



The Missing Link: Engaging Rural Australians Before Crisis

David Woods, 2025 Scholar
Queensland

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Executive Summary

This research sought to understand why some organisations consistently succeed in engaging rural Australians before they reach crisis. Across Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, I found that organisations working in very different settings had independently arrived at many of the same principles. Their success often came from making the first step easier to take.

This research aimed to identify the principles that consistently encouraged engagement across diverse settings, rather than to find a single solution. It drew on interviews and observations from farmers, community leaders and organisations spanning farmer wellbeing, alcohol misuse, leadership and peer support.

Several recurring principles consistently underpinned strong engagement. Organisations achieving strong engagement reflected the identity of the people they served. They used familiar language, established credibility through lived experience, created environments where people felt psychologically safe, encouraged repeated connection and translated complex ideas into simple, practical experiences. Different organisations applied these principles in different ways, but the underlying pattern was consistent.

These observations help explain why rural mental health outcomes have remained difficult to improve despite significant investment, expanded services and growing awareness. Improving services remains essential, but no intervention can improve outcomes if people never meaningfully engage with it. This research argues that engagement should be viewed as a design challenge. By intentionally designing environments that align with how rural Australians naturally think, communicate and build trust, earlier engagement becomes more likely.

To demonstrate how these principles might be applied, this report proposes the Intercooler model: a practical peer framework designed to help rural Australians regulate life's pressures before they exceed their available capacity to cope. The model is currently being piloted through small peer groups of rural men, providing an opportunity to test and refine its design in practice. Although the initial pilot has focused on rural men, the underlying design principles are intended to be adaptable across different rural settings and populations. Rather than replacing existing services, the Intercooler is designed to make taking the first step easier and to encourage earlier engagement with broader pathways when needed. While still in the pilot stage, it demonstrates how the principles identified throughout this scholarship can be put into practice.

Ultimately, this scholarship suggests that improving rural mental health is not simply about expanding services, but about intentionally designing environments that rural Australians genuinely want to engage with. By viewing engagement as a design challenge rather than simply an individual choice, this research offers an approach to encouraging earlier engagement and improving rural mental health outcomes.

Keywords: Rural mental health, engagement, identity, peer support

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Foreword

When most people think about a Nuffield Scholarship, they think about building capacity within agriculture. That idea resonated strongly with me, but over time I found myself asking a different question. If we are working so hard to build the capacity of rural Australia, why aren't we paying more attention to the capacity we are losing?

Like many Nuffield Scholars, my roots are firmly in agriculture. I manage our family's mixed broadacre cropping and grazing enterprise near Goondiwindi, Queensland. While farming has shaped much of my life, this scholarship grew from a deeply personal journey and a desire to better understand one of the greatest challenges facing rural Australia.



Figure 1. David Woods, Author (Source: Author)

Many years before this scholarship, I experienced chronic depression that took me to a very dark place. My recovery raised as many questions as it answered. I became determined to understand what had kept me psychologically stuck and to discover the underlying dynamics of a life that remains rock solid when everything around it is shaken.

Over the following fifteen years, I spent more than a thousand hours studying psychology, human behaviour and leadership, searching widely for my own answers. My motivation became deeply personal. I wanted to understand these questions not only for myself, but for my family. I wanted to make sure my children grew up with the kind of foundations that would help them withstand life's inevitable suffering without losing themselves in it.

For a period, I became involved in mental health advocacy. While I cared deeply about the issue, I eventually stepped away. I found it extraordinarily difficult to create meaningful change for rural men because engaging them before they reached crisis seemed almost impossible. I came to believe my time was better invested in my farm, my family and continuing my own learning.

Then I lost a close friend to suicide.

The tragedy forced me to revisit questions I thought I had left behind. Sometime later I lost another close friend, and I reached the conclusion that I could no longer simply hope someone else would solve this problem. If there was any contribution I could make, I felt I had a responsibility to try.

A Nuffield Scholarship offered the opportunity to pursue that question with a depth and breadth that would never have been possible otherwise. Rather than searching for another mental health program or another awareness campaign, I wanted to better understand a more fundamental question. Why do so many capable rural Australians struggle to engage with support before they reach crisis? If we better understood that question, perhaps we could begin helping people much earlier.

As the scholarship unfolded, my conviction that this work mattered only grew stronger. I came to realise that I did not really choose this path. In many ways, it felt as though the path had chosen me. If I had the opportunity to contribute, then I also had a responsibility to do so.

The scholarship ended with a moment I will never forget. I took my report to the resting place of the mates I had lost and read it aloud. As I stood there reflecting on the journey, I realised how deeply they had shaped it. Looking back, I could see that the Nuffield journey had been driven by a desire to honour them.

Reading this report to them was one of the most meaningful moments of my life. It strengthened my commitment to keep advancing the cause, to keep asking better questions, and to keep searching for better ways to help more rural Australians engage before they reach crisis.

Table 1. Travel Itinerary

Dates	Country	Visits / contacts
May 18–22, 2025	Singapore	Global Focus Program
May 22–27, 2025	Indonesia	Global Focus Program
May 27–31, 2025	Qatar / UAE	Global Focus Program
May 31–Jun 8, 2025	Germany	Global Focus Program

Jun 8–17, 2025	United States	Global Focus Program
Jun 17–22, 2025	Mexico	Global Focus Program
Nov 16–Dec 2, 2025	United Kingdom: West Yorkshire North Yorkshire Gloucestershire Herefordshire Somerset Cornwall Hampshire	James Dent – Farm visit Joe Dugdale – Farm visit Hugh Shedden (2017 Nuffield Scholar) – Farm visit Alex Crawley (2025 Nuffield Scholar) – Farm visit Martin Williams – We Are Farming Minds Sam Stables – We Are Farming Minds Gerard Tucker (1997 Nuffield Scholar) Peter Green (2025 Nuffield Scholar) – Farm visit Geoff Williams – Farm visit Stuart Oates (2025 Nuffield Scholar) David Oates (2025 Nuffield Scholar) Sharon May (2025 Nuffield Scholar)
Apr 14–29, 2026	United States: Phoenix Las Vegas Colorado Springs Cheyenne Wells Boise	Kyree Oliver – Men’s leadership coach Jake Kauffman – Men’s performance coach Jerry Henderson – Life coach (Harvard trained in psychology) Kit Pharo – Pharo Cattle Company – Farm visit Craig Gore – Men’s performance coach
Jun 2–16, 2026	New Zealand: Golden Bay South Marlborough Marlborough Wairarapa Cambridge Hamilton	Wayne Langford – Federated Farmers NZ President Nigel Harwood – Farm visit Corrigan Sowman - (2019 Nuffield Scholar) Doug Avery – Farm visit Hamish Murray - (2019 Nuffield Scholar) Lisa Portas - (2025 Nuffield Scholar) Marc Gascoigne – Farmstrong Ambassador – Farm visit Gerard Vaughan – Farmstrong CEO Rural Support Trust – Hamilton Field Days Dani Darke - (2025 Nuffield Scholar)

The Missing Link: Engaging Rural Australians Before Crisis

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Acknowledgements

To **Nuffield Australia**, thank you for recognising my passion and determination to contribute to a cause I care so deeply about. This scholarship challenged me intellectually, stretched me personally and became one of the most significant periods of growth in my life. For that opportunity, I will always be profoundly grateful.

To **GrainCorp**, thank you for your generous support of Australian agriculture and rural communities. Your investment made this scholarship possible and gave me the greatest opportunity I have ever had to contribute to a cause far bigger than myself.

To **my wife, Alice**, I would never have begun this journey without your belief in me. Through every high and low, your encouragement, patience and unwavering support became the foundation that allowed me to keep moving forward. For that, I will always be grateful.

To **everyone I met throughout my Nuffield journey**, thank you. We often laughed about the fact that I had chosen a topic that many people would rather avoid, yet time and again those conversations became honest, personal and deeply vulnerable. It takes courage to have those conversations, and I have enormous respect for everyone who trusted me with their stories. I learnt far more than I could ever have hoped, and this report is richer because of your generosity.

Finally, to the mates we have lost. You remain the quiet reason behind so many of the questions this scholarship set out to explore. I hope this report honours you as a small tribute to your legacy.

Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
COM-B	Capability, Opportunity, Motivation – Behaviour model
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
YOLO	You Only Live Once

Objectives

The objectives of the research are to:

- Examine why rural mental health outcomes remain poor despite increased investment and expanded service availability.
- Explore the identity, psychological, cultural and relational factors that influence engagement.
- Identify the common principles used by organisations and communities that successfully engage rural people.
- Synthesise these principles into practical approaches that may improve engagement.
- Explore how improving early engagement may enable people to access a broader range of pathways appropriate to their individual needs.

Introduction

Australian agriculture depends on capable, resilient people. Considerable investment has been made in improving wellbeing across rural Australia through expanded services, increased public awareness and a growing range of support initiatives. Yet many of the outcomes these efforts seek to improve have changed far more slowly than hoped. Many rural Australians continue to delay engaging with support until their difficulties have become far more severe. This pattern has significant consequences not only for individuals and families, but also for farming businesses, rural communities and the long-term capacity of Australian agriculture.

This report explores an important question: why do so many rural Australians resist engaging with support, often until they reach crisis?

Rather than focusing primarily on the availability of services or the effectiveness of interventions, this scholarship examines a different part of the problem: engagement itself. It explores how identity, culture, trust and human connection influence whether people take the first step towards support, and how earlier engagement might be encouraged within rural communities.

To investigate these questions, the scholarship drew on interviews and observations from farmers, community leaders, researchers and organisations across Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. Although these organisations worked in very different settings, many had independently developed remarkably similar approaches to engaging people. The scholarship sought to identify the recurring principles that consistently encouraged engagement across diverse contexts and consider how those principles might be applied within rural Australia.

Although human psychology is extraordinarily complex, the organisations creating the greatest impact rarely communicated that complexity. Instead, they translated psychological concepts into simple principles, practical metaphors and everyday language that made engagement feel accessible rather than intimidating. This report follows the same philosophy. Its objective is not to oversimplify a complex issue, but to translate that complexity into ideas that are easier to understand and apply.

The report is organised into four chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the engagement paradox. Chapter 2 explores the factors shaping engagement. Chapter 3 identifies recurring engagement principles. Chapter 4 demonstrates how those principles can be combined in practice.

The ideas presented here sit alongside existing clinical, psychological and social models. They are informed by the literature, interviews, site visits and observations undertaken throughout this scholarship, together with insights drawn from lived experience. They are offered as a synthesis of recurring principles observed across multiple countries and organisations, and as one possible contribution to strengthening engagement within rural Australia. If they encourage others to think

differently about engagement and to design environments where more rural Australians take the first step before reaching crisis, then this report will have served its purpose.

Chapter 1. The Engagement Paradox

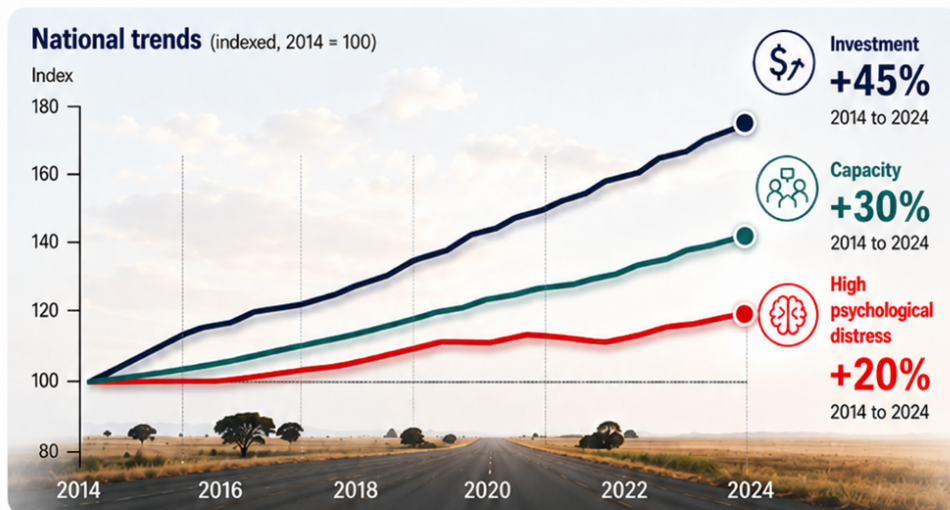
This chapter addresses the first objective of the scholarship by examining what this report refers to as the engagement paradox. It explores why mental health outcomes have remained difficult to improve despite increasing investment, expanding services and growing public awareness. Engagement refers broadly to people taking the first step and remaining connected with pathways that enable them to respond to life's challenges before reaching crisis.

Australia has invested heavily in mental health over the past decade. Government expenditure has increased, the specialist mental health workforce has expanded, and public awareness campaigns have expanded considerably (*Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, 2024; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024*). Yet population mental health outcomes have remained difficult to improve (*Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024*). This raises an important question: if more support is available than ever before, why are so many people still not engaging before reaching crisis?

Figure 2.

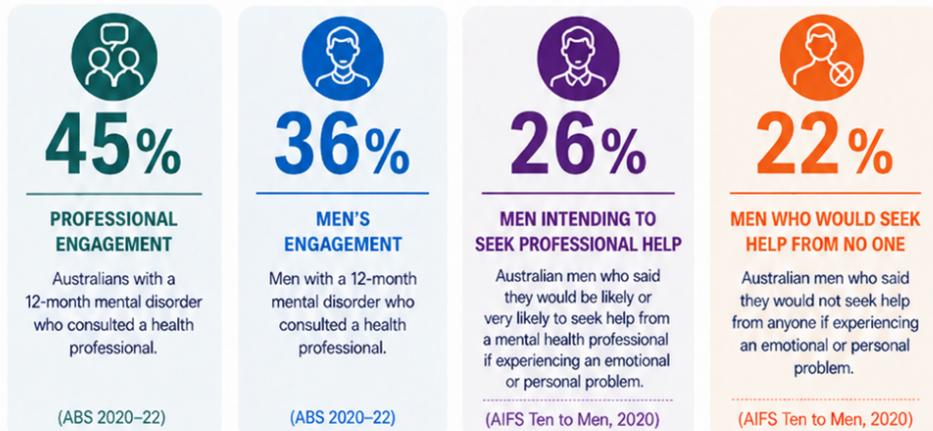
Australia's Mental Health Paradox

Despite substantial increases in investment and workforce capacity, Australia has not seen clear, measurable improvements in population mental health.



Notes: Three-year moving averages. See Appendix A for variable definitions and data sources.

THE EVIDENCE BEHIND THE PARADOX



Sources: AIHW; ABS; Australian Institute of Family Studies; Department of Health and Aged Care. See Appendix A for variable definitions and data sources.

Figure 2. Australia's Mental Health Paradox. Source: Author's analysis and visualisation using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023), Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024), Australian Institute of Family

Studies (2020), and the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care (2024). See Appendix A for data sources, calculations and methodology.

As shown in Figure 2, government investment, specialist workforce capacity and high psychological distress have all increased since 2014. While investment and workforce capacity have risen substantially, high psychological distress has also continued to increase. Although these trends do not establish cause and effect, they raise an important question: why has greater investment not translated into better population outcomes? The engagement indicators in Figure 2 suggest one possible explanation. This report refers to this disconnect as the engagement paradox: expanding services does not necessarily increase engagement, and without engagement, greater investment cannot fully translate into better outcomes.

The scale of the challenge is reinforced by several additional indicators:

- Mental ill health and suicide cost Australia an estimated \$200–220 billion annually, equivalent to approximately \$550–600 million every day (*Productivity Commission, 2020*).
- Approximately 3.8 million Australians (around one in seven people) are dispensed antidepressants each year (*Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024*).
- The prevalence of mental disorders among Australians aged 16–24 increased from 26% to 39% between 2007 and 2020–22, an increase of approximately 50% (*Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023*).
- Australia's age standardised suicide rate has remained broadly unchanged at around 12 deaths per 100,000 people for approximately three decades, despite substantial increases in investment, workforce capacity and public awareness (*Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024*).

Several factors may contribute to these trends, including greater public awareness, expanded diagnostic criteria, improved recognition of psychological distress and increased willingness to seek help. These influences may partly explain why more Australians are identified as experiencing mental ill health and why treatment rates have increased over time. However, they do not fully explain why many people continue to delay engaging with available support until distress has become severe, nor why substantial investment in services has not consistently translated into improved population outcomes.

Taken together, these findings suggest that one of Australia's greatest opportunities to improve mental health outcomes may lie in increasing engagement with the services and supports that already exist. If a substantial proportion of people do not engage, or only engage once pressure has escalated into crisis, the potential benefits of increased investment and service capacity cannot be fully realised.

This research therefore explores a central question: why do some environments consistently encourage engagement while others struggle to do so? Understanding the answer requires first recognising why engagement matters. If engagement is the point through which every form of

support must pass, then it may represent one of the most important leverage points for improving rural mental health outcomes.

Engagement as the bottleneck

Generating and sustaining engagement is one of the fundamental challenges facing systems designed to support people (Yardley et al., 2015; Michie et al., 2011). If people never take the first step, even the most effective interventions cannot improve outcomes.

From a systems perspective, which considers how the different parts of a system work together rather than in isolation, engagement may represent the primary bottleneck. A bottleneck determines the performance of the entire system. Increasing capacity downstream achieves little while the principal constraint remains upstream. Likewise, refining interventions, expanding services and increasing funding can only have limited impact if people do not engage in the first place. Viewed through this lens, attention shifts from the performance of individual services to the behaviour of the system as a whole. If large numbers of people consistently choose not to engage, that pattern is unlikely to be explained by individual choice alone. It suggests there may be features of the system itself that influence engagement. Before improving interventions, we must first understand engagement.

Research approach

Rather than reviewing the mainstream mental health system in detail, this scholarship deliberately focused on organisations and individuals who appeared to be achieving unusually strong engagement. This scholarship increasingly focused on outliers, people and organisations achieving exceptional engagement by doing things differently. These outliers became valuable because they challenged conventional assumptions and often revealed principles that were less visible within established systems.

The scholarship involved interviews, site visits and observations across multiple countries and contexts. The organisations visited spanned farmer wellbeing, alcohol misuse, peer support, leadership and community development. Although they differed in their missions, audiences and approaches, many appeared to achieve unusually strong engagement. Rather than searching for a single solution, the aim was to identify the underlying principles that consistently emerged across these diverse contexts.

As the scholarship progressed, the focus also evolved. Rather than accepting the problem as it was commonly framed, the scholarship increasingly questioned the question itself. Instead of asking how rural mental health services could be improved, it explored why so many people never

engaged with available support in the first place. That shift in perspective ultimately led the research away from individual interventions and towards the design principles that influence engagement.

These observations were then considered alongside relevant literature and systems thinking (Meadows, 2008) to identify recurring principles of engagement. Chapter 3 synthesises those principles into a practical framework for designing engagement, while Chapter 4 demonstrates how they can be intentionally combined through the Intercooler as a practical case study.

The engagement paradox therefore became the central focus of this scholarship. If increasing investment, expanding services and growing awareness cannot improve outcomes without engagement, then understanding how engagement is created becomes essential. The chapters that follow explore the principles that consistently encourage engagement and demonstrate how those principles can be translated into practice.



Figure 3. Kit Pharo, Colorado, USA. Kit Pharo’s “herd quitter” philosophy reinforced the importance of challenging accepted assumptions and being willing to think differently. **(Source: Author)**

Chapter 2. Understanding Engagement

This chapter explores the cultural, psychological and relational factors that shape engagement in rural Australia. Identity, language, available capacity and the way people build trust all influence whether someone accepts or rejects the first invitation to engage.

This chapter addresses the second objective of the scholarship by examining the identity, psychological, cultural and relational factors that influence engagement. The observations that follow provide the behavioural foundation for the engagement principles developed in Chapter 3.

Rural identity shapes engagement

Rural Australia has long been characterised by values of stoicism and self reliance. These qualities developed over generations of farming in an environment defined by drought, flood, volatile markets, isolation and uncertainty. Success often depended on enduring hardship, making difficult decisions with incomplete information and continuing despite adversity. Over time, these behaviours became more than practical adaptations. They became part of rural identity (*Fuller et al., 2000; Kaukiainen & Kõlves, 2020*).

Many rural Australians take great pride in being dependable, capable and able to carry whatever life places before them without burdening others. Emotional restraint became closely associated with strength, while openly expressing vulnerability could feel inconsistent with the identity that had served them well throughout their lives. Trust is rarely earned through qualifications alone. It is earned by showing up consistently, solving problems and demonstrating an understanding of rural life.

These qualities remain among rural Australia's greatest strengths. They have enabled individuals, families and communities to navigate extraordinary challenges across generations. The challenge is that many of today's pressures cannot be solved through endurance alone. Chronic stress, emotional exhaustion, relationship difficulties and declining psychological capacity often require a different response from the practical problems previous generations became so skilled at overcoming.

The same qualities that help people endure external hardship can make it more difficult to engage with internal challenges. If the first invitation to engage with support feels inconsistent with a person's identity, resistance should not be surprising. It may not reflect a rejection of support, but an attempt to remain consistent with the person they have spent a lifetime becoming. Understanding that relationship between identity and engagement provides the foundation for the remainder of this chapter.

The invitation to engage

Throughout this research it became increasingly clear that the invitation to engage often mattered as much as the support itself. Across the countries visited, organisations with very different missions repeatedly arrived at the same conclusion: the way support was introduced often determined whether people engaged at all. During a conversation with USA men's leadership coach Jake Kauffman, he observed, *"People don't resist change. They resist being changed"* (Kauffman, personal communication, 2026). This insight repeatedly emerged throughout the scholarship, suggesting that how support is presented may be just as important as the support itself.

The words themselves were important, but the intention behind them mattered even more. During one discussion, UK farmer and counsellor Geoff Williams described trust, empathy and unconditional positive regard as the foundations of effective therapeutic relationships. He also reflected that people readily detect whether they are being genuinely understood or merely analysed (Williams, personal communication, 2025).

For many rural Australians, words such as *help*, *support*, *vulnerability* and *mental health* can carry unintended meanings. Rather than being heard as an invitation, they may imply dependence, diminished capability or a loss of control. Whether those meanings are intended is almost beside the point. If the invitation feels inconsistent with a person's identity, resistance can occur before the support itself has even been considered.

Many organisations addressed this by changing the conversation rather than the service. Instead of asking people to seek help, they spoke about building capacity, managing pressure, maintaining performance and protecting what mattered most. In many cases, the support itself remained unchanged. What changed was the way the invitation was experienced. New Zealand farmer wellbeing initiative FarmStrong, for example, deliberately frames its work around staying well enough to farm rather than seeking mental health support, making the first step feel more consistent with farmers' identities.

Effective engagement begins by meeting people where they are at. Language that reflects identity and demonstrates genuine understanding creates a bridge into conversations that might otherwise never occur. If the invitation feels inconsistent with how people see themselves, resistance often occurs before the support itself has even been considered. Understanding why this happens requires looking beyond language alone and considering how identity shapes behaviour.

Identity shapes behaviour

Identity influences far more than how people describe themselves. It shapes what feels natural, acceptable and consistent with who they believe themselves to be. As a result, people are naturally drawn towards behaviours that reinforce their identity and often resist behaviours that appear inconsistent with it.

For many rural Australians, identity is closely associated with being capable, dependable, practical and able to solve problems under pressure. In their research exploring health and wellbeing in rural communities, *Fuller et al. (2000)* identified self-reliance and stoicism as enduring characteristics of rural culture, shaped by generations of adapting to isolation, uncertainty and the practical demands of life on the land. These characteristics have enabled individuals, families and communities to navigate adversity.

Difficulties arise when support is perceived as being inconsistent with that identity. If engaging with a service appears to imply that a person is no longer coping, capable or independent, resistance can appear before the service itself has even been considered. The issue is often not the support being offered, but what accepting that support appears to say about the individual from their perspective.

This helps explain why awareness alone rarely changes behaviour. People respond not only to potentially helpful information, but also to what acting on that information appears to say about who they are.

Low stress stock handling offers a useful analogy. Rather than relying primarily on force, it works by understanding how cattle naturally perceive and respond to pressure. Experienced stock handlers understand that behaviour rarely changes by applying more brute force. Instead, when cattle consistently baulk, turn back or become distressed, the first response is not to blame the animal, but to become curious about what is creating that behaviour. The handler considers how pressure is being applied and how that pressure interacts with the animal's natural instincts. By changing the way pressure is applied, the handler often changes the animal's behaviour. The lesson is not really about cattle. It is that behaviour often changes when we change the conditions that give rise to it.

Throughout this research, it became clear that rural mental health engagement could deserve the same mindset. When large numbers of people consistently resist engaging with existing support, the important questions become: Which factors shape engagement? How might environments be designed to encourage earlier engagement? Like skilled stock handlers, our role may be to better understand the environment producing that behaviour and to intentionally design conditions where engagement feels natural. One of the defining insights of this research was the importance of intentionally designing environments that encourage engagement. This shifts attention from trying to change the individual to understanding and shaping the conditions that influence behaviour.



Figure 4. Jake Kauffman, Las Vegas, USA. Discussions around identity, agency and the deeper drivers of human behaviour helped shape the thinking that underpins this report. (Source: Author)

Why awareness is not enough

Awareness is an essential first step in change. Without recognising that a problem exists, there is little opportunity to address it. Education, public health campaigns and community conversations all play an important role in increasing awareness, understanding and reducing stigma. Awareness alone, however, rarely changes behaviour. As *Michie, van Stralen and West (2011)* propose through the COM-B model, knowledge is only one component of behaviour change, which also depends on capability, opportunity and motivation.

This provides one possible explanation for the paradox outlined in Chapter 1. Increasing awareness is important, but awareness alone is unlikely to improve outcomes if people do not engage with support or cannot translate knowledge into meaningful action.

For many rural Australians, the challenge begins before awareness has an opportunity to influence behaviour. Awareness can only influence people who are willing to engage with the conversation in the first place. If support feels inconsistent with a person's identity or values, many will disengage before the message itself can influence behaviour. This reinforces the central argument of this report that improving engagement is not separate from improving outcomes; it is a prerequisite for them.

Even when people do engage, awareness alone is seldom enough to produce lasting change. Most people already know they should exercise more, eat better, drink less alcohol, spend less time on their phones and get more sleep. Yet knowing what to do and consistently doing it are vastly different things. If knowledge alone changed behaviour, many of today's most persistent health challenges would already be in decline.

Much of human behaviour is automatic. *Kahneman (2011)* distinguishes between fast, automatic thinking and slower, more deliberate reasoning, while *Wood and Neal (2007)* show that repeated behaviours become increasingly habitual over time. Together, these findings help explain why established patterns of behaviour can be surprisingly difficult to change, even when people recognise they are no longer beneficial.

This helps explain why providing information alone through awareness campaigns is often insufficient to change behaviour (Michie et al., 2011). Information competes with established habits, identity and automatic behavioural patterns. Knowledge may change what people understand without changing what they actually do.

The challenge becomes even greater under sustained pressure. *Arnsten's (2009)* research demonstrates that prolonged stress impairs attention, executive functioning and cognitive flexibility, increasing reliance on familiar patterns of thinking and behaving. Understanding this relationship between pressure and behaviour provides the foundation for the concept of available adaptive capacity explored in the following section.

Available adaptive capacity

In this report, available adaptive capacity refers to the physical, emotional and psychological resources a person has available to respond to the demands of everyday life. It influences our ability to think clearly, solve problems, regulate emotions, make decisions and adapt to changing circumstances, functions that are known to become impaired under prolonged stress (*Arnsten, 2009*). For example, after several nights of poor sleep, mounting financial pressure and a series of unexpected setbacks, even a relatively minor problem can feel far more difficult to manage than it normally would. The important question is not how much capacity someone has, but how much capacity remains available to them.

Life continually draws upon these internal resources. Some demands are obvious, such as financial pressure, drought, relationship difficulties, or increasing workloads. Others are less visible. Chronic worry, unresolved conflict, perfectionism, self criticism, grief and a loss of purpose can quietly consume adaptive capacity over time. While each pressure may appear manageable in isolation, their combined effect can substantially reduce the available adaptive capacity in someone when new challenges arise. This cumulative effect is consistent with *McEwen's (1998)* concept of allostatic load, which describes the biological and psychological wear and tear associated with prolonged exposure to stress.

The distinction between total adaptive capacity and available adaptive capacity helps explain why two people facing similar circumstances can respond very differently. Most people function well while a reasonable reserve remains. They can think clearly, adapt to changing circumstances and make sound decisions. As pressure accumulates, however, that reserve gradually diminishes. Increasing effort is required simply to maintain the same level of performance, even though outwardly very little may appear to have changed.

Importantly, available adaptive capacity is dynamic rather than fixed. It changes over time as people respond to, adapt to and recover from life's demands. The processes that influence available adaptive capacity are explored further in Chapter 4.

As available adaptive capacity diminishes, people often experience gradual changes. Difficulty sleeping, reduced concentration, irritability and increasing indecision may begin to emerge. These changes are also consistent with the research of *Armsten (2009)* showing that prolonged stress can impair attention, executive functioning and decision-making. As pressure continues to build, relationships may become strained, motivation declines and people often withdraw from the very people and activities that could help them respond more effectively to mounting pressure. Eventually, a point may be reached where the demands placed upon an individual exceed the adaptive capacity they have remaining. Beyond this threshold, performance, emotional regulation and decision making can deteriorate rapidly, increasing the likelihood of burnout, breakdown or crisis.

This helps explain why major life events such as drought, financial hardship or relationship breakdown are often perceived as the cause of distress. While these events can have profound impacts in their own right, they may also represent the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back. The final stressor is often the one people notice, but it is rarely the whole story. A more informative question is how much available adaptive capacity remained before that final event occurred?

Burnout, anxiety, depression, relationship conflict, substance misuse and suicidal thinking are very different experiences with complex and often multiple contributing causes. Yet they may also share something in common. They frequently emerge when cumulative demands exceed the available adaptive capacity a person has remaining. Viewing these experiences through the lens of available adaptive capacity does not replace biological, psychological or social explanations. Rather, it offers an additional perspective that is consistent with the cumulative effects of chronic stress (*McEwen, 1998*).

One of the greatest challenges is that people rarely recognise how close they are to their limit. Many continue working, caring for their families and meeting their responsibilities long after their available adaptive capacity has begun to decline. By the time the effects become obvious, that decline may have been unfolding for months or even years.

Viewing wellbeing through the lens of available adaptive capacity changes the question. Instead of asking how we respond once someone reaches crisis, we begin asking how we recognise

diminishing capacity before people reach crisis. This does not diminish the importance of evidence based treatment for those experiencing mental illness. Rather, it highlights the importance of recognising and responding to diminishing available adaptive capacity before formal intervention becomes necessary.

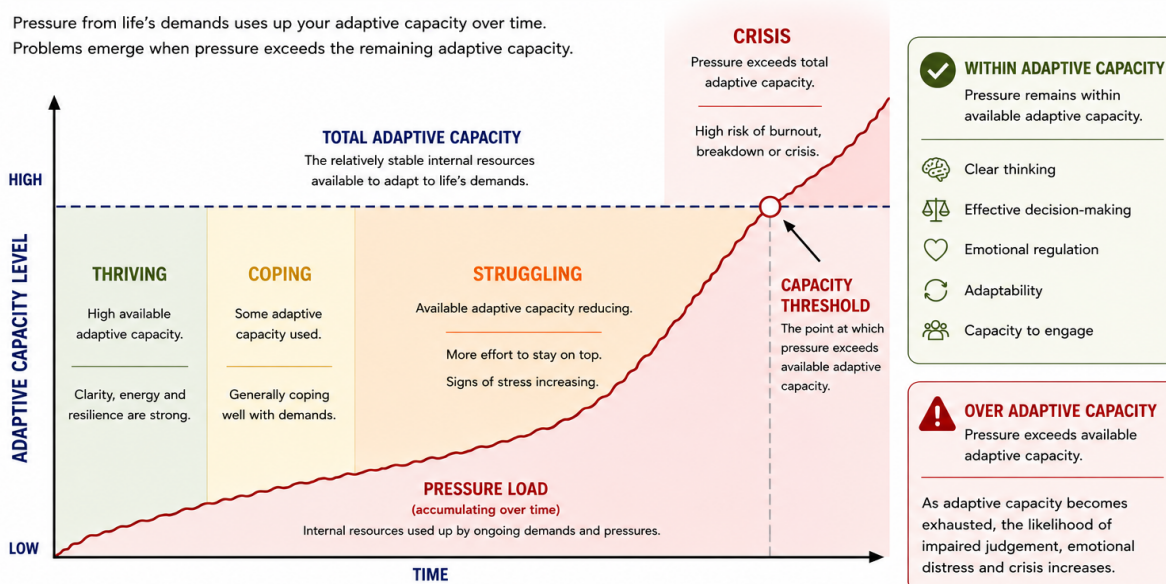
Understanding capacity in this way also provides another perspective on engagement. When people have very little available adaptive capacity remaining, engaging with support can feel like just another demand. Completing paperwork, making appointments, travelling, talking about deeply personal experiences or navigating unfamiliar services all require energy. This is consistent with the COM-B model developed by *Michie et al. (2011)*, which proposes that behaviour depends on capability, opportunity and motivation. As available adaptive capacity diminishes, recognising the need for change and taking action to restore it both become increasingly difficult.

Viewed through this lens, improving outcomes is not simply about increasing awareness or expanding services. It also requires creating approaches that people can engage with while sufficient available adaptive capacity remains. This provides another perspective on the engagement paradox introduced in Chapter 1. As available adaptive capacity diminishes, engaging with support itself becomes increasingly difficult. Understanding how to design for engagement before that point is reached is the focus of the next chapter.

THE CAPACITY MODEL

Wellbeing and performance depend on how much adaptive capacity remains available to respond to life's demands.

Pressure from life's demands uses up your adaptive capacity over time.
Problems emerge when pressure exceeds the remaining adaptive capacity.



Pressure is an inevitable part of life. Crisis is not. By recognising diminishing adaptive capacity earlier and reducing cumulative pressure where possible, we can protect our wellbeing, maintain performance and engage with support before capacity is exceeded.

Figure 5. A conceptual model of available adaptive capacity under pressure. Source: *Author's conceptual model informed by McEwen (1998), Arnsten (2009), Michie et al. (2011), Kahneman (2011) and Wood and Neal (2007). Artificial intelligence (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used as a drafting and design aid during the iterative development of the conceptual model and accompanying figure.*

Like all conceptual models, Figure 5 simplifies a far more complex reality. People do not move neatly from one stage to the next, and different areas of life may sit at different points at the same time. Nevertheless, most readers will recognise periods when life felt manageable, times when staying on top of everyday demands required increasing effort, and occasions when pressure eventually exceeded their available adaptive capacity. The goal is not to eliminate pressure, which is an inevitable part of life, but to recognise when adaptive capacity is diminishing so that pressure can be regulated before it exceeds what a person can sustainably carry.

Chapter 3. Principles of engagement

Organisations working in very different fields repeatedly arrived at remarkably similar ways of engaging people. Although their missions differed, many appeared to rely on a common set of underlying principles.

This chapter addresses the third objective of the scholarship by identifying the recurring principles observed across interviews, site visits, literature and the Intercooler pilot. It synthesises these observations into a practical set of engagement principles that consistently encouraged earlier engagement.

Each principle contributes in its own right, but their greatest strength appears to lie in the way they reinforce one another. Together, they provide a framework for designing environments where trust, connection and engagement become increasingly likely.

Previous Nuffield Scholars have already made valuable contributions by documenting organisations working in farmer wellbeing. Sarah Crosthwaite's scholarship, for example, provides an excellent account of FarmStrong New Zealand alongside several other initiatives (Crosthwaite, 2025). Building on that work, this chapter focuses on the recurring engagement principles that emerged across multiple organisations and countries.

Principle 1: Understanding before design

The observations in this chapter reflect the behavioural patterns explored in Chapter 2. If identity influences engagement, then understanding the people, their values and their perspectives becomes the starting point for designing environments they genuinely want to engage with. Throughout the scholarship one sequence consistently emerged: understand first, then design.

Yardley et al. (2015) argue that effective interventions begin with a deep understanding of the people they are intended to serve, allowing their perspectives, lived experiences and context to shape the design from the outset.

Before travelling, I assumed improving engagement was largely about finding better language. Instead, I repeatedly observed that the organisations achieving the strongest engagement first invested time understanding the people they hoped to reach. They did not expect rural people to adopt the language of mental health or healthcare. They learned how those communities already spoke about their lives.

FarmStrong in New Zealand demonstrated this particularly well. During discussions with the team, they explained that even within agriculture there was no single message that resonated with everyone. The language that connected with a dairy farmer was often different from that of a shearer or a sheep and beef farmer. Rather than treating farmers as one audience, FarmStrong deliberately adapted its communication to reflect the different cultures within agriculture itself.

I encountered the same principle at We Are Farming Minds in the United Kingdom. Founder Sam Stables recognised that understanding extended beyond language. Farmers were often greeted by someone with a farming background who understood the realities of rural life. Where appropriate, they were connected with counsellors who also understood farming communities. Conversations also began in familiar places such as Young Farmers clubs and local boxing gyms rather than expecting people to walk through the door of a mental health service (*Stables, pers. comm., 2025*).

Australia's Sober in the Country, a national charity addressing alcohol harm in rural communities, demonstrated the principle in another way. Founder and CEO Shanna Whan's language is unmistakably rural because it comes from lived experience rather than professional training. She speaks with the humour, honesty and directness of someone who has lived the same life as the people she is trying to reach. Her credibility begins long before advice is given because people recognise they are speaking with someone who genuinely understands their world (*Whan, pers. comm., 2025*).

Principle 2: Reducing the identity cost of engagement

If identity influences engagement, then successful design begins by reducing the perceived cost of taking the first step, ensuring it feels safe, familiar and consistent with how people already see themselves.

Oyserman's (2010) work on identity-based motivation suggests that people are more likely to engage in behaviours that align with their existing identity and values. This reinforces the observations explored in Chapter 2: people respond not only to what is being offered, but also to what engaging appears to say about them. Successful organisations reduced the barriers surrounding engagement rather than relying on people to overcome them.

FarmStrong demonstrated this through the way it framed wellbeing. Conversations focused on living well and farming well, helping farmers maintain their health, performance and ability to continue doing what mattered most. The invitation was designed to feel familiar and consistent with the identity of being a capable farmer, reducing any sense that participation required adopting the identity of a patient.

Sober in the Country created an online community where people could engage at their own pace. Many members initially chose to remain anonymous or simply observe before contributing. There

was no expectation that people immediately disclose deeply personal experiences. Participation remained voluntary, allowing confidence and trust to develop over time.

Australian men's leadership coach Leon Christiansen deliberately designed his Inner Horsepower community to lower the barriers to participation. Alongside a larger closed network, participants were placed in smaller peer groups where relationships could develop more naturally. The smaller groups reduced the perceived social cost of speaking openly, allowing trust and confidence to build gradually through repeated interactions (*Christiansen, pers. comm., 2025*).

Although each organisation applied this principle differently, the underlying pattern was remarkably consistent. The identity cost of engagement was rarely a single concern. Instead, it reflected a combination of perceived social, psychological and emotional costs that people weighed before deciding whether to participate. These costs were often largely invisible to programme designers, yet repeatedly emerged through observation:

- **Social cost** – Who might see me and what will they think?
- **Status cost** – Will others assume I am struggling or unable to cope?
- **Emotional cost** – Will I be expected to disclose more than I am comfortable sharing?
- **Commitment cost** – Am I signing up for something I cannot easily leave?
- **Autonomy cost** – Will I remain in control of how, when and how much I participate?

Rather than expecting people to overcome these costs, organisations deliberately designed approaches to reduce them. Familiar language, socially acceptable entry points, voluntary participation and opportunities to engage gradually all helped lower the perceived cost of taking the first step. People retained control over how much they shared, when they participated and the pace at which relationships developed. The invitation respected the identity of the people these organisations hoped to reach.

Reducing the identity cost of engagement extends beyond choosing the right words. It involves designing experiences that minimise the hidden social, psychological and emotional costs of participation while reinforcing a person's sense of competence, agency and belonging. Successful organisations did not expect people to become more willing to engage; they reduced the barriers to engagement so less willingness was needed.

Principle 3: Create repeated connection

Reducing the identity cost of engagement makes the first step easier to take. Sustaining engagement, however, requires something more. Across the organisations visited, successful engagement was rarely built through one-off conversations or isolated events. Instead, organisations intentionally created opportunities for repeated connection, recognising that trust, confidence and psychological safety develop gradually over time. As people met, talked and

shared experiences, relationships deepened and vulnerability was not demanded but emerged naturally.

Gilbert Enoka, the mental skills coach behind the New Zealand All Blacks for more than two decades, argues that sustained performance rests on three interconnected elements: skillset (what people know and can do), mindset (how they think and respond) and structure (the routines and environments that shape behaviour) (Enoka, 2025). While all three matter, Enoka suggests that structure is often the most influential and the most overlooked. This aligns with a broader principle in behavioural science. Wood and Neal (2007) argue that behaviours repeated in stable contexts become increasingly automatic over time, reducing reliance on conscious motivation. In each example, simple structures created regular opportunities for connection. As participation became easier to sustain, trust was able to develop through repeated interaction.

During discussions in New Zealand, Federated Farmers President Wayne Langford reflected that meaningful change rarely comes from a single conversation or event. Instead, he emphasised the power of small actions repeated consistently over time, observing that their effects often compound in ways that are difficult to appreciate day to day (Langford, pers. comm., 2026). This same pattern emerged across many of the organisations visited. Regular, low effort opportunities for connection gradually strengthened relationships, trust and engagement.

One example was FarmStrong ambassador Marc Gascoigne in Cambridge, New Zealand. Every Friday before dawn, Marc and a group of mates meet to train in a simple makeshift gym they call *The Hurt Locker* (see Figure 6). Afterwards, they drive to the Waikato River for a cold-water swim, regardless of the season. I joined them for both the training session and a mid-winter plunge into the river.

What stood out was the sense of brotherhood and shared commitment. Rather than relying on motivation, the group relied on structure. A regular time, shared accountability and a predictable rhythm meant the decision had largely been made before Friday morning arrived. According to Marc, that consistent rhythm had become an important part of maintaining his mental wellbeing (Gascoigne, pers. comm., 2026).

The same principle emerged through Leon Christiansen, who designed his year long Inner Horsepower programme around a consistent weekly rhythm of connection. Monthly learning themes were supported by regular check ins, online sessions and small peer groups, allowing trust to develop gradually through repeated interaction over the course of a year (Christiansen, pers. comm., 2025).

Organised sport provides another example of how simple structures create repeated opportunities for connection. Training nights, weekend matches and time spent with teammates establish a rhythm that becomes part of everyday life. For many men, however, this gradually disappears once they leave competitive sport. Without an intentional structure to replace it, everyday life may provide few equivalent opportunities to maintain trusted relationships. They lose not only the physical activity, but also the repeated connection that had quietly supported them for years. If

repeated connection builds trust, creating new structures that restore this rhythm may be just as important as encouraging people to seek support.

Across these examples, repeated connection allowed trust to grow through shared experience. Vulnerability was not the starting point for engagement; it emerged as relationships strengthened over time.



Figure 6. The Hurt Locker, Cambridge, New Zealand. Source: Author. Participating alongside Marc Gascoigne and the Hurt Locker crew reinforced how shared challenge, consistency and genuine camaraderie can create the conditions for trust, belonging and meaningful conversations to emerge naturally.

Principle 4: Keep complexity with the designer

One paradox became increasingly apparent throughout the scholarship: the simpler an organisation appeared on the surface, the more thoughtful its design often proved to be underneath. Simplicity was the visible expression of deep understanding. Although complexity is often unavoidable, every additional layer can become another barrier to engagement. The

organisations achieving the strongest engagement absorbed that complexity into the design so participation remained practical, intuitive and accessible.

These organisations rarely asked participants to understand complex theories or sophisticated models. Regardless of how engagement began, the experience itself was simple. Beneath that simplicity, however, sat considerable sophistication. Many founders and leaders had spent years refining their approach, stripping away unnecessary complexity until only the essential elements remained. Participants did not need to understand the psychology, behavioural science or leadership theory underpinning the model. They simply needed to know what the next step was.

During conversations in the United States, men's high performance coach Jake Kauffman observed that "a conscious mind is what a person knows; an unconscious mind is who they are" (**Kauffman, pers. comm., 2026**). In other words, people often behave according to who they have become, not simply what they know. That distinction reinforced an important observation from this scholarship. The organisations achieving the strongest engagement consistently translated complex ideas into simple, repeatable experiences that people could easily adopt.

Stories, metaphors and analogies were central to this process. During conversations in Colorado Springs, for example, US performance coach Jerry Henderson, explained neuroplasticity by comparing new habits to a faint path through grass that gradually becomes a well-worn highway through repeated use. Rather than describing neural pathways and synaptic connections, he translated a complex neurological process into an image people could immediately understand (Henderson, pers. comm., 2026).

These observations suggest that complexity belongs with the designer, not the participant. The responsibility of leaders is not to expose people to every nuance of a problem, but to understand it deeply enough that the next step feels obvious.

Principle 5: Preserve autonomy

Keeping complexity with the designer was not about making decisions for people. Instead, it allowed participants to engage without having to navigate unnecessary barriers while remaining firmly in control of their own decisions. Preserving autonomy consistently emerged as another defining characteristic of strong engagement.

Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory identifies autonomy as one of three fundamental psychological needs underpinning intrinsic motivation and sustained behaviour change. Similarly, *Miller and Rollnick (2013)* argue through Motivational Interviewing that lasting behaviour change is more likely when individuals identify their own reasons for change than when those reasons are imposed by others. Together, these perspectives suggest that preserving autonomy is not simply respectful of individual choice but central to effective engagement.

This appeared particularly important within rural communities where independence, self-reliance and personal responsibility are highly valued. Across the organisations visited, engagement was rarely framed as something people should do. Instead, organisations created environments where people remained in control of how, when and to what extent they participated.

Sober in the Country demonstrated this principle particularly well. Within its online community, members are encouraged to share their own experiences rather than prescribe solutions or tell others what they should do. Rather than directing people towards a single pathway, the organisation presents a range of support options and trusts individuals to decide what is right for them. In doing so, it preserves autonomy while making engagement easier.

Preserving autonomy consistently appeared to reduce resistance while encouraging earlier engagement. The role of the organisation was not to make decisions for people. It was to create the conditions in which people could make better decisions for themselves. Ultimately, the goal of effective engagement is not to change people. It is to design environments where people are more likely to take the first step.

Chapter 4. Designing for engagement

The previous chapter identified a series of principles that consistently encouraged engagement across diverse organisations. This chapter addresses the fourth objective of the scholarship by synthesising those principles into a practical framework that demonstrates how they can be intentionally combined.

During the scholarship, the Intercooler Model evolved as a real world design project. As insights emerged from the literature, interviews and site visits, they were progressively incorporated into the model and refined through practical application. The process was highly iterative. Some design choices strengthened engagement, while others required modification. Observing multiple peer groups evolve over time provided valuable insight into why some choices consistently strengthened engagement while others proved less effective. This included observing groups within Leon Christiansen's Inner Horsepower community. Alongside designing the model, I also participated as a member of an Intercooler group. This provided an opportunity to observe the operating principles from the perspective of both participant and designer throughout the pilot. Together, these observations became an important source of learning in the iterative development of the Intercooler model.

Rather than presenting the Intercooler as the primary contribution of this research, it is used here as a practical case study through which the principles identified in this report can be synthesised and illustrated. It demonstrates how multiple engagement principles can be deliberately combined within a low-barrier peer environment and provides an opportunity to explore why particular combinations of design choices appear to generate unusually strong engagement.

The Intercooler Model

Pressure is an inevitable consequence of responsibility, purpose and performance. The challenge is not to eliminate pressure, but to help people regulate it before it exceeds their available adaptive capacity.

The Intercooler takes its name from the intercooler fitted to a turbocharged engine. Rather than reducing the engine's load, it manages the heat generated by sustained operation, allowing the engine to continue performing efficiently. The same principle underpins this model. The intercooler seeks to create an environment where pressure can be regulated before it silently exceeds a person's adaptive capacity.

Many existing activities within rural communities already provide valuable forms of pressure relief. Sport, exercise, hobbies, volunteering and time with mates all create opportunities to temporarily step away from life's demands. The Intercooler serves a different purpose. It is designed to

support pressure regulation, as opposed to pressure relief, through regular conversations that allow people to process what they are carrying while remaining engaged with everyday life.

In practice, the Intercooler operates through small peer groups of four to five members who connect regularly in a confidential environment. Participation is voluntary and primarily occurs through asynchronous voice messages, allowing members to engage whenever pressure arises rather than waiting for scheduled meetings. The model is intentionally peer based rather than expert led, creating a simple rhythm of regular connection through which the operating principles can be practised over time.

THE INTERCOOLER MODEL

REGULATE PRESSURE. PRESERVE CAPACITY. ENGAGE EARLIER.

Pressure is part of rural life. The Intercooler provides a low-barrier peer environment that helps people regulate pressure before it exceeds capacity—so they can keep performing and access the pathways that best fit their circumstances.

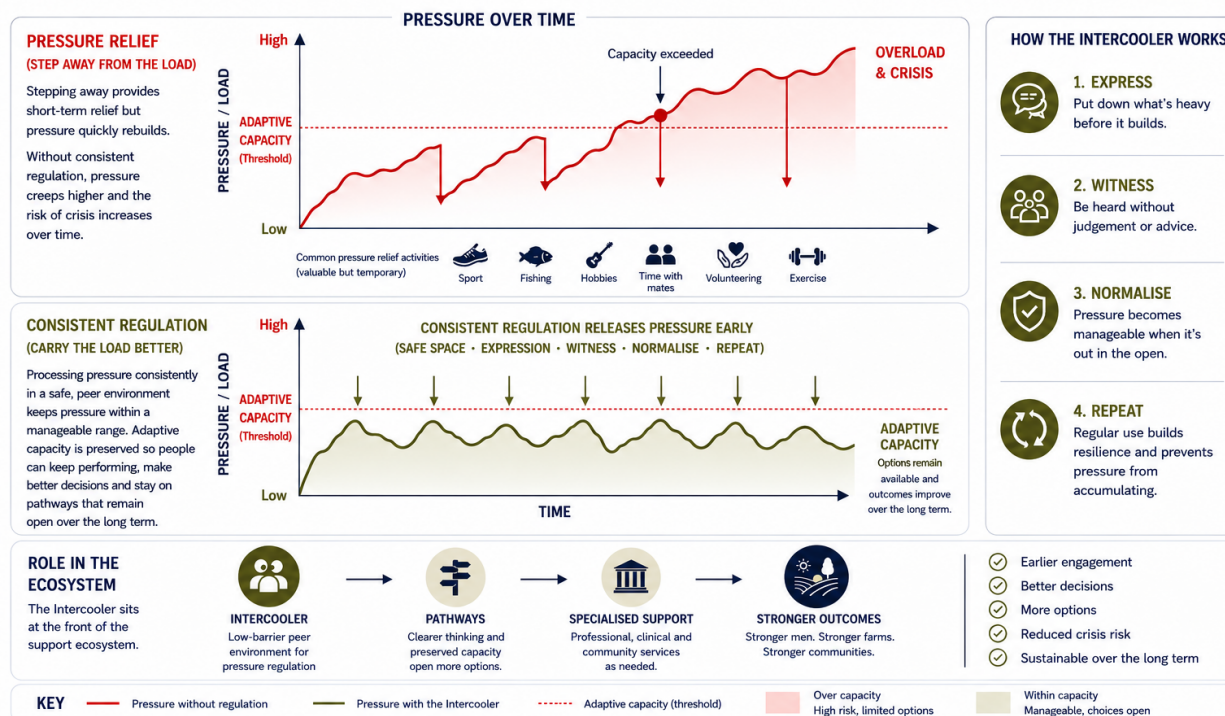


Figure 7. The Intercooler model: pressure relief and pressure regulation. Source: Author's conceptual model informed by McEwen (1998), Arnsten (2009), Michie et al. (2011), Wood and Neal (2007), and Meadows (2008). Artificial intelligence (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used as a drafting and design aid during the iterative development of the conceptual model and accompanying figure.

Figure 7 illustrates the difference between temporarily relieving pressure by stepping away from the load and regulating pressure through consistent processing. While pressure relief may provide short term benefits, pressure regulation helps preserve adaptive capacity over time, enabling earlier engagement while options remain open and reducing the likelihood of crisis.

Design principles

The Intercooler Model was developed by applying the principles of engagement identified throughout this scholarship. Each design decision was guided by a single question: How can engagement become easier before pressure exceeds a person's available capacity?

The model intentionally reflects the five design principles discussed in Chapter 3. It seeks to understand the realities of rural life before proposing solutions, reduce the identity cost of engagement, create repeated opportunities for connection, keep complexity with the designer rather than the participant, and preserve each person's agency to decide how and when they engage. Together, these principles informed every aspect of the model, from its operating principles and group structure to the way participants communicate and support one another.

The sections that follow demonstrate how these engagement principles are translated into practice through the Intercooler's operating principles, design features and the emergent properties that arise over time. Each operating principle and design feature can be traced directly to one or more of the engagement principles identified in Chapter 3. Each element was intentionally designed to support principles that consistently encouraged engagement across the organisations visited during this scholarship.

Operating principles

The Intercooler's operating principles define the culture of the model. Rather than prescribing techniques or therapeutic interventions, they establish four shared behaviours that make participation simple, psychologically safe and sustainable. Together, they encourage members to regulate pressure through repeated conversation while preserving individual responsibility and agency.

The four operating principles are:

- Put down what is becoming heavy to carry.
- Pick up what matters.
- You must go first.
- Do not fix.

The first operating principle, *put down what is becoming heavy*, applies the principles of reducing the identity cost of engagement, preserving agency and keeping complexity with the designer. Members are invited to put down whatever is becoming heavy in their lives. They are not expected to explain, justify or solve what they share. The principle does not require disclosure on demand. Instead, each member remains responsible for recognising when pressure is building and deciding what, when and how much they wish to share. This preserves personal agency while

reducing the barriers that often discourage early engagement. By removing expectations around vulnerability, advice or performance, the invitation becomes easier to accept, allowing pressure to be regulated before it accumulates unnoticed.

The second operating principle, *pick up what matters*, draws on the principles of understanding before design, creating repeated connection and preserving agency. Members are encouraged to intentionally recognise and share what gives their lives meaning, purpose or enjoyment. This practice was influenced by New Zealand farmer Wayne Langford's YOLO (You Only Live Once) approach, which encourages people to intentionally notice something each day that reminds them they are glad to be alive (Langford, pers. comm., 2026). Rather than waiting to feel better before engaging with life, the practice encourages engaging with life first, gradually strengthening psychological resources through repeated attention to what matters most.

The third operating principle, *you must go first*, applies the principles of reducing the identity cost of engagement and creating repeated connection. Someone must model the behaviour they hope to see in others. By sharing first, the social risk of participation is reduced for everyone else, making it easier for others to engage authentically. Over time, these repeated moments of modelling contribute to the gradual development of trust within the group.

The fourth operating principle, *don't fix*, reflects primarily the principle of preserving agency. Members are encouraged to listen, acknowledge and, where appropriate, share their own experiences rather than attempting to solve another person's problems. This avoids creating dependency or unintentionally taking ownership of someone else's decisions. Instead, the role of the group is to create an environment where individuals remain free to determine their own next steps while feeling supported through the process.



Figure 8. Wayne Langford, Golden Bay, New Zealand. Source: Author. Conversations with Wayne and Tyler Langford about their YOLO (You Only Live Once) philosophy inspired the Intercooler's principle of intentionally recognising and sharing what matters most. Their simple daily practice demonstrates how small, consistent actions can compound into profound change over time.

Design features

Table 2. Intercooler design features and their purpose

Design feature	Purpose
Small groups (four to five members)	Create repeated connection while allowing trust and psychological safety to develop over time.
Confidentiality and initial anonymity	Reduce the identity, social and reputational cost of engagement, allowing relationships to develop around authenticity rather than existing social roles.
Asynchronous communication	Reduce practical barriers to engagement by allowing participation whenever pressure

	arises, rather than waiting for scheduled meetings.
Voice-first communication	Keep engagement simple while preserving the richness of human communication through tone, pauses and emotion, while allowing text or video where preferred.
Peer-based participation	Preserve agency by avoiding an expert–client relationship while encouraging mutual support through shared experience.
Voluntary, participant-led engagement	Preserve agency and keep complexity with the designer by allowing members to decide if, when and how they engage.

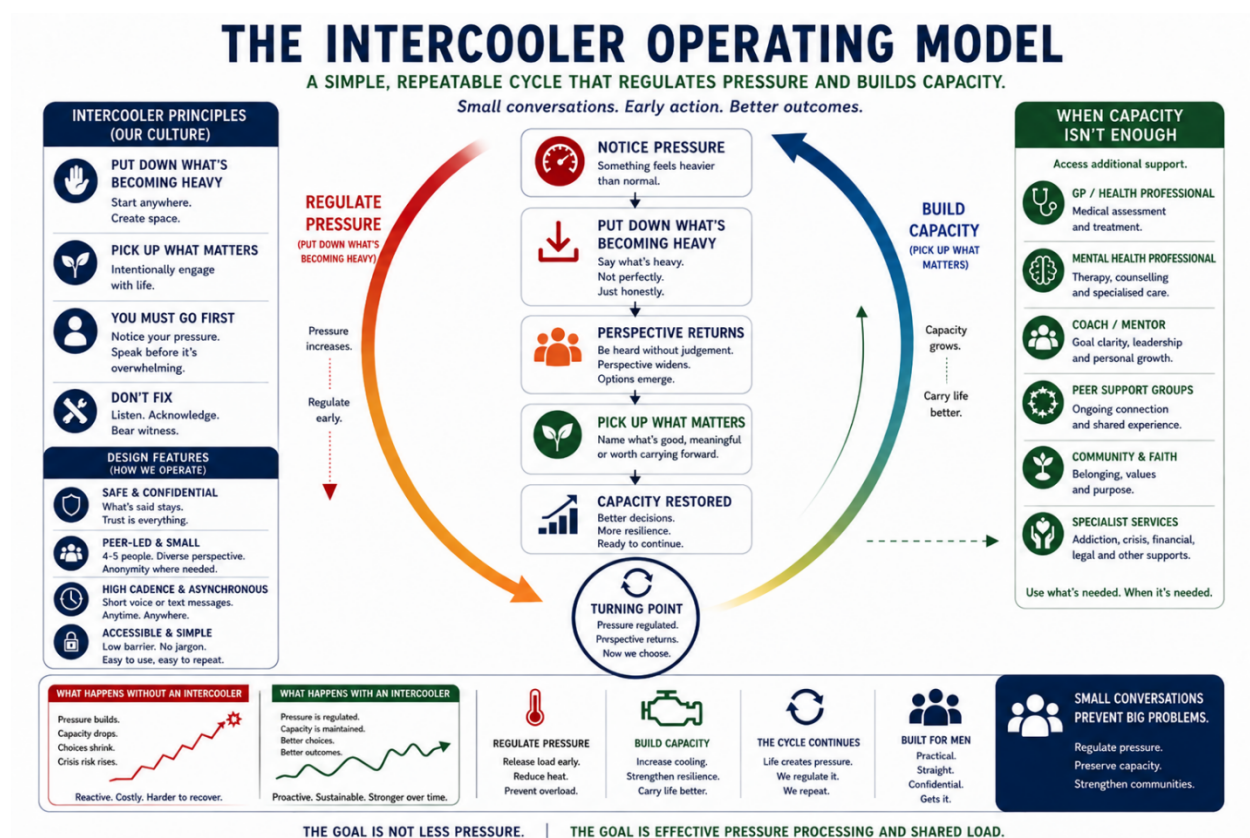


Figure 9. The Intercooler operating model. Source: Author's conceptual model integrating the engagement principles developed throughout this scholarship. Artificial intelligence (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used as a drafting and design aid during the iterative development of the conceptual model and accompanying figure.

Emergent properties

As members participate in the Intercooler over time, new patterns of behaviour emerge that cannot be attributed to any single operating principle or design feature. Instead, they arise through the interaction of the model's design, its operating principles and the repeated participation of members. This reflects the systems perspective described by *Meadows (2008)*, who argues that many of the defining behaviours of complex systems emerge from the interactions between their components rather than from any individual component in isolation. Consistent with this perspective, four emergent properties are proposed for the Intercooler.

Table 3. Proposed emergent properties of the Intercooler

Emergent property	How it emerges
Real time pattern interruption	Regular opportunities to put down what is heavy interrupt habitual patterns of suppression, avoidance and rumination closer to the triggering event. Processing occurs while challenges remain manageable, encouraging earlier regulation before emotional pressure accumulates.
Emotional capacity through repetition	Consistently expressing what matters most strengthens the ability to recognise, articulate and regulate emotions. Like physical strength developed through repeated training, emotional capacity develops through regular practice rather than isolated breakthrough conversations.
Dynamic pressure regulation	Members naturally move through different seasons of challenge and capacity. As emotional load fluctuates, those with greater capacity at a given time are able to support others, allowing pressure to be continually redistributed across the group rather than carried by one individual.
Collective momentum	Because members are rarely under maximum pressure simultaneously, the group continues to move forward even when individuals are struggling. As capacity

	shifts between members, support naturally flows to where it is needed, reducing reliance on any single leader or helper and sustaining engagement over time.
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Together, these emergent properties explain why the Intercooler is designed to support sustained engagement rather than simply facilitate individual conversations. Collectively they influence four distinct aspects of engagement:

- **Real-time pattern interruption** changes when people respond.
- **Emotional capacity through repetition** changes what individuals become capable of.
- **Dynamic pressure regulation** changes how emotional pressure is managed.
- **Collective momentum** changes how the group functions over time.

Scope and limitations

The Intercooler is intended to complement, not replace, existing mental health services, clinical care or crisis intervention. Its role is to create a low-barrier environment where people can regulate pressure through genuine human connection, making earlier engagement and, where needed, access to broader support more likely.

The model will not suit everyone. Some people will prefer one-to-one conversations, professional counselling or existing informal networks. The Intercooler should therefore be viewed as one option within a broader continuum of support rather than a universal solution.

One of the clearest findings of this scholarship is that engagement begins long before people encounter a programme. Identity, language and perceived social cost all influence whether people participate. Consequently, successful implementation depends not only on the model itself but on how it is introduced. Positioned as another mental health programme, it risks recreating the very barriers it seeks to reduce. Positioned as a practical way for people to process everyday life together, it aligns far more closely with the engagement principles identified throughout this report.

Beyond the Intercooler

While the preceding sections primarily address the fourth objective of this scholarship by demonstrating how engagement principles can be translated into practice, this final section

addresses the fifth objective by exploring how earlier engagement may enable people to access a broader range of pathways appropriate to their individual needs.

The Intercooler is intentionally limited in scope. Its purpose is not to diagnose, treat or solve every challenge people face. Its role is to make early engagement easier by helping people regulate pressure before it exceeds their available adaptive capacity.

For some people, that may be enough. Others will eventually reach a point where curiosity replaces resistance and they begin asking a different question: *What now?*

One observation repeatedly emerged throughout this scholarship. Many people were aware that support existed but had little understanding of the range of pathways available beyond the traditional mental health system. Counselling and psychology were often seen as the default destination, yet many organisations introduced people to a much broader range of approaches depending on their needs, preferences and circumstances.

This suggests a second design challenge beyond engagement itself: **navigation**.

If the Intercooler creates the conditions for earlier engagement, a complementary framework could help people explore the wider landscape of support while preserving the agency that has been central throughout this report. Rather than directing people towards a single solution, its role would be to help individuals understand the range of evidence-informed options available and choose the pathway most appropriate for them.

The Intercooler should therefore be viewed not as a destination but as an entry point. Its greatest contribution may be creating enough clarity, trust and emotional capacity for people to become curious about the next step in their own journey.

Conclusions

This scholarship began with a simple but important question: why do rural mental health outcomes remain difficult to improve despite increasing investment, expanding services and growing public awareness? The aim was to better understand the factors that influence whether rural Australians engage with support in the first place.

Across the organisations visited, engagement consistently appeared to be shaped as much by the way support was designed as by the support itself. While their programmes, language and missions varied, they shared a common focus on making the first step feel safe, practical and consistent with the identity of the people they hoped to reach.

The Intercooler is presented as one practical demonstration of how these principles may be combined within a low-barrier peer environment. It is not proposed as a replacement for existing mental health services, nor as a universal solution. Instead, it illustrates how thoughtful design may encourage earlier engagement, helping people regulate pressure before it exceeds their available adaptive capacity while making broader pathways of support easier to access when required.

Perhaps the most significant insight from this scholarship is not the Intercooler itself, but the principles of engagement that emerged throughout the research. Although each organisation applied them differently, effective engagement consistently began with understanding the people being served, reducing the identity cost of participation, creating repeated opportunities for connection, keeping complexity with the designer and preserving individual agency. Together, these principles suggest that engagement is not simply something that happens naturally. It can be intentionally designed.

Ultimately, this research suggests that one of the greatest opportunities to improve rural mental health may not lie solely in creating more services, but in intentionally designing environments that people genuinely want to engage with. If engagement can be strengthened earlier, more people may access the support that already exists before pressure escalates into crisis. Designing for engagement may therefore represent one of the greatest opportunities to improve rural mental health in the years ahead.

Recommendations

Design for engagement, not just service availability

Recognise engagement as a design challenge, not simply a service challenge. Improving outcomes depends not only on increasing services but also on reducing the barriers that prevent people engaging with them in the first place.

Invest in earlier engagement

Prioritise approaches that encourage participation while people still have the capacity to engage, rather than relying predominantly on crisis-driven intervention.

Design environments that lower the barriers to engagement

Create conditions that feel psychologically safe, protect agency, build trust, reduce friction and encourage repeated participation over time.

Adopt a broader understanding of wellbeing

Recognise that wellbeing extends beyond the treatment of mental illness. Strengthening connection, purpose and psychological capacity can help prevent problems escalating to crisis.

Reduce the identity cost of engagement

Future initiatives should be designed so that engaging feels consistent with, rather than in conflict with, the identity and values of rural Australians. By using language, environments and experiences that reinforce agency, competence and belonging, more people may feel comfortable taking the first step before pressure escalates into crisis.

Test engagement first models

Invest in piloting and evaluating engagement first models that prioritise early participation, building the evidence base for approaches that connect people with support before crisis develops.

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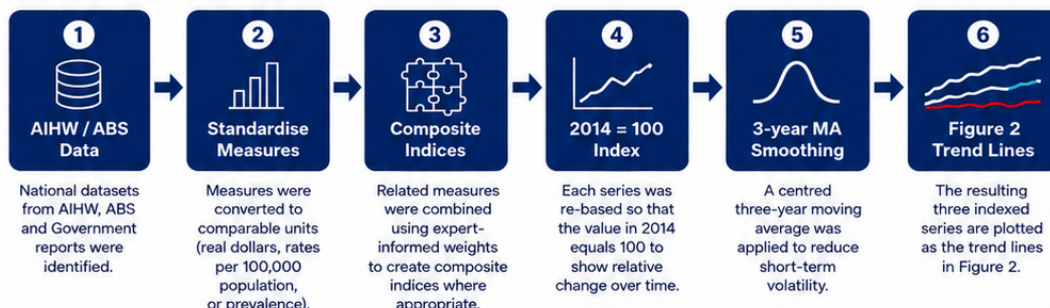
Appendices

APPENDIX A Understanding Figure 2

How Australia's Mental Health Paradox was Constructed

Figure 2 combines three indexed national trend lines with four supporting evidence indicators. The chart is designed to compare relative change over time, not absolute values. Each trend line is indexed to **2014 = 100**, allowing measures expressed in different units to be viewed on the same scale.

A1. CONSTRUCTION PROCESS



A2. SUMMARY OF THE THREE NATIONAL TREND LINES

Trend	Primary Measure	Source
Investment	Real (inflation-adjusted) government expenditure on specialist mental health services.	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Mental Health Services in Australia (annual reports)
Capacity	Specialist mental health workforce (psychiatrists, psychologists, mental health nurses and occupational therapists) per 100,000 population.	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Health Workforce Australia (annual reports)
High Psychological Distress	Proportion of Australians aged 16+ experiencing high or very high psychological distress (Kessler-10).	Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing (2007; 2011; 2014; 2017; 2020–22)

Note: Investment and Capacity are composite indices. High Psychological Distress is a single national outcome measure indexed to the same baseline for comparison.

A3. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE DISPLAYED IN FIGURE 2

Statistic	What it Measures	Source
45%	Australians with a 12-month mental disorder who consulted a health professional.	Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing (2020–22)
36%	Men with a 12-month mental disorder who consulted a health professional.	Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing (2020–22)
26%	Australian men who reported they would be likely or very likely to seek help from a mental health professional if experiencing an emotional or personal problem.	Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) Ten to Men: Mental Health of Australian Males – Depression, Suicidality and Loneliness (2020)
22%	Australian men who reported they would not seek help from anyone if experiencing an emotional or personal problem.	Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) Ten to Men: Mental Health of Australian Males – Depression, Suicidality and Loneliness (2020)

The Ten to Men findings were drawn from Australia's longitudinal study of more than 10,000 males. Percentages have been rounded to whole numbers for consistency throughout Figure 2.

A4. PRIMARY DATA SOURCES

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) - Mental Health Services in Australia - Mental health expenditure - Mental health workforce	Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) - National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing (2007; 2020–22) - Australian population estimates	Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) Ten to Men: Mental Health of Australian Males – Depression, Suicidality and Loneliness (2020)	Department of Health and Aged Care - National mental health expenditure - State and Territory budget data
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Full details of data sources, definitions, component measures and weighting approaches are available on request.