiritual life). If this all sounds a bit Zen-like, well, it is – I think basic Buddhist philosophies have a lot to teach all of us about resilience.

A homeopathic example of addressing chronic stress

But what happens when 'mindful action' is simply not enough. Sometimes, circumstances mean that a series of what could have been 'acute stresses' (meaning you could have bounced back from each alone) result in a state of 'chronic stress' (meaning it's all too much at once and is not resolvable without some level of intervention). A chronic stress state might be noticeable to someone first as a physical issue (for example, re-occurring infections that require multiple courses of antibiotics, high blood pressure or poor sleep and eating patterns). It's very rare for someone to step into my clinic with a chronic physical complaint that, after some conversation, does not also reveal something troubling them at the mental/emotional level as well (such as over-work, too many concerns, future uncertainties, lack of self-confidence). For others, chronic stress is expressed mostly at the non-physical level, with emotions like anger and grief, anxiousness, burn-out/lack of interest and melancholia.

Alternative health therapies (e.g. homeopathy) are excellent ways to resolve chronic stress because they are holistic, focused on (re-)building resilience, and very person-specific. These therapies can be also be used to complement other mindful actions you might take such as meditation, Neuro Linguistic Programming and counselling.

When a client steps into my homeopathic clinic, I look for how specifically they are expressing their chronic stress or current state of poor resilience, especially as it pertains to their unique set of family history (their 'underlying genetics'), their personal medical history and life experiences. This is important because we are all individuals and how we respond to life events and what causes each of us chronic stress can be different. As a consequence, the right homeopathic prescription to help a client (re-)build their resilience will similarly be individualised.

To illustrate this concept of 'individualisation', I've created the example (see figure on the next page) of five farmers/farm workers experiencing work-overload similar to the scenario described above. Although their case notes ('stories') have been highly simplified and only one representational homeopathic prescription each is provided (homeopaths have over 4,000 remedies to choose from and consider a range of options before choosing one), the example demonstrates that a common 'trigger' (a busy season and growing task list) impacts individuals differently, eliciting different expressions of chronic stress and requiring different homeopathic prescription as a result. In some cases, the 'trigger' is only secondary to an underlying physical, mental or emotional problem.

If you want to learn more about the theory and philosophy of the therapeutic system of homeopathy, you can read more in my previous article: *Understanding Homeopathy: A brief look at its history, philosophy and theory* (www.energiclinic.co.nz/articles.html).

Other information sources

- Dr Neels Botha (AgResearch), Project Leader for the AgResearch-NZIRH Farmer Wellness study
- New Zealand Centre for Rural Health (www.health.govt.nz/our-work/populations/rural-health)
- New Zealand Institute of Rural Health (www.nzirh.org.nz)
- New Zealand Ministry for Primary Industries (www.mpi.govt.nz)
- Statistics New Zealand (www.stats.govt.nz)

