

Stress Management in Farming in Ireland

A report for



NUFFIELD IRELAND Farming Scholarships

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2014 Nuffield Scholar

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Executive Summary

This report examines some of the issue that cause farmers stress with an emphasis on the particular challenges faced by young people entering into farming.

The objectives of this study were as follows;

- To identify the major controllable stressors of farming life.
- To highlight the need to react to stressors early - early recognition of and intervention will lead to an easier and more successful outcome.
- To explore an education model that will give young farmers the foresight of potential stressors and challenges that life will throw at them, and the skills and tools to enable them to best face adversity.
- To help remove the stigma that surrounds 'asking for help'.

The objectives of the study were met through a series of interviews and case studies with, farmers, industry personnel, Nuffield Scholars and mental health professionals during an international study trip that included travelling to Europe, USA, India, New Zealand and Australia.

Key Findings

- Managing stress involves the ability to cope with or lessen the physical and emotional effects of everyday pressure and challenges.
- Succession planning and intergenerational relationships need to be tackled in an open manner early in the career of the succeeding generation.
- Realistic goal setting and proper planning help to identify a clear path to achieving ones ambitions. This clarity of vision helps to insulate against stress caused by unforeseen events.
- By giving young farmers an insight into the sort of challenges they will face in starting out in business, they will be better equipped to overcome these issues.
- Farmers are more likely to talk about their problems to support personnel who have a strong rural connection/empathy.



- Developing a ‘farmer experience’ lead debate in the media and in education will resonate far more strongly with the farmers than one lead by non-farming examples.

Recommendations

These recommendations are aimed at developing a stronger support structure for farmers.

Recognising and supporting ‘the farmer’ as the most vital ingredient to the future success of his/her business will increase the ‘wealth’ of Irish agriculture;

- The setting up of a **single**, central farmer help line to deal with the concerns and worries of all aspects of a farmer’s life by connecting him to all relevant bodies. To be funded under 'Pillar 2' European money to train farmer volunteers to become counsellors.
- Teagasc to set up of a farm mentorship scheme to connect inexperienced enthusiastic farmers with experienced successful farmers. To be coordinated through regional Teagasc offices on a volunteer farmer basis.
- The development of an education module to highlight 'mental health and safety' and ‘self-care’ to agriculture students and farmers.
- Teagasc to rethink the promotion of benchmarking targets –individual targets need to take account of regional differences, age and needs of farmers. Targets that are unattainable can have a negative effect on farmer morale.
- A training module such as Mental Health First Aid or the ‘SafeTALK’ program for industry support personnel. To show how to best recognise the signs of stress/ distress and how best to respond to farmers’ needs.



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Foreword

To farm, to be a custodian of a small piece of land for a few short years and to have a connection with 'mother nature' is a pleasure and a privilege that fewer and fewer people have. As a dairy farmer I am fully aware of how lucky I am to have this opportunity. But as a farmer I am also fully aware of how hard a farming life can be at times. Having spent years growing and developing my business I am acutely aware of the stress that can be placed not only on myself but also on my family and work colleagues.

My wife and I, along with our four children, live in county Meath on the east coast of Ireland. We are currently running our 500 cow milk production partnership in conjunction with family and outside help. We run a spring calving, grass based production system that aims to maximise the use of our natural competitive advantage that is Ireland's ability to grow high quality feed (grass) cheaply. Though our business has expanded considerably in the past number of years (we were milking 180 cows in 2007) our focus has always been on developing a simple, easy to manage, sustainable farming system.

How to manage stress is a topic I have been interested in for a number of years since my involvement in a project by my discussion group on 'identifying stress triggers on our farms'. This group, the Navan Discussion group, set up in 1993, is made up of 15 predominantly spring calving dairy farmers from counties Meath and Cavan. Over the years the group's main focus has been on developing technical and financial efficiencies on farm while, almost inadvertently, providing social and personal support. It was in 2012 when we undertook our project on managing stress that I began to realise the real value of the social and personal support the group provides. This made me aware of the need to get farmers talking and focused on the wider issues beyond farm practices.

This scholarship has enabled me to continue studying this topic through travels to England and Wales as well as during my Global Focus Program (GFP). The GFP gave me the opportunity to travel through India, Qatar, Turkey, France, the Netherlands and the USA in the company of nine international Nuffield Scholars. During these study trips I met with farmers, both large and small, college professors, industry personnel, psychologists, therapists, farm/business advisors and many other people involved inside and outside of agriculture. For this study I have also drawn on information gathered from my own and other Irish discussion groups, from a



previous visit to New Zealand and from discussions with my own contemporary Nuffield Scholars.

With the unprecedented changes that are happening within Irish agriculture, especially the dairy industry, I believe there is a fundamental need to look at all aspects of the industry and that critically includes farmer welfare. In Teagasc, our national farm research and advisory body, Irish farmers possess a world leading farm support body that provides expert advice on all technical and financial matters. However this only covers two aspects of the needs of modern farming - the final aspect relates to the farmers personal welfare needs and that of their family. It is an area that greatly needs highlighting and one that I hope to help promote through my Nuffield studies.

On a personal level this study has helped me to too cope with the continuing challenges of leading my dairy business development through 'post quota' Ireland, whilst gaining an insight into the challenges facing other farmers in similar positions. With my families farming expansion plans ongoing we are expecting to double our annual milk output (based on 2014 supply) by the end of 2016. This process has already proved challenging. The physical and technical parts of this expansion were readily enough planned for and implemented. The added stress of managing the extra labour demands and the communication levels needed to keep 'the show on the road' by juggling the requirements of my family, my increased work force and myself proved very tough. Personally, insomnia is my first sign of stress. Despite the physical exhaustion that is normal during the calving season this year I regularly found myself unable to sleep for more than three to four hours a night when, to function properly, I need a good seven to eight hours . I was unable to stop my mind 'racing' and to relax due to the stress I was under. I find this physical exhaustion then leads me to be indecisive and to make poorer decisions on the farm. Recognising and acting on the signs that I am under severe strain is something that has taken years for me to get better at.

In light of this and the governments stated targets for agricultural growth as set out in the 'Food Harvest 2020 Report', including a 50% increase in national dairy output by 2020, I believe that it is vital to develop a better understanding and openness to address this third leg of farm viability that is farmer welfare.



Acknowledgements

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I would like to thank the wider global Nuffield community and particularly my Global Focus Group; Emma, Jamie, Karen Lucy, Ben John, Johnny, Paul and Tim – thank you for such a memorable year.

I would also like to thank the people I have met along this journey; your generosity of time and hospitality has been heart-warming.

Thank you to my sponsors for this amazing opportunity not only to study a topic of great interest to me, but also for the incredible personal development this journey has taken me on. They are Dairymaster, LIC Ireland and The Peter Daly Trust. I hope to in some way repay your support of me, thank you.



Abbreviations

AEA – Agricultural Extension Agent

AI –Artificial Insemination

BSE – Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

CAP – Common Agricultural Policy

CSO – Central Statistics Office

DEFRA – Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

FCN – Farm Community Network

GFP – Global Focus Program

HSE – Health Service Executive

IFA – Irish Farmers Association

ICMSA – Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association

IRUPA – Irish Rugby Union Players Association

KPI – Key Performance Indicator

LIC – Livestock Improvement Corporation

MHFA – Mental Health First Aid

NFU – National Farmers Union

NY – New York

TB – Tuberculosis

UCD – University College Dublin

UK – United Kingdom

USA– United States of America



Objectives

- To identify the major controllable stressors of farming life.
- To highlight the need to react to stress early - early recognition of and intervention will lead to an easier and more successful outcome.
- To explore an education model that will give young farmers the foresight of potential stressors and challenges that life will throw at them, and the skills and tools to enable them to best face adversity.
- To help remove the stigma that surrounds 'asking for help'.

Introduction

It is the intention of the author to focus this study not on the issue of farmer suicide but rather to look at the even larger group of farmers who struggle with undue daily stress, and while this may or may not be life threatening it does lead to farmers leading sub-optimum lives. Suicide particularly in young people does invariably make the headline statistics;

'Suicide is a leading cause of death among young people. The rate of youth suicide in Ireland is the fifth highest in the EU at 15.7 per 100,000 for 15-24 year olds.' NOSP (2005).

A recent Irish Examiner/ ICMSA study found that 53% of farmers were affected by suicide in some way. While these are dreadful and worrying statistics that will always cause concern, there are numerous crisis management organisations that provide invaluable support, to help in times of distress. However the issue of stress is one that is less openly addressed.

Stress is our emotional response to an event or situation - how stressed we get depends upon how well we feel we are able to cope with that situation. This leads to us all responding differently to stressful situations. Dorothy Fairburn used a simple analogy in her Nuffield thesis

—

'An experienced skier's perception of a steep snow covered mountain is different from that of a novice standing at the top of the same mountain.' Fairburn (1996)



Factors such as age, experience and position within the management structure of the business and physical and mental strength all have a profound effect on how we as individuals perceive and handle stress.

Whilst short term stress can be useful in that the adrenaline 'rush' it gives us can help to escape/solve a problem, prolonged exposure to stress is known to cause adverse medical conditions. The symptoms of prolonged stress, though well known, can vary widely from:

- Self- medication with alcohol/drugs;
- Poor/broken relationships;
- Eating/Sleeping disorders;
- Anxiety disorders;
- Physical illness including cardiovascular disorders and certain cancers.

Stress as an emotional reaction to an external event is neither sectorial nor regionally exclusive rather it is a reaction common to everyone. Simplistic as it sounds most stressful situations start out with a relatively minor problem that if addressed early and in the right way can usually be prevented from ever becoming the major problem that leads to stress/conflict.

By giving young farmers the tools to recognise and deal with these problems early it is hoped that they will be better placed to surmount such problems before they become major life affecting obstacles. Financial hardship due to extreme price volatility or enterprise viability and/ or the effects of climatic conditions are cited in numerous studies as being major contributory factors towards stress in farming. However there is little that we as farmers can do day-to-day to counter these outside forces as they are outside our 'circles of influence'. The theory of 'circles of influence' in its simplest form states that we (as farmers) should worry about the things that are within our control or 'circle of influence' rather than the things that are beyond our control. For dairy farmers a focus on our basic key performance indicators (KPI's) such as six week calving rate and tons of grass dry matter grown per hectare will be far more beneficial to our financial viability than time spent worrying about things beyond our control such as the weather and milk price. Yet most farmer conversations will focus on the latter especially when times are tough.



Resilience and mental strength are valuable attributes to being a farmer. They are the very characteristics that help us deal with the stresses of modern farming in a time of considerable price volatility, increased mechanisation, increased rural isolation and greater regulation. However a more important attribute to success is the ability to admit your mistakes and ask for help when you need it. No truly successful person made it on their own, they all did it as part of a team - as never before us farmers collectively need to recognise ourselves a team.

Method

This study is built upon research carried out by myself and my discussion group, the Navan Discussion Group, which aimed to identify controllable stress triggers within our own farms; some of which is referenced further in this paper. This Nuffield study aims to look at some major causes of stress, particularly for young people getting involved in Irish agriculture, and to offer some possible solutions. The research for this study took the form of a series of interviews and case-studies with fellow Nuffield Scholars, farmers, extension providers, researchers, industry stakeholders and mental health professionals. These took place in the countries visited which include England and Wales, France, the Netherlands, the USA and India as well as from a previous visit to New Zealand. It also included a literature review of previous studies on stress in farming, as well as a look at how the male dominated world of professional rugby perceives and addresses the issue of managing stress.

The key findings of this research are laid out in the six interlinked thematic chapters listed below. The chapters are laid out in such a way as to provide a linear progression through initially addressing issues from succession to goal setting, to finding support and personal attitudes to self-care and then how industry stakeholders can provide support.

As such this study will look at the issues around;

- Succession and intergenerational relationships;
- Goal setting and clarity of vision;
- Mentoring and team building;
- Self-care and attitudes to health and safety;
- Media coverage;
- Education;



1. Succession and Intergenerational Relationships

Succession planning or rather the lack of it is a major source of stress and uncertainty, not only for younger, but also for older retiring farmers. In an interview with Sian Bushell, a farm business consultant and a succession planner who works in the UK and Ireland, she described a number of reasons that can leave both generations feeling overwhelmed and stressed if this process is not tackled correctly and early. Sian believes younger farmers moving into the family business need clarification as to where they stand in terms of succession plans. Who will inherit what if there is more than one sibling, will the farm be split even though the other siblings have no wish to farm? These difficult conversations need to happen early and younger farmers need to have responsibility and feel actively involved in the major decisions on running the farm so as to meet their ambitions. They shouldn't be left with all the worst/dirtiest jobs just because they are starting out. Nor should they be made to feel guilty by more settled parents because they want time off or a social life.

For the older generation, parents are often unwilling or financially unable to let go of the business as they may not have a pension plan. There are also major issues around self-esteem as many farmers define themselves by their work and they see the removal of this as a threat to their personal identity often resulting in feelings of worthlessness. Another area, cited by Sian, as being of great concern to parents is their son/daughter's choice of partner. There is a strong perception that a marriage breakdown will automatically lead to the farm or part of it being sold. Though this is not necessarily the case, the worry of it happening is enough to stall the transfer of land to the next generation. In some cases transfer is delayed until the death of the father.

This inter- generational relationship, be it a son or daughter who is joining the business, is one that always needs to be managed carefully. These stresses were highlighted by Larry, a dairy farmer in up-state New York whom we visited.

Larry, who works alongside his father and his own two sons readily discussed the stresses and tensions that the family were going through. As he explained the situation, he had worked his early years under his strong willed father but in general had avoided conflict by allowing his father to dictate the direction the farm business would take. Day to day conflict was avoided



primarily because Larry was the stockman and his father was the machinery operator, so their routine work was reasonably independent. Once his own two sons joined the business the tensions started to surface as the two boys are both strong willed and immediately started to challenge their grandfather, a situation he had never faced before and one that he strongly resisted. The sons also introduced a new robotic milking system and more precision feeding that has replaced Larry's work and left him feeling superfluous as his daily routine is removed. The result of these changes is that Larry has been left feeling he has no role to play in his own farm, except to act as sole mediator between his sons and their grandfather. This feeling of isolation was only exacerbated by his wife's refusal to get involved, stating that the farm was 'nothing to do with her'.

This is a very clear example of the type of conflict Sian Bushell spoke of. Clear communication, establishing everyone's needs and ambitions and the involvement of an independent mediator would help to considerably reduce the stress that Larry and his family were going through.

The position of daughters and daughters-in-law in the succession issue tends to one of second class citizens. According to Sian, the daughter, particularly on Irish farms, is often not considered as a candidate to inherit the farm. This is more prevalent on smaller farms where attitudes are far less open. Parry et al (2005) found similar attitudes in the UK;

'We came across several examples of daughters who were strongly attached to farming and who seemed to be the most capable beneficiary, who were excluded from inheritance in favour of sons.'

The daughter –in-law often has the hardest position as she tries to establish her own identity in an already formed family and business unit while living in close proximity (often even in the same house) to a new mother-in-law. For a family getting the balance right between initially fully accepting the new daughter-in-law into the family unit while at the same time adopting a more cautious approach to integration into the business unit can be very stressful for all involved.

The clear advice to help avoid the stress that surrounds succession is to start the conversations early and to involve all relevant parties so that everyone knows exactly what is going to happen to the farm and how the business is going to be divided . Once everything has been established everyone, parents and children, can then plan their own way forward



with a clear understanding. Uncertainty breeds anxiety and stress whereas clarity engenders confidence.



2. Goal Setting and Clarity of Vision

There are a myriad of reasons why people become farmers and none of them are any more or less valid than the next. The single most important factor in the decision (possibly even before succession is ever discussed) is that ‘you’ want to farm for your reasons and not because you are pushed or forced into it by a parent. Too often the reasons are ‘I was the only son so I had to take on the farm’ or ‘the farm has been in the family for generations and I didn’t want to see it sold’. These are not a good starting point in helping to build the resilience and mental toughness that are required to stay farming when times are tough.

‘Farmers who felt that they had chosen their work and had alternative options, and who looked upon it more as a business venture than a way of life, reported higher levels of occupation satisfaction than those who felt pushed into it because of family pressures.’ Parry et al (2005).

Peter Clough, (interviewed as part of this study) is Professor of Psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University and is a leading applied academic authority on mental toughness.

‘Mental toughness describes the capacity of an individual to deal effectively with stressors, pressures and challenges, and perform to the best of their ability, irrespective of the circumstances in which they find themselves.’ Clough (2012)

Although not having studied farmers as an individual subset, from his research into the broader general population and into more specific subsets of society such as professional athletes, Professor Clough is confident that farmers would show a similar spectrum of mental toughness. This spectrum goes from the mentally strong individuals through to those individuals who need more support. The perception that all professional athletes are mentally tough is not correct, rather they fit the same spectrum as the rest of society. From Professor Clough’s work, what sets the successful ones apart is their clearly defined goals. This clarity of vision is what gives them the strength to overcome the challenges, such as the monotony of training, and setbacks, such as injury, that they encounter during their careers. Likewise for farmers having very clearly defined goals with a specific timeline (ie; 1 year and 5 year goals) will help individuals to overcome day to day setbacks. Clear goals help us to see the longer term view which in turn removes the anxiety and stress caused not only by on farm events but also from events which



are beyond our control such as market volatility, political or legislative changes or climatic events. As long as the business is moving towards the set goals within the set time frame day to day issues can be met and dealt with without causing undue stress.

Goal setting works to improve performance in four distinct ways as set out by Dr Edwin Locke *et al* (1981):

1. It causes the individual to focus;
2. It mobilizes effort;
3. It enhances long-term persistence;
4. It promotes new learning strategies.

Clough and Strycharczyk (2012) found that for goals to be effective they should be SMARTER.

This seven letter acronym describes the key steps to goal setting. (see appendix 1)

- **S**pecific,
- **M**easurable,
- **A**chievable,
- **R**elevant,
- **T**ime bound,
- **E**xciting,
- **R**eviewable.

When setting goals in an industry such as farming one needs to be very clear that you are following your own ambitions. There is nothing more stressful than following a path that is not your own. It can be very easy to get ‘swept along on the band wagon’ particularly if involved in dairying at the moment as there is so much ‘hype’ and expectation surrounding the removal of milk quotas. If your ambition is to milk an extra 100 cows and reach every benchmark set and you have the physical and management capabilities to succeed then expansion is for you. How many Irish farmers who are expanding today know why they are expanding? All too often farmers take on expansion because ‘it’s the thing to do’ or ‘everyone else is doing it’, when in reality they do not always have the skills to make it work. In such a case where a farmer is working longer hours and with a higher debt level for little added financial gain is he any better off?

Specific ‘benchmarks’ are important indicators as to how well a farmer is doing in relation to industry ‘best practice’. Widespread promotion of these targets needs to be cognisant of the huge variation in farm and farmer capabilities. Farm production and financial performances that are achievable on an ideally located research farm, such as the Teagasc dairy farm in Moorepark, are certainly attainable by some commercial farmers. However there are such



physical and climatic variations on farms across Ireland that individual benchmarks are more realistic. Success is different for each individual and having clearly defined targets and goals makes it much easier to attain one's own success. It is important to have goals that are realistic and achievable as attaining them will lead to feelings of wellbeing and success while failure can lead to feelings of disillusionment and stress.

Visiting Jamie McCoy and her partner Deian Evans in West Wales I saw this clarity of vision in action.

As a young couple taking on the family dairy farm, from Deian's parents, it was obvious that a very clear development plan had been drawn up. Through careful planning and with the involvement of the older generation they were changing the farming system. They identified a full autumn calving system (a system that is at odds with the regional average) as the most profitable for them, as it best suits their yearly grass growth profile, and were in the middle of an infrastructural development plan that would enable them to best deliver their goals. Though both very busy people their clarity of vision meant they were able to cope with the pressures of the business without undue stress.

Though not specifically following the SMARTER steps of goal setting it is clear that, by planning and implementing their farm development in a structured way, Jamie and Deian are following the same basic path.



3. Mentoring and Team Building

For Professor Clough people can be defined as either ‘active copers’ or ‘emotional copers’ depending on their level of mental toughness. As such a ‘one size fits all’ approach to supporting farmers in need is unlikely to reach all those who need support. When faced with the same problem or stressful situation active and emotional copers respond better to differing types of support. Active copers prefer to be told what needs to be done to solve the issue and then to be left alone to get on with implementing the solution. Emotional copers prefer to discuss the issue with others to find a solution. Both are faced with the same problem and both will ultimately most likely implement similar solutions for solving the problem, it is the way that they interact in looking for support in the first place that is different.

The discussion group model is one such recognised forum for support with over 700 groups throughout Ireland. A group is usually comprised of 10-15 farmers and is usually enterprise and location specific (ie; spring calving dairy farmers from Meath). A groups aim would be to meet once a month on a member’s farm to discuss relevant farming matters. Though a discussion group’s primary function is to aid knowledge transfer, it also plays a vital role in providing emotional support through peer interaction. The discussion group model will not appeal to everyone, and indeed will significantly add to some peoples stress levels if they feel compelled to engage. Therefore a more one to one support structure needs to be considered for some people such as a peer mentoring scheme.

Peer mentoring works in a number of ways. In a strong family structure when a father and son work well together there is a natural mentoring process. In this scenario the father imparts his practical knowledge and experience to his son while at the same time encouraging innovation and ceding responsibility of decision making. This allows the son to grow in knowledge, build resilience and gain the confidence that is needed to drive the farm forward.

Unfortunately all too often a father and son struggle to work together in a supportive way. The father can either be overly cautious or be very resistant to change. As one Nuffield scholars father replied when he announced his intention to change farming enterprise; *‘why do you have to keep challenging yourself, can you not be happy with what you have.’*



In a case where there is little or no parental support, or as is more commonly becoming the case, where a young farmer is starting out on his own, a positive successful mentor could act as the missing supportive ‘father figure’.

In finding a mentor it is important to look for someone who is successful and innovative, who will challenge ideas and practices in an open and honest way and who can be respected and worked with.

Enda Hawe, originally from Kilkenny but now a high profile 50:50 sharemilker in Canterbury, New Zealand, regards his mentor, Ray Seebeck as having had a crucial impact on his development as a successful dairy farmer. They first met when Enda worked for Ray in 2004 and have remained in close contact ever since. Setting up a business in a country where you have no family backup or ‘track record’ with the banks can be extremely tough. For Enda having a respected business leader as a mentor and friend proved very beneficial. Ray guaranteed his first bank loan, enabling Enda to buy his first herd of cows and start on the ‘road’ to sharemilking.

Mentoring is a support practice used successfully in many businesses and sports environments.

Niall Ronan, an ex-professional rugby player with Munster and Ireland, explained some of the mentoring dynamics that drive the Munster players. Though the club is a highly competitive environment, with all players having the same ultimate goal of playing on the senior team, they all understand that it is their collective strength that will deliver the best results. Players vying for the same position will encourage each other to work harder and be better, while on a one to one basis senior players will help younger ones. This one to one player relationship is helpful for younger players when dealing with the mental stresses of injury setbacks or lack of game time while at the same time encouraging patience and a longer term view. Since breaking into the senior team can be slow, the experience of older players into how to manage this ambition can be very helpful for young players

For farmers it is just as important to have a strong support network. Since now-a-days most work alone it is vital to build a ‘team’ of connections they can call upon for advice, ideas and support when times are tough.

Professor Ivor Browne, Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry, UCD gave a valuable insight into our needs as human beings and into how we are designed to react to and deal with stress. He



explained that as humans, we need social interaction with others and also interaction with nature by working on the land with animals and crops to help maintain our natural balance and wellbeing. He also explained that we have evolved over millennia to react to external threats, fear or stress with a “fight or flight” response. He reasoned that we are hard wired to fight a problem (solve it) or flee from it. We are simply not designed to accommodate the build-up stress through an accumulation of problems that we have no immediate solution for. It is this continuous and unreleased build-up of stress through the way we live and work today that can result in many people becoming physically and/ or mentally ill. His view is that humans evolved to live in social groups, maintaining six to eight close personal relationships and numerous acquaintances. These close relationships are with the people that are supposed to help us to deal with life’s problems. Professor Browne believes that the advent of modern farming techniques and increasingly isolated rural populations is leaving farmers without access to the natural support we first evolved to live with. As farmers we are increasingly dependent upon ourselves to develop and maintain these social supports to maintain a healthy balance and mitigate stress build up.

As farms get busier and the social fabric of rural communities changes with more ‘townies’ living in the countryside along with falling church attendance, there is less collective rural community support. By encouraging young farmers to join discussion groups and or to find mentors, not only are they enhancing their opportunity to develop better technical and financial efficiencies but they are also developing social contacts upon whom, if needed, they can draw during hard times. Access to this diverse range of ideas and experience means a greater variety of solutions.



4. Health and Safety

‘According to the US Centre for Disease Control, more than half of all deaths up to the age of 65 are as the result of stressful lifestyles.’

‘The total cost of stress related illness across the European Union, according to the most recent survey, is €13 billion’ (Irish Health and Safety Authority 2009).

Health and safety on farms is a major issue that continually needs highlighting with 30 deaths on Irish farms in 2014 and up to 2000 farmers involved in farm accidents each year (Teagasc). What proportion of these accidents are in some way due to stress is hard to determine. Anecdotally farmers will admit to ‘being less careful’ or ‘taking less care of personal safety’ when they are rushing or under stress when completing their work.

‘Thu et al., (1997) identified stress as a significant risk factor for agricultural injuries. Their study found that those farmers reporting high stress were 1.7 times more likely to sustain a serious injury than those reporting moderate to low stress.’ Finnegan (2007)

While the physical toll of farm injuries is easily identifiable, and openly talked about, there is still an underlying reluctance within the farming community to acknowledge stress and mental health difficulties. Talking to farmers, it was noted that they shied away from engaging in dialogue on ‘mental health’ but more readily discussed ‘feeling stressed, anxious or worried’. The language used when discussing sensitive topics seems to be important. According to findings from “The Public Attitudes towards Mental Health Problems” survey (2014), commissioned as part of “See Change”,

‘72% of farmers would not want others to know if they had a mental health problem, 39% would hide a diagnosis from friends and family and 33% would delay seeking help for fear of someone knowing about it.’ See Change (2014)

These attitudes first need to be changed throughout society as a whole if there is ever going to be real openness surrounding the management of stress in farming.



4.1 Self-care

For attitudes towards ‘mental’ health and safety to change farmers need firstly to recognise their own importance within their businesses and adopt a proactive attitude to self-care.

‘Self-care in health refers to the activities individuals, families and communities undertake with the intention of enhancing health, preventing disease, limiting illness and restoring health’.
Woods (2015)

All farmers take some form of proactive ‘care’ approach in their farming practices whether it is by changing the oil in a tractor to prevent it from breaking down or vaccinating their stock or spraying a crop to prevent a disease outbreak. Is it such a big step to look after themselves? After-all if a cow dies or a tractor breaks down the farm will carry on; but in the case of a farmer having a serious health issue there will be far greater consequences for the farm viability.

A study of farmers in the UK found

‘Despite considerable evidence of occupationally-related illness, little sick leave was taken and stigma was attached to talking about mental health.’ Parry *et al* (2005).

Farming is a unique environment as in most cases, it is both a work place and a family home and as such it can be very hard for farmers to separate the two environments psychologically. Being able to mentally separate these two environments is a great help towards reducing stress as it gives the farmer a chance to relax and leave the ‘worries of the day’ at the back door. Aspirational as it sounds - it is not an unrealistic goal and is achievable through good planning and discipline. A family mind-set that understands the value of spending time together or with friends, in keeping up sporting interests and hobbies and one that values holiday time is important for maintaining a realistic good work life balance. All too often younger farmers are made to feel guilty for wanting to take time off.

Joe Patton, a Teagasc dairy specialist and discussion group facilitator, described a meeting of a young farmer group that he leads. At the end of their last meeting he introduced the topic of stress and how they were feeling.

‘Instead of this taking the last 20 minutes as I had envisaged the discussion lasted two hours’.



The young farmers, most of whom worked ‘with’ their fathers, vented their frustrations mostly with their lack of influence in the farm and how they were made to feel guilty for any time they took off. This highlights that when working as part of a team either with family or with outside labour it is important to recognise that everyone’s social needs vary.

4.2 Navan Discussion Group Study

A study by the Navan Discussion Group (2012-13), a group of 15 Irish dairy farmers, looked at ways they could learn to identify what was causing them stress in their lives and at ways of how they might best deal with these stressors. The study started with an educational phase to inform them about mental health in general: what were the main types of mental illness such as depression or bi-polar disorder; how to recognise some of the major symptoms; where to access help; and how best to support family or colleagues who might be suffering.

This was followed by a comprehensive on-farm survey to identify triggers that were causing stress and the degree of the severity of that stress. This revealed the major stressors to be fatigue and lack of personal time, bad weather and associated management problems, office/paper work and dealing with regulations. Interestingly, financial and succession issues were not deemed major stressors for the group perhaps because they are all established farmers running financially robust farming systems and within an age bracket where succession is not a pressing concern. It was a particularly wet year in 2012 when the surveys were carried out, which may also explain why the weather and associated management issues were cause for such high levels of on farm stress. However just by undertaking the study the group members found they were more able to discuss their feeling around dealing with such a tough year.

Ultimately the major concern for the group was the number of hours they were working. The survey revealed that on average the members were working 65-70 hours a week all year – CSO statistics put the average working week at 35.7 hours (CSO 2015). For a group of spring calving farmers this was a shock; they assumed that their long spring hours would be balanced out by much shorter days in the latter half of the working year. In response to this, workshops in time management and on farm labour efficiencies were carried out to compare the working practices of the most efficient members and see what they were doing differently to those less time efficient. Hobbies, sport and off-farm interests seemed to be the key driver. The most efficient time managers were ultimately those who had interests away from farming and who valued



their time greatest. Like the majority of farmers, most group members had given up their sporting and off farm interests due to the pressures of work and young families. Joe Kirk, who gives a time management lecture to students on the Apprentice Farm Managers course in Moorepark, says he always starts his lecture by saying ‘get a hobby’. Off farm interests help to maintain connections and perspective that are vital in maintaining emotional well-being.

A mindfulness course was also undertaken to help members with relaxation techniques and stress management. Appendix 2 is a summary of the group views on the project and how beneficial they found it.

4.3 Finding support

Getting farmers to engage with support services is still a tough task. Men in general are not good at talking about their personal problems and farmers are worse again. The nature of farming is such that a strong degree of self-reliance and independence are needed to get along, but these characteristics can be at odds with the idea of asking for help. Parry et al (2005) noted in their interviews with farmers that

‘most expressed a preference for support organisations or individuals who were known to them locally, and who were felt to be very familiar with farming, such as the old agricultural advisory service. There was little evidence of knowledge of the stress-based agricultural support organisations operating at a local level, and the stigma attached to not coping with pressure emerged as a major reason why support may not be sought until difficulties have become quite entrenched.’

An Irish health study in 2014 found similar attitudes to engagement.

‘Effective health consultations with farmers revolve around building rapport, talking their language and showing understanding of their profession; all of which pave the way for more open dialogue.’ (Irish Heart Foundation 2014).

The evidence would suggest that to get farmers to readily engage with support services in a timely manner, when needed, requires a high profile organisation led by personnel with a strong agricultural connection.



4.3.1 United Kingdom

The Farm Community Network (FCN) in the United Kingdom was first set up as an agricultural Christian fellowship in 1995 in response to the BSE crisis. Meeting chief executive Charles Smith, he explained how the organisation was there so that farmers could unburden themselves, stating that their main aim was to help farmers manage hardship. The organisation's primary role was to listen and give non-judgemental support, while at the same time acting as a link to which ever support organisation was needed, be it financial, medical or technical. This support service is provided by a regional network of volunteers who man their national helpline and who also meet face to face with every farmer who contacts them. Charles pointed out that the organisation's reputation was based around trust and confidentiality and that all frontline volunteers were required to have a strong farming or rural background. The volunteer's rural connections and ability to empathise with the issues is seen as being crucial in gaining the trust and openness of the farmers.

For Mary Counsell, a FCN helpline volunteer, the biggest number of calls she gets are concerning financial difficulties followed by succession issues, loneliness and TB (as her region of Somerset is a TB blackspot). Mary explained that she acts as a first point of contact for distressed farmers and her role is to listen, provide a 'sympathetic ear' and collect details about the particular case. She then passes the information on to her regional co-ordinator who will organise a meeting between the caller and the volunteer that is best suited to deal with the issues.

The FCN, with the help of NFU, DEFRA and other regional farm bodies are very proactive in promoting their services and helpline number at marts, county shows and on DEFRA literature. This promotion work has been taken a step further lately by their new development officer, Mark Caldicott. Mark's role is to interact with young farmers through information meetings with clubs and in agricultural colleges. By making this initial contact in a positive manner, at a time when young farmers are more relaxed it is hoped they will more readily contact the services should the need arise later in their careers. Interestingly, Mark has noted how, very often after such meetings, he is approached by young people who express their worries. These worries are predominantly about succession issues and interaction with the older generation. A point backed up by the concerns Sian Bushell sees in her work.



4.3.2 New York, USA

Similarly, Cornell University in upstate New York set up NY FarmNet, another example of a strong farm support body, in response to a farm crisis in 1986. Their mission statement;

'is to provide NY farm families with free, confidential consulting services to assist in developing skills for anticipating and addressing financial, family, and production efficiency challenges and transitions through referrals, personalized education, and business and personal planning.'

Just as is the case with the FCN in the UK, Judy Flint a NY FarmNet consultant talks of the rural connection consultants have which helps build farmer trust especially when dealing with the sensitive issues of stress, depression and rural suicide.

"We understand the way of existing in a farm. That puts us ahead of regular mental health providers, and I think farmers are comforted by that."

NY FarmNet, who are funded by the US Department of Agriculture, employ farm consultants who provide a hands on service from drawing up business plans, dealing with succession and communication issues to emotional support through times of crisis or tragedy. "FarmNet is an investment in the state's economy," says Ed Staehr, the executive director. "It's not a cost." (FarmNet website 2015).

A similar attitude to supporting the welfare of Irish farmers needs to be adopted by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine by developing a national support agency with trained rural counselors. Such funding would be possible under Pillar II funding of the Basic Payment Scheme (CAP funds from Europe) as this scheme allows for national discretionary spending.

4.3.3 Southland, New Zealand

Rural Support Trusts are a nationwide network of 14 regional Trusts which assist rural communities and individuals during or after adverse events such as floods and droughts.

Rural support trusts in affected areas may:

- co-ordinate an initial response to an event or a longer term recovery effort
- provide mentors or colleagues from rural backgrounds to talk over problems
- advocate for financial assistance



- provide stress management services.

The trusts' members are local people who have themselves faced the challenges rural life brings. If the trust does not offer particular services themselves, they will put you in touch with appropriate individuals and organizations that can help.

Southland Rural Support, set up in 2007, is part of the network of 14 New Zealand wide Rural Support Trusts that are about;

'rural people helping rural individuals and communities to cope during difficult times.'

Lindsay Wright, an ex-sheep farmer and past chairman of Southland Rural Support, explained that he joined the organization after his own fight with depression led him to leasing out his farm and leaving sheep farming. For him, as their website 'tagline' says

'The unique circumstances of rural life can only be truly understood by rural people who share the same challenges.'

Rural Support throughout New Zealand helps out with issues on all levels be it an individual case up to coordinating a regional crisis response. Lindsay described one such regional crisis and how Rural Support was central to the response effort.

In September 2010 Southland experienced a late season heavy snowfall that caused havoc throughout the farming community what with the calving and lambing seasons in full swing. Roads were blocked, milk could not be collected, feed could not be delivered and many farms were cut off for up to ten days. With little or no shed facilities available, as is the norm in New Zealand farming, livestock were extremely vulnerable with limited feed available. Farmers were extremely distressed and in many cases felt unable to do anything. Rural Support coordinated the effort by gathering a response team together from all the agricultural stakeholder businesses. These included tanker drivers, feed sales men, vets, agri-bankers and others whose jobs revolved around farming but who were not working due to snow. They first collected food parcels to distribute to every farming family and used these as an 'excuse' for visiting farms. When on farm they were then able discuss with the farmer his immediate needs. Each farmers needs were then colour coded, Green as ok, Yellow as in need of some assistance and Red for those in need of immediate help. Thus all the farms were assessed and contact was



made with all farming families so that the relief work could be quickly targeted at those who needed it most.

Lindsay cited this proactive approach to crisis management as an example of how strong rural community support helps to prevent a natural disaster from becoming an industry disaster. He went on to explain how Rural Support was involved with a number of farms that needed ongoing support after the adverse snow event.



5. Media Coverage

The media have a role to play in helping to remove the stigma associated with stress and the perception that by asking for help you are admitting to failure.

'The farming press and media should be aware of the image they are presenting. Farm walks and visits also provide farmers with an opportunity to be open about their failures and not just to concentrate on their highest yields, best crops etc. This can only be done by successful farmers.' (Fairburn 1996).

When profiling successful farmers in print media, in radio interviews or at farm open days it is important **not** to focus solely on the success achieved. Every farmer's achievements are the result of his/her own journey and for everyone that journey is a series of highs and lows, successes and failures. Responsibility lies with the media to show that even the best farmers at times struggle and make mistakes, that it is alright to do so and that the important message is, success comes in learning from these mistakes. By only reporting how well a farmer is doing, the media can give the impression that successful farmers 'had it easy' or 'were always lucky', which is often far from correct. Young farmers need to see that resilience and perseverance will help them to achieve their ambitions and that the mistakes and failures along the way are opportunities to learn from rather than be ashamed of.

Continuing to promote openness and debate around farmer welfare and stress management is essential to the 'normalization' of the topic. Just because the conversation is about an uncomfortable topic does not mean that it should be ignored. Broader initiatives such as World Mental Health Week (6th-12th October - annually) and Mental Health Irelands Green Ribbon campaign (throughout May – annually) are great for keeping the topic in the public 'consciousness'. Though these initiatives are strongly supported by Irish farm organizations more sector specific coverage is essential for farmers to engage with the issue. Events such as the Irish Farmers Journal dairy meeting in Kilkenny (Jan 2015), where Irish dairy farmer and Nuffield Scholar David Kerr spoke courageously about his battle with depression, have a very profound impact on farmers. An extract from an email sent to the Farmers Journal after this interview highlights the impact this style of coverage can have on farmers.



'I see him as a top-class successful farmer and for him to tell his personal story was very surprising indeed. Who would have guessed what was going on for him? Anyone I spoke to afterwards said it was a fantastic talk. I came away realising that we all need to look in on our neighbours just for a chat! A big thank you to David.' (Irish Farmers Journal 2015)

A great example, from outside of farming, of how the media can cover the topic of stress was printed in the Irish Independent recently. Like farming, a professional sport such as rugby union is considered to be a 'macho' environment and like farming it struggles with the belief that it is not alright to need emotional support. Why are men not good at asking for help? Why do professional rugby players or farmers feel under the pressure of a societal stereotype? In the Irish Independent (2015) professional rugby player Tom Court in an interview with David Kelly, talks refreshingly openly about his battle with stress and how that 'stress attacks sleep which itself arouses stress in an unforgiving cycle'. In the environment of professional sport where you are only as good as your last game Tom Court admits to nagging self-doubt. 'Am I good enough? If I am good enough, do they think I'm good enough? Will I be good enough next week?' A recent Irish Rugby Union Players Association (IRUPA) survey revealed that Court is not alone in his feelings. They found that '67% of respondents admitted to regularly/always spending time worrying about playing performance while 74% of players have admitted suffering from excessive lack of sleep; four in 10 agree that performance worries affect relationships outside the sport.'

The more high profile people like David Kerr or Tom Court who speak out about the issue the more it will be 'normalised' and the easier it will be to discuss.



6. Education

Though specific education modules for making young farmers aware of how to deal with stress were not encountered during this study, a number of countries, notably Australia, have initiatives that help farmers to navigate stressful times. The Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety in conjunction with the University of Sydney have produced a farm family business handbook entitled ‘Managing the Pressures of Farming’ (available on their website: <http://www.aghealth.org.au/pressures/>). This handbook gives a very clear guide as to how to assess your needs and how and where to access support be it for business, family or personal reasons.

A similar publication should be included as part of the Health and Safety Authorities ‘Farm Safety Risk Assessment Document’ and distributed to all farming families to enable them to complete a full ‘mental and physical health and safety audit’.

6.1 Mental Health First Aid

Also developed in Australia, in 2002, is the Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) course (now being delivered in 23 countries worldwide). In a study carried out by the Centre for Rural and Remote Area Health, University of Southern Queensland that looked at ‘Enhancing the knowledge and skills of Advisory and Extension Agents (AEAs) in mental health issues of farmers’ it was concluded that;

‘MHFA training is effective in enhancing the mental health knowledge and skills of AEAs. The agents, who are a main line of contact of farmers, are able to recognize mental disorders of people and help them appropriately. They are more willing to work with stigmatized people and know who to refer people to for help.’

A Mental Health First Aid course or similar course module would be of great benefit if included in all Teagasc and UCD agricultural and veterinary courses. It would give the young farmers, vets and advisors of tomorrow the ability to recognise if other farmers, colleagues or clients were showing signs of distress and it would give them the knowledge as to where to find the appropriate help. By teaching students about the issues surrounding stress and mental health before they become involved in farming, it is hoped that they would be more open to seeking help themselves or to helping others if the need arose.



At a time when farming is becoming increasingly more competitive and farmers are working longer hours in more isolated conditions just to remain viable, it is often the case that the only outside contact they may have is with a vet or feed sales representative or a local advisor.

6.2 SafeTALK

‘SafeTalk’ is a Canadian developed suicide awareness program similar to the MHFA and is delivered free of charge, in Ireland, to groups by the Health Service Executive (see appendix 3 for details of SafeTALK program). The HSE ran this course, during 2013, for a group of farmers, vets, Teagasc advisors, agri-bankers, feed and AI sales reps, IFA officers and local Coop member relations officers from county Meath. The idea behind the course, organised by the Navan Discussion Group, was to make the local agricultural service personnel more aware of how to support a farmer in distress should he/she encounter such a situation. The course was extremely well received with one IFA officer, who attended, putting the skills learned into practice the very next day when visiting a local farm.

An extract from an article entitled ‘Death on the Farm’ by US magazine Newsweek in 2014 highlights the global nature of extreme distress on farms.

‘the suicide rate for male farmers has remained high: just under two times that of the general population. And this isn't just a problem in the U.S.; it's an international crisis. India has had more than 270,000 farmer suicides since 1995. In France, a farmer dies by suicide every two days. In China, farmers are killing themselves to protest the government's seizing of their land for urbanization. In Ireland, the number of suicides jumped following an unusually wet winter in 2012 that resulted in trouble growing hay for animal feed. In the U.K., the farmer suicide rate went up by 10 times during the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in 2001, when the government required farmers to slaughter their animals. And in Australia, the rate is at an all-time high following two years of drought.’



Conclusions

Through the series of interviews and case studies with farmers from UK to USA, from New Zealand to France and from discussions and interviews with Nuffield Scholars and extension officers it is possible to conclude that farmers everywhere struggle with very similar challenges. This findings in this study lead to the following conclusions;

- Managing stress involves the ability to cope with or lessen the physical and emotional effects of everyday pressure and challenges. These challenges can often seem insurmountable at first, but with the right support, advice and by tackling them in a structured way they can be successfully overcome.
- By giving young people an insight into what sort of challenges they will face in starting out in farming, they will be better equipped to overcome these issues. *‘An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure.’*
- Succession planning and intergenerational relationships need to be tackled in an open manner early in the career of the succeeding generation to avoid conflict and familial stress.
- Realistic goal setting and proper planning help to identify a clear path to achieving ones ambitions. This clarity of vision helps to insulate against stress caused by unforeseen events.
- Farmers are more likely to talk about their problems to support personnel who have a strong rural connection/empathy. Therefore support services would be better able to engage with farmers in need if they were manned by farmers or rurally based staff/volunteers.
- Developing a ‘farmer experience’ lead debate in the media and in education will resonate far more strongly with the farmers than one lead by non-farming examples.
- Managing stress is not an independent task, rather it is part of ones’ overall personal and business development. Following practices that limit stress will overlap with farm business viability while at the same time help to strengthen personal relationship which will enhance success and ‘quality of life’.



Recommendations

From the research conducted, this report identifies the following initiatives as being of benefit to helping maintain farmer welfare standards by helping to reduce the level of stress experienced by some farmers. Through the open promotion of the need for higher standards of ‘farmer welfare’ there will be a reduction in the ‘stigma’ that surrounds asking for help.

- The setting up of a **single**, central farmer help line to deal with the concerns and worries of all aspects of a farmer’s life by connecting him to all relevant bodies. To be funded under 'Pillar 2' European money to train farmer volunteers to become counsellors. The Farm Community Network in the UK ensure that all their counsellors have a strong rural/agricultural connection as it has found that farmers talk best to those with similar backgrounds.
- Teagasc to set up of a farm mentorship scheme to connect inexperienced enthusiastic farmers with experienced successful farmers. Access to the experience and knowledge of older farmers who model the resilience farmers need, is an invaluable resource that not all young farmers have. To be coordinated through regional Teagasc offices on a volunteer farmer basis.
- The development of an education module to highlight 'mental health and safety' and ‘self-care’ to agriculture students and farmers. To be delivered and promoted jointly by Teagasc, the Health and Safety Authority and UCD’s Agricultural Science Department, through courses, discussion groups and agricultural open days. To help farmers deal with ongoing education surrounding succession and intergenerational relationships, planning and financial viability, dealing with paperwork, staffing issues and stress management. Thus providing the skills to build resilience and mental strength.
- Teagasc to rethink the promotion of benchmarking targets –individual targets need to take account of regional differences, age and needs of farmers (life stage and financial commitments required). Targets that are unattainable can have a negative effect on farmer morale.
- A training module such as Mental Health First Aid or the ‘SafeTALK’ program for industry support personnel - vets, Teagasc advisors, sales reps., Dept. of Agriculture inspectors, agri-bankers and others who support farmers. To show how to best recognise the signs of stress/ distress and how to respond sympathetically to farmers’ in need. ‘Mental Health First Aid’ in Australia has been shown to be very successful.



**“THINGS THAT MATTER MOST MUST NEVER BE AT THE MERCY OF THINGS THAT
MATTER LEAST”**



Appendices

Appendix 1

SMARTER Goals

Specific - You must be able to define them clearly and concisely. The clearer the goal the more effective it is. 'I want to do well at school' is better replaced with 'I want to get four Grade A passes in my A level exams'. It is useful to be equally clear about the benefits (to you and others) of achieving the goal.

Measurable – You must know when you have achieved success and what success will look like. As Henry Ford is reported to have said, 'If it ain't measured, it doesn't get done.' Measures are usually unambiguous and tangible – they remain in sight.

Achievable – Sufficiently challenging but not impossible. Generally the evidence shows that most people make progress by 'gently' stretching themselves. If you overreach yourself this can diminish motivation and failure can be damaging.

Relevant – It should be relevant to the circumstances and have a real impact.

Time bound – There must be a deadline to work towards. To say 'I'll write that report soon' is very different to 'I will write that report by the last day of the month'.

Exciting – They should inspire enthusiasm and commitment. The benefits and impact should be assessed as worthwhile or valuable. The process (the way the goal is achieved) should also provide a source of inspiration or development, for example, the need to learn a new skill.

Reviewable – There must always be provision for reviewing and re-establishing targets to take account of changing circumstances.

(Clough and Strycharczyk, 2012, page 259)



Appendix 2

NAVAN DISCUSSION GROUP: STRESS MANAGEMENT & MENTAL WELL-BEING PROJECT WORKSHEET.

Having completed our Discussion Group Project in 2013, the following questions were put to the group at a workshop to facilitate discussion on where to from here. Their answers are as follows;

Q.1: From my involvement in the project, I have learned.....

- Mental Health is a huge issue on farms countrywide and its amazing how little discussion at farm level there is with ref to Mental Health...
- While there are supports out there none are them are associated directly with the farming Community..
- Farmers should talk more about problems...and try and get “more in touch with feelings”...bottling up does nothing for anyone but as a nation especially men we don’t open up as much as we should to friends/family...
- As farmers we all know the times of the year when we are at our busiest and encounter most stress...
- The project has shown that you have to act early and take action to alleviate the stress ie get help...take time off etc..
- Most people suffer some form of stress and a daily/weekly basis and some deal with it better than others. The latter can learn and practice how to deal with it.
- That stress doesn’t have to be part of work and home life and can be reduced.
- Long hours of working under pressure, contributes to stress. However, being busy, within reason, is good for you.
- Aside from work, personal/people relationships can be a major cause of stress.
- Get a better work/life balance in my life.
- Long working hours is bad for your health: it not worth it!
- How to control my stress levels and deal with them better/more calmly.
- To be more relaxed, listen to my body, look after my physical health,, break my work down into a series of small challenges, rather than one big challenge.
- That I need to risk manage the farm against physical injury/ill-health to myself or my wife.

Q.2: My perception of Mental Health was/is now.....



- **Was:** Limited
Now: Less limited
- **Was:** Surprisingly unaware of the detail,
Now: More aware, I think more about other peoples' problems and how they may affect me and themselves.
- **Was:** I knew very little about Mental Health...
Now: am much more aware and can see what a huge area it is.
- **Was:** Always someone else's problem
Now: I see as a real threat to everyone.
- **Was:** People not able to cope with life stresses.
Now: All kinds of people have mental health issues.
- **Was:** We all have highs and lows. Managing these is the challenge.
Now; No different, except that I know that certain practices like, diet, exercise, mindfulness, meditation, prayer and time off can be very important in keeping our minds well.
- **Was:** something we had no control of..
Now: Something we and I have greater control of..
- **Was:** A sign of a weak person, prone to suffering from "my nerves"
Now: A person mentally vulnerable to unavoidable daily stresses of work and life.
- **Was:** Something you were born with/disabled,
Now: Our wellbeing, just like the flu – it must be looked after
-

Q.3: I notice the following changes in myself since I participated in the project.....

- No change per say just a lot more aware of stress levels and I try to act before it becomes a real worry/problem
- The ability to anticipate a stressful situation arising and dealing with it when it does – thus avoiding rage/panic when dealing with the unexpected. I now planning ahead a bit better.
- I now much more aware of the areas in work and home that are my stressors and now work to reduce their effect.



- I try to avoid panic when the workload piles up, even though this may be coming anyway with age and experience. I try to have enough help on the farm, but don't always work out. I try to do things in a mindful way at times but I need to keep it up more regularly.
- I am more aware of my behaviour during busy periods and how it affects people around me.
- More aware of mental health now,
- I am less stressed and better able to de-stress myself. I am more aware of my stress levels.
- More relaxed in the way I handle things/situations .
- More laid back, plan jobs better, accept everything doesn't have to be 100%; just to the best of my ability with the time available.
- I realise today that the problems/worries I had two weeks ago are now not there and realise I shouldn't have been worrying about them.
- I really do take a more positive attitude to issues and challenges.

Q.4: If and when I experienced stress I would have acted

- I would have: put my head down and worked through it.
- Now: I would be more aware that I should talk about it and get help if needed in whatever area is causing the stress
- I would have: Got short with people and not think through the consequence and then worry
Now: I do some short mindfulness exercises, think situations through better and try to be more positive always.
- I would have: Tried to solve the problem there and then and then act.
Now: I try to solve the problem over a longer time frame.
- I would have: Bottled it up and tried to deal with on my own
Now: I assess the situation and talk to someone.
- I would have: Taken short-cuts. Being "snappy" with family members. Then physically over-doing it, causing tiredness and backache.
Now: I try to do things in a mindfulness way, if possible; and I get enough help on farm.
- I would have: Got very frustrated and sought a quick solution.
Now: I take a deep breath and try to work out what are the best possible solutions to overcome the situation.



- I would have: With a variety of actions – not able to predict – blind rage to panic to having a “go” at the people closes to me.

Now: Try to be more rational, doesn’t always work, tell myself it is a stressful day/week/month/situation but will pass and life will and must go on.

- I would have: Short fused.

Now: Just as short fused!

- I would have: panicked and felt like a failure,

Now: I take a step back look at the positives and the alternatives, relax, plan solutions. Keep looking forward with no regrets.

-

Q.5: My experience of the mindfulness course was.....

- Positive, and useful,
- Excellent and a very worthwhile course to take.
- Very exciting and a new way of relaxing. It should be compulsory in all schools.
- Didn’t do it.
- Positive but would not agree with everything,
- I was originally sceptical but found it calming, relaxing and mind clearing.
- Great.
- How I could totally switch off from the present, leave everything outside the door. How easy I could get into that zone.
- I liked the idea where it explored a number of options on how to relax ,eg. Various techniques, music etc.
- In some small shape or other it should be part of each discussion group meeting.
- Does anyone need help in the Group? What is bothering you? How is it going? How are you?
-

Q.6: The mindfulness course taught me.....

- How to de-stress by clearing my head; this allows me to calm myself and look at the problem better before acting.
- Think twice about things before action and appreciate the small things in life



- We need to look after ourselves. Doing things in a mindful way is remarkably effective in relieving stress. I found meditation more difficult.
- I don't allow stress build up by taking a break; that constant rushing around is very destructive way to live.
- How to perform stress relieving exercises.... How to be careful how much unnecessary pressure we sometimes put on other people.
- How to relax and meditate.
- How to relax, listen to my body, and know my physical and mental limits. Allow extra time for jobs that might be stressful.
-

Q.7. The course could have been improved by.....

- Follow up with once month/two month meetings to keep it fresh in our minds.
- Probably could have been more specific to farmers and the make-up of our jobs.
- Review in 6 months.
-

Q.8. To take the project forward I would suggest.....

- Try to involve other discussion group...maybe with the Time Sheets at first and later to broaden this into a general meeting on Mental Health...
- The idea of getting awareness training for the people, co-op staff, sales reps, vets, advisers, other farmers, etc , who come in contact with farmers on a daily basis is a good idea.
- The Group should study time management/organisation in greater detail.
- The group, in co-operation with agricultural colleges, talk to students about the topic and our experiences.
- A refresher course in mindfulness.
- We need to focus on getting the message out that stress doesn't have to be allowed to have a negative effect and can be controlled through greater awareness of its causes. And by putting in place well defined work practices which compensate for lack of knowledge or for indecision which can cause stress.
- Produce a DVD with ordinary farmers talking; not therapists, recovering depression patients, doctors or church leader; for circulation to farmers that they can watch as often as they want or need to in their own homes.



- Make it available to more people
- Further studies of managing labour, managing time better. Also how to approach/assist somebody who may be under stress/pressure.
- How to reduce work hours?
 - I feel guilt if too short? A frame of mind I have to get over.
 - I need to put time aside and not feel guilty – get away from a constant work mind-set.
 - We need training in office/recording management.
- I need to learn to accept bad outcomes or less than perfect results by myself or others.
- That I have sometimes being “doing my head in” over “nothing”

Q.9. Any other suggestions.....

- Each meeting should have a General Discussion on any problems areas that any of the group members would like to discuss or any problems that they would like to air on anything and have this at the start of the meeting so that it's not a rushed item at the end.
- Perhaps, one or two of our group members going to talk to other discussion groups for 10 minutes at the beginning of one of their monthly farm walks.
- Tied to above, a short “key points to look out for” which could raise awareness among the people above with pointers for them to give a little help, be it directly or indirectly.
- We are all unique, we all have certain strengths and weaknesses', which we should all respect.
- We must get a Dairy Farm Protocol/Procedures book developed

Q. 10. Where to now for the Group?

- Look again at the survey results to help us decide on what need to be acted on so that we do/discuss at meetings. For example, time management, office management, labour management/recruitment, dealing with outside agencies, etc.
- Assist/collaborate with Derek Pepper/others in developing protocol for more widespread promotion of mental health among the farming community.
 - Prepare a 20 minute package for Group members to talk to Lakeland, Glanbia and other. While recognising the limits of such a short presentation it may be an initial informative talk to trigger further action by the Agencies.
 - Prepare 10 key points of action.

Ryan, M (2013)

Appendix 3



Half day programme

Learn four basic steps to recognise persons with thoughts of suicide and connect them with suicide helping resources.

Suitable for everyone who wants to help prevent suicide: front line workers, clergy, volunteers, parents, teachers, citizens ...

What is safeTALK?

safeTALK is a 4 hour suicide alertness programme that prepares participants to identify persons with thoughts of suicide and connect them to suicide first aid resources. These specific skills are called suicide alertness and are taught with the expectation that the person learning them will use them to help save lives. Expect to leave *safeTALK* more willing and able to perform an important helping role for persons with thoughts of suicide.

What happens at safeTALK trainings?

Expect to be challenged. Expect to have feelings. Expect to be hopeful.

See powerful reminders of why it is important to be suicide alert. Ask questions and enter discussions. Learn clear and practical information on what to do.

Practice the *TALK* (Tell, Ask, Listen, and Keepsafe) steps to connect a person with suicidal thoughts to suicide first-aid intervention caregivers.

Conclude with practice in activating a suicide alert.

How does safeTALK help prevent suicide?

safeTALK suicide alert helpers are trained to:

- Move beyond common tendencies to miss, dismiss or avoid suicide
- Identify people who have thoughts of suicide
- Apply the *TALK* steps to connect a person with suicidal thoughts to people and agencies that can help.

Who should attend safeTALK?

This training is suitable for everyone who wants to help prevent suicide and is prepared to become a suicide alert helper.



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