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No farmer is an island: supporting the mental health of farm families

Written by:

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Publishing date: September 2026

A NUFFIELD FARMING SCHOLARSHIPS REPORT

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ISBN: 978-1-916850-86-6

Published by The Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust
Bullbrook, West Charlton, Charlton Mackrell, Somerset, TA11 7AL
Email: office@nuffieldscholar.org
www.nuffieldscholar.org

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*"Leading positive change in agriculture.
Inspiring passion and potential in people."*

Title	No farmer is an island: supporting the mental health of farm families
Scholar	Sharon May
Sponsors	The Farming Community Network and Len's Light
Objectives of Study Tour	To understand how to effectively provide support to farmers, and other members of the farming community, with their mental wellbeing to ensure a safe and productive industry for the future.
Countries Visited	New Zealand, Australia, the USA, Canada, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Ireland, Zimbabwe and the UK.
Messages	1. Poor mental health in farming is a systemic issue, not an individual failing. Farming families face a distinctive combination of long hours, isolation, high responsibility and limited control over the pressures that have significant impact on them. 2. Resilience is not about enduring more, it is a move from rigidity to flexibility. Independence, strength and self-reliance are valuable parts of farming culture, but they can become barriers to seeking help. True resilience involves adaptability, supportive relationships and changing harmful conditions. 3. Effective support must combine agricultural trust with professional knowledge. Support works best when it is culturally informed, delivered through trusted people, grounded in appropriate expertise and backed by clear referral routes. Practical, preventative and 'health by stealth' approaches can reach people who may avoid formal mental health services. 4. Farmer wellbeing is a shared responsibility across the whole agricultural system. Families, communities, allied professionals, support organisations, clinicians, researchers, industry, the supply chain and government all have a role in supporting each other. Investing in these relationships is essential to creating a safe, productive and sustainable industry.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores the mental health and wellbeing of farming families from a global perspective. In it, I use my professional and academic knowledge as a rural counsellor and researcher, and my personal experience of farming life to discuss how mental wellbeing in agriculture is not an individual issue but a systemic one.

I visited 10 countries, speaking to researchers at seven universities, representatives from over 35 support organisations, and many farmers, families and employees across a wide range of industry sectors.

The research confirmed that poor mental health in agriculture is a global issue. Farming combines long hours, physical demands, and isolation with high levels of responsibility: not only for business, animals and household, but also for family, community, environment, and future generations. This is combined with many significant external stressors which are largely outside of the farmers' control, and which generally fall into the broad categories of climate, finance and government policy. Women face additional pressures through overlapping on-farm roles, off-farm employment, and caring and emotional responsibilities in addition to workplace or systemic misogyny.

These pressures are compounded by cultural identity. Values such as independence, strength and self-reliance - or often for farm women being the person who supports everyone else - are sources of justifiable pride and can be very useful. However, they can also be a significant barrier in accessing support, and the accepted norms around meeting other's needs first or working harder, pushing through, and being stubbornly independent perpetuates the challenge. True resilience isn't about losing those values, but involves flexibility, adaptability, evolution, connection, and challenging unsupportive systems so that those values can remain beneficial rather than detrimental.

Effective wellbeing support combines trust, cultural understanding and appropriate knowledge. Change is more likely when others see it modelled successfully and storytelling is a powerful tool in reducing stigma and encouraging conversations. However it is important that mental health messages are well-informed and responsible in their use of language. The strongest approaches combine trusted individuals with professional expertise, clear referral pathways and support for those delivering that support. Practical, preventative and 'health by stealth' approaches can also reach people who might otherwise avoid formal mental health services.

Driven by a desire to move away from the narrative that 'farmers need to be more resilient', the recommendations of this report extend beyond individuals to communities, those working in professions allied to agriculture, support providers, medical professionals, researchers, and those further up the supply

chain and government. They include ensuring that those supporting farmers are effectively supported themselves, that support interventions are rooted in professional knowledge, and that research, policy and change involves farmer input. Key to this is the ability to invest and nurture relationships.

The wellbeing of those in farming should not be a side issue, but should underpin every conversation and decision. If we do not look after the people in our industry, not only will businesses fail to thrive, but there will be no incentive for future generations to work in agriculture. It is a collective responsibility to ensure that farming is a safe and supportive industry for all who live and work in it.

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DISCLAIMER

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author alone and not necessarily those of the Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust, of the author's sponsor, or of any other sponsoring body.

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Nuffield Farming Scholars are available to speak to NFU Branches, agricultural discussion groups and similar organisations.

*Published by The Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust
Bullbrook, West Charlton, Charlton Mackrell, Somerset, TA11 7AL
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION



**Figure 1: Sharon May, author
(authors own photo)**

In my professional role as a counsellor running a rural practice, and through my personal experience as the wife of a fourth-generation farmer, I have become increasingly aware of the issues surrounding mental health in agriculture. As I delved further into the existing research, I gained significant understanding, but also became increasingly aware that, while the research was understandably focused on farmers, other members of farming families were struggling invisibly too.

As a mother of three children who may one day wish to live or work within the farming community, my application for a Nuffield Farming Scholarship was driven by a desire to ensure that agriculture is not an industry that puts them under undue emotional and mental pressure. If we want to guarantee the future success of our industry, we need to ensure that it is a safe and supportive environment in which to work, and understand the skills people need to thrive.

The title 'No farmer is an island' is an echo of John Donne's 'No man is an island', the opening lines of which are:

*No man is an island entire of itself; every man
Is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.*

Initially I chose this title to highlight those invisible contributors to farming who are also struggling with their mental health, but the idea also epitomises the paradox of farming for me: it is an occupation in which people can spend long periods working alone often in remote locations but actually the value they bring to the 'continent' of the agricultural industry and its communal identity emphasises how that connection to others could be our most valuable resource.

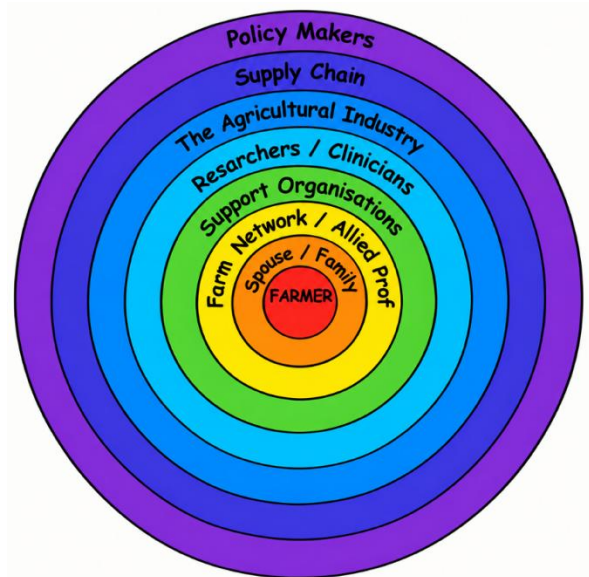


Figure 2: No farmer is an island



CHAPTER 2: MY STUDY TOUR

As a mental health professional and researcher who lives with farming, I wanted to view my study topic through each of those lenses.

Firstly, I wanted to speak to researchers working at the knowledge frontier to identify themes and causes through scientific study.

Secondly, I wanted to talk to service providers about how they support farming communities, including mental health professionals, charities, individuals, community organisations and other health initiatives. I sought to understand how they operated, how support was funded, and what hurdles they faced.

Finally, I wanted to visit farms and speak to farmers and their families: to understand the challenges they face, where they turn for support, what prevents access, and whether available help meets their needs. I also wanted to learn what helps people recover from severe adversity and to understand the skills required to be truly resilient.

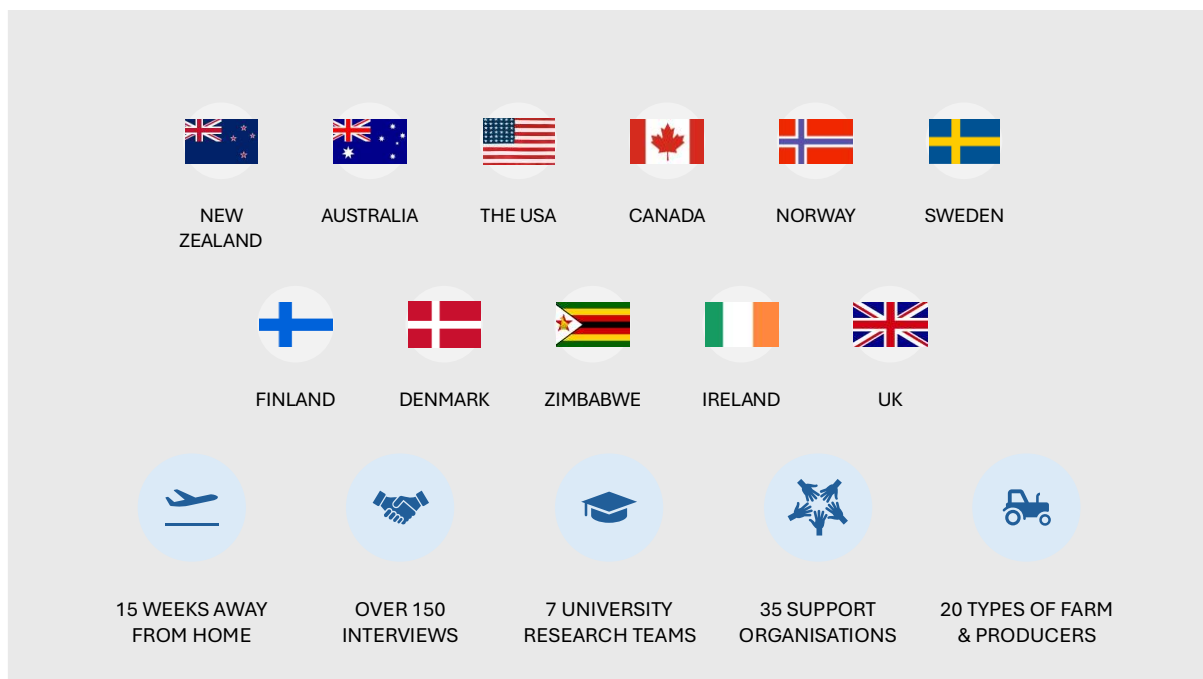


Figure 3: My Nuffield study tour

I spoke to many people from small-scale enterprises to large corporate businesses, and spoke to farmers, family members, employees, tenants and landowners. The people I met shared many moving, sometimes painful and always inspirational personal stories, and I am incredibly honoured and grateful. Those stories are at the heart of this report. However, they were a gift that I hold gently and respectfully, and I do not feel they are mine to share in these pages. I will instead talk about my conclusions and include a few snapshot examples of organisations and programmes encountered on my journey.



My travels substantially deepened my knowledge and understanding of the complexity surrounding mental health in agriculture. The subject is incredibly broad, and attempting to summarise it in one neat answer is impossible. The role of this report therefore is to give an overview of my key findings in the following three chapters:

Chapter 3: Mental Health in Agriculture from a global perspective – what exactly are the issues?

Chapter 4: Support systems – what effective support is and how to implement it.

Chapter 5: Recommendations for what needs to happen to ensure positive change.

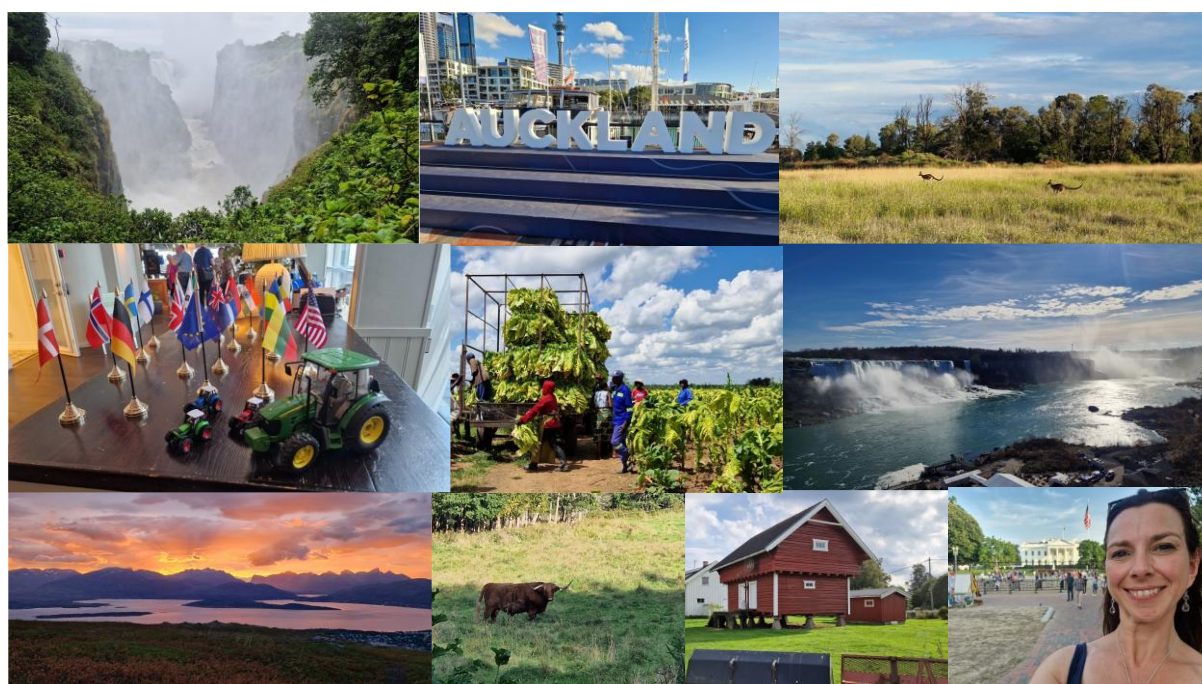


Figure 4: L-R from top. Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe. Auckland Harbour, NZ. Toobeah, Australia. Nordic meeting of agricultural occupational health, Sweden. Tobacco farm, Zimbabwe. Niagara Falls, Canada. Tromsø, Norway. Potato Farm, Norway. The White House, USA.



CHAPTER 3: MENTAL HEALTH IN AGRICULTURE – A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Prevalence

Mental health matters in agriculture because its consequences spread fast and wide. Poor mental health can cause distraction, exhaustion, corner-cutting and risk-taking, therefore increasing the risk of accidents and injury. Resultant physical conditions or inability to work then adds further pressure. Poor mental health can also result in poor financial or business decisions made through desperation or overwhelm, increasing debt and strain. Marriages, family relationships and friendships may suffer, creating tension, isolation and loneliness and affecting the wellbeing of others.

Suicide rates are consistently found to be higher among agricultural workers than in the general population. This is devastating, but it is not the only measure that matters. These statistics indicate the severity of the issue yet are only the tip of the iceberg. They do not account for the many others across the spectrum of mental and emotional distress, those who are part of agricultural life but do not identify as farmers, or those who are impacted by the mental health struggles of others.

The 2021 RABI Big Farming Survey in collaboration with the CRPR in Exeter painted an insightful picture of the scale of the issue in the UK, with over a third of farmers probably or possibly depressed, and half experiencing anxiety. This shows considerably poorer mental health of the farming community compared the general population, a phenomenon known as the Farmer Wellbeing Gap.

For women, who form an increasingly large proportion of the agricultural workforce, the research indicates that not only do women in farming tend to have poorer wellbeing than women in the general population (confirming the farmer wellbeing gap) but they also tend to have poorer mental health than men in farming, highlighting a *gender* wellbeing gap within agriculture. In addition, many women on farms can be missed from the research because they are not officially classified as farmers or farm workers. They may be partners, daughters, mothers or sisters who work on farm without appearing on the payroll, or who work elsewhere and are classified according to their off-farm occupation. These women are often just as invested in, and affected by, the challenges facing agriculture.

The issue of mental health struggles in agriculture is not unique to the UK with many other countries reporting a similar picture, and whilst my tour confirmed that disappointingly no-one seems to have a definitive solution to the problem, it was reassuring to feel that we are all working hard towards the same goal. What became apparent, however, is that there is wide variation in how far through the process different countries are. Some are only beginning to identify occupation-



specific suicide statistics and acknowledge an issue, while others are implementing substantial interventions and evaluating their impact.

How living and working within agriculture impacts mental health

In addition to experiencing the same sources of stress that any other person may be subject to, agriculture poses an additional combination of factors that can impact mental wellbeing.

Farming is hard work: physically demanding, undertaken in challenging conditions and often for long hours. This is not necessarily a problem in itself; it is an accepted part of the role and, for many, a source of pride. However, long stretches working alone and intense seasonal peaks can add stress and feelings of isolation. Anything that impacts the physical ability to do the job further increases the pressure.

Farming carries high levels of responsibility: to family, livestock, customers, the supply chain, employees, landlords, colleagues, soil, wildlife and climate. Agriculture combines this high responsibility with many factors outside a farmer's immediate control. When speaking to farming families about the key sources of stress, although there were nuances dependent on country and industry sector (such as animal and crop diseases) several stressors were largely universal and fell into the three broad categories of weather, finance and policy (see Figure 5).

Weather	Finance	Policy
• Weather dependent day to day operations • Extreme weather events: Flood, Drought, Storm, Fire • Long term Climate Change implications and adaptations	• Day to day cash flow struggles • Changes to market forces • Sudden drops in prices for products • Increased cost of inputs • Cost of living crisis • Tax / Succession • Applications / eligibility for funding and schemes	• Trade Tariffs • Certification • Compliance • Regulation • Inspection • Tax obligations • Employment law • Tenancies • Schemes

Figure 5: Common key agricultural stress factors negatively impacting mental wellbeing

When high responsibility meets low control, the toll can be feelings of frustration, powerlessness, failure and hopelessness and that has a significant negative impact on mental wellbeing.



For women in agriculture there are additional stressors. Because agriculture has historically been male-dominated, misogynistic attitudes still leave many women feeling they must work twice as hard to prove themselves, making it harder to ask for help or show perceived weakness. Limited understanding of health issues that affect women disproportionately creates further disadvantage. Traditional business structures and efforts to protect farms against divorce can also remove women's financial independence and security, increasing isolation and stress.

One of the most significant causes of poor mental wellbeing among women in farming is role and support overload. They frequently work both on and off farm, providing practical as well as financial support, and much of the mental load and caring responsibilities still fall to women, often for more than one generation or branch of a family.

These challenges are tough enough, but the impact is compounded by several other factors relevant to the farming industry.

The structure of the industry

High responsibility and low control is not a characteristic unique to farming, however the structure of the agricultural industry makes things more complicated. Whilst there are some corporate structures within farming, many operations are small and this leaves those working in that way vulnerable.

There is often a lack of differentiation between home and farm, business and personal, which means that struggle in one area bleeds into the others. If a farm is no longer viable, the loss is not only a business, but also a home, animals, invested money and time, a generational legacy, connection to the land and the future they hoped to offer their children

With this comes a further entanglement of business and identity. The farming identity is powerful because, in many cases, it has been present for a whole lifetime. We often hear, 'The only way I am leaving this farm is in a box.' If someone has grown up on a farm and known nothing else, contemplating another life can feel impossible. There is a lack of options for exiting the industry that allow farmers to preserve their dignity, pride and purpose and so many doggedly continue at the cost to their physical and mental wellbeing. This is one of the reasons succession is such a complicated issue, but also sadly contributes to the suicide statistics.

When stress and strain has an impact on relationships, it moves from being about business to being personal, and this is often the catalyst for crisis – but also often a motivator for help-seeking.



Culture and stigma

Farmers rightly pride themselves on their work ethic, strength, independence and self-reliance. They understand that farming is hard and are willing to put in the graft. However, when events beyond their control impact wellbeing, farming's greatest strength can become its greatest weakness. Rugged individualism can lead people to double down in adversity and work harder, resulting in depletion and burnout. The belief that they must sort everything themselves encourages withdrawal and isolation, compounding the struggle. Because this identity is associated with being a 'good farmer', asking for help can feel weak, and easing back feels slack or lazy. The result is that they take on more, overwhelming already stretched systems.

This cultural identity, and the threat it comes under when things are hard, is one of the biggest barriers to support. The cultural identity of farm women can be as much a barrier to support seeking as it is to men. They are often seen as capable, and the people on farm who hold everything together and support everyone else. They are great advocates for others, but if they struggle, they may feel not only that they are failing in their role, but that if they crumble the whole system will collapse.

Protective factors

Although attention understandably focuses on what has a detrimental impact on mental health in agriculture, farming also offers many protective factors. Many of the farmers I spoke to love what they do and were keen to tell me that whilst it is tough, there are many benefits that promote wellbeing for a lot of people (see figure 6). It is important to keep this in mind as recognising, leaning on and developing those strengths could play a key role in changing perceptions.



Figure 6: Some of the potentially protective factors of agricultural on mental wellbeing



In countries where farming and agriculture are respected, farmers seemed to have a stronger sense of pride and purpose. Feeling that their role and contribution were valued by the public and government had a positive effect on wellbeing, thereby reducing isolation and reinforcing support.

Working in an industry aligned so closely with the seasons also seems to foster a protective 'this too will pass' mentality. A hard winter will be followed by spring; summer may be glorious, but preparation for autumn is still necessary. This mindset literally helps farmers weather storms.

However, when there is challenge after challenge without time for recovery or preparation and crisis hits, where can farmers turn for support and what is effective?



Figure 7: Farmers and their families. L-R from top: Farm ladies of Deniliquin, Australia. Proud Zirinde, Zimbabwe. Sharon & John, Australia. The Woods Family, Australia. Pam Dawson and Roberta Bellamy, USA. The Drost Family, USA. Essi Ruuskanen, Finland. Brian and Amanda Johnson, New Zealand. Birger Bull, Norway. A group of female employees of a commercial pig enterprise, Zimbabwe. Scott and Belinda, Australia. A group of Karoi farmers, Zimbabwe. Egnacious Chisauka, Zimbabwe



CHAPTER 4: SUPPORT SYSTEMS AND THEIR EFFICACY

During my travels I came across many different types of support: crisis management, preventative strategies, government funded, charitable, private sector, organisations and individuals. Whilst there are many different approaches, I was able to identify several key considerations to ensure engagement and effectiveness of support.

The power of story-telling and the importance of language

Farmers are rarely enthusiastic about being told what to do by anyone perceived as an authority. However, when they see someone like themselves doing something that has visibly beneficial results, they are much more likely to take it on board. The power of storytelling cannot therefore be underestimated, particularly in raising awareness of mental health, normalising struggle and illustrating potential ways forward. There has been a big increase in this through various campaigns, and whilst some tell their stories openly, honestly and responsibly, inspiring others to seek support and providing clear signposting, others allow ego or commercial aims to overwhelm the message.

The storytelling approach whilst effective requires caution. Language matters. Publishing and media guidelines on discussing suicide are strict for good reason as poor language choices can reinforce outdated ideas of suicide being criminal, sinful or shameful, which for those in that space deepens isolation and discourages help seeking. Discussion of method or martyrdom of those passed can also lead to an increased likelihood of action in those contemplating suicide. These responsibilities extend beyond discussion of suicide: misuse of terminology, poor language choices and misinformation about other mental health conditions can also potentially cause harm. Every path through struggle is as individual and nuanced as the person experiencing it. Those with good intentions or commercial aims that present what worked for them as the solution for everyone, or perhaps more dangerously - dismiss what didn't work for them as ineffective, risk dissuading others from potentially beneficial interventions. The most effective support is the one that fits the person seeking it.



CASE STUDIES: Examples of responsible and effective storytelling

Motherland (AUS)

Motherland is a podcast broadcast by Stephanie Trethewey (journalist and farm wife) in which many different women discuss the challenges of their lives raising families on farm. It allowed farm women to see their experience in the stories of others, feel less isolated, and learn from the struggles and triumphs of others. The organisation expanded to provide connection, knowledge and peer support by facilitating small online support communities based around motherhood stages, and then to a national conference bringing farm women from all over Australia together to listen to speakers and connect with others in person.

Just a farmer (AUS)

The film 'Just a Farmer' was written and produced by farmer Leila McDougall who also starred in it, and is a moving and unfiltered portrayal of the mental health struggles facing Australian farmers. The movie has been screened around Australia, and worldwide sparking meaningful discussion and winning several awards.

Kick off ya boots (AUS)

Written by John Gladigau (Farmer, Nuffield scholar and Director of GPSA), 'Kick off ya boots' is a musical portraying the life and challenges of an Australian farm family. Developed in association with Ifarmwell it allowed communities to come together for a night out, and see relatable characters deal with situations they recognised with poignance and humour. The input of Ifarmwell led by Dr Kate Gunn, ensured responsible use of language and helpful messages and strategies modelled by the characters. Resources, signposting and discussions were available after the show, and follow up support as required. A second play based on relationships was filmed allowing greater distribution.

The combination of trust and knowledge

Trust is the gateway to effective support as without it even an excellent intervention will fail to engage. I unfortunately came across examples of clinicians and researchers who didn't really understand the communities they were trying to help and decried farmers for being hard to reach, or unwilling to take up support, when actually what they were offering was what they *thought* farmers needed, not what was *actually* needed.

Farmers have understandably felt let down by these professionals and therefore usually turn first to those who will 'get it'. Yet being able to 'speak farmer' is also



not enough on its own. Those organisations that concentrate on providing a listening ear without appropriate training, boundaries and referral routes, leave both the people they are trying to help *and* the people helping at significant risk or emotional harm.

The most effective and safest initiatives therefore either involve those who possess both clinical knowledge and lived experience, or work hard at bridging the gap and combining the two by delivering interventions with local community members but who are informed and supported by clinicians with training and experience.

CASE STUDIES: Examples of effective combination of trust with knowledge.

Ifarmwell (AUS)

Ifarmwell is a website designed with farmers, for farmers in order to disseminate wellbeing information and resources. It is based on evidence-based clinical information developed by the research team led by Dr Kate Gunn. It takes into account what farmers are looking for, and packages it in a language and style that suits accordingly. In addition they have an initiative called 'Vocal Locals' which takes trusted members of local communities and trains them in support and signposting.

3 Oaks Cabin (CAN)

3 Oaks is a respite space for farmers and first responders who need time and space to get off farm due to mental strain. It is low cost and can host individuals or families together with everything they need. Whilst set up by a farm mum who tragically lost her farmer son to suicide, it is robustly supported by the National Farmer Mental Health Alliance who perform safeguarding check ins with those wishing to book, wellbeing resources during the stay and follow up contact with a mental health professional if required.

Friendship Bench (ZIM)

This initiative uses local 'grandmothers' as mental health support workers to provide a listening ear within communities. They are trained by mental health professionals, taught how to screen for serious issues, and offered ongoing development training and supervision.

Combining types of support

Because the issues around mental health in agriculture are multifaceted and involve many different aspects of farm life, those initiatives that either combine support in different areas or provide all the necessary elements for wellbeing



under the umbrella of other resources (so called 'health by stealth') seem to be particularly effective.

CASE STUDIES: Examples of combined support

NYFarmnet (USA)

Run by the Cornell University NYFarmnet combines financial and business support with social and emotional. Anyone contacting their support line receives a visit from both a financial advisor and social worker together. An awareness that struggle in one of those areas rarely occurs without struggle in the other, they approach the business and family as one enterprise tackle both issues together.

Rural Aid (AUS)

Rural Aid combines practical and emotional support. After crisis events, mental health professionals were sent out alongside the deliveries of practical support such as hay or fence posts. This recognises that at the peak of a crisis practical support is most useful but the counsellor's presence allows in-person risk assessment (of the whole family), and provides a name, friendly face and contact details for farmers should they find at a later point that they need further support.

Institute of Agromedicine (USA)

A collaboration between three North Carolina universities, the Institute of Agromedicine combines safety, physical and mental health providing training programmes, resources and crisis support backed by clinical research. It combines the expertise of doctors, nurses, mental health professionals, researchers and extension specialists within one organisation.

Fat farmers (AUS)

Fat farmers was set up to improve the physical health of farmers to prevent more severe health issues later on (lose weight, lower blood pressure etc). It uses trusted members of farming communities and local exercise businesses to run farmer exercise sessions. Whilst aiming for physical wellbeing, it simultaneously provides many of the elements known to improve mental wellbeing – time away from the stress of the farm, connection with others, physical exercise, and a sense of purpose and achievement not directly linked to the farm. Its approachable branding starts conversations and allows farmers to begin a journey towards health and improvement in an way which minimises their vulnerability.



Supporting more than the farmer.

Healthy communities thrive when everyone within them is supported and therefore better able to help each other. In farming, this means ensuring partners, spouses, children, and farm workers are also effectively supported. It also means supporting 'accidental counsellors': those on-farm professionals such as vets, agronomists, hauliers, inspectors, sales representatives and financial advisers whose close contact with farmers and trusted position means they are often the first to spot when things aren't right, are onsite during a crisis or confided in by farmers. However, they already work in pressurised industries and may carry significant emotional burdens, so making them the first line of support without adequate backing is unfair and dangerous. In light of this, mental health first aid training is increasingly offered to those professions but it is not always clear what is expected and often them feeling the weight of the added responsibility. It is important therefore that training is fit for purpose and there are clear and easy referral routes to those with clinical expertise, and readily available access to that support themselves if necessary. Understanding how to create and maintain healthy boundaries will protect themselves from burnout and vicarious trauma. This also applies not just to those in professions allied to agriculture but all those volunteering with support organizations.

CASE STUDY: Supporting the whole community

Jaime Philp Komani (ZIM)

Jaime runs a blueberry farm with a large community of farm workers living on the farm. She has two counsellors living on farm supporting the 400+ work force and families in exchange for accommodation. What started as supporting the children using exercises like singing at lions and the tree of life to process trauma, and encourage hope and aspiration, had such a profoundly positive effect that other members of the community sought out the support for themselves. Jaime also built a community room – initially to screen football matches and films. However it formed a social space where community members then met to play sport as well as watch it, make products to sell to supplement community income and form buying groups to help reduce financial pressure. Replacing the bottle store with a church dramatically reduced alcohol use and improved community morale.



CASE STUDY: Supporting the volunteers

Back on Track (AUS)

Back on Track is a 10 stage peer-guided mental health initiative run by the National Centre for Farmer Health open to anyone within the farming community. The community coaches are trained to deliver a evidence based programme, but before they can deliver it, they have to complete the programme themselves. This helps them have the self awareness of their own health before helping others, and the understanding of what it is like to work through. They are remunerated for their time, have regular supervision with a psychologist, and programme leaders regularly checking in with both them and the mentee to identify and support through any adverse incidents. There are clear distress pathways and robust lone worker protocol to ensure their safety and wellbeing.

Barriers to effective support

Who pays?

One major challenge is finding mental health professionals with sufficient agricultural knowledge and understanding. Canada's National Farmer Mental Health Alliance is one example of an organisation trying to address this with comprehensive 'Agriculture Informed Therapy' training and clear branding that helps farmers identify those clinicians. However qualified professions cost money, as does administration, resources and accessible technology, so the most significant barrier to support provision remains 'who pays?'. Farmers are already under financial strain, and charities depend on donations from communities facing the same economic pressures.

In some countries, government funding supports organisations, research and university-led programmes. But that too is vulnerable, as political change can remove resources abruptly, as seen recently in the United States.

We may need to approach the problem slightly differently. Perhaps there needs to be a heavier responsibility on those further up the chain particularly as this is where the greatest profit margins sit. However, we must beware the 'mind washing' trap: organisations who simply provide a donation in order to avoid facing up to their role in the issue are not a long-term solution.

One of the first conversations of my Nuffield journey was with a vet whose practice had shifted to a subscription model of care rather than pay-as-you-go. What became apparent was that because farmers had already paid for it (and they like to get their money's worth) they were valuing it more highly, accessing



professional support sooner and more often, therefore improving both welfare and economic outcomes. This model is something that warrants further thought.

CASE STUDY: Funding differently

MELA (FIN)

Mela is a mandatory insurance for farms above a certain scale and income which is also heavily financially supported by the Finnish government. As a result farmers have access to a pension, life insurance, workers compensation, maternity and paternity pay, health screenings, and wellbeing support. For livestock farmers they also can claim 26 days a year of livestock labour so that they can get off farm. These measures not only helps farmers with their wellbeing, but also communicates that the Finnish government values the role that farmers play in their economy, boosting pride and self esteem.

Competition gets in the way of collaboration

Competition for resources, donations, university grants and government funding often creates protectionism between organisations. In several areas, I encountered reluctance to share knowledge or research, causing unnecessary duplication, gaps in provision and stalled progress on issues requiring national cooperation. Yet I also saw successful examples in health and safety. International collaboration offers particular potential: many challenges are shared, while cross-border partners compete less directly for resources. Research, knowledge and ideas could therefore be developed together and rolled out across countries.

CASE STUDY: Examples of successful collective collaboration

NLR (NOR)

NLR is a farm safety organisation aiming to reduce the number of farm deaths a year to zero. Whilst a complicated process, NLR are a successful example of the amalgamation of eleven separate organisations to form one national organisation whilst maintaining local roots.

SafeHabitat (EU wide)

A Europe wide, multinational collaboration of eleven 'communities of practice' sharing farm health and safety knowledge. Their offerings include resources for farmers and also involves the rest of supply chain, health professionals, researchers and policy makers.



A word on resilience

Resilience is very important: it is what allows us to withstand challenge with minimal detrimental impact. 'Farmers need to be more resilient in the face of adversity' is something I have heard from policy makers, industry executives and the general public but it is a mantra that needs to be challenged, because it lacks explanation or context. It is also akin to 'victim blaming' – expecting the farmer to be the solution to a problem which isn't always of their making, at a time when their financial, emotional, and energy resources are at their lowest.

Clearly defining resilience is therefore crucially important. A false idea of resilience is created by the values held in farming culture mentioned earlier: be strong, head down, don't trouble others, do it yourself, toughen up. When farmers are encouraged to see endurance as resilience, they carry on doing what they have always done under greater pressure, strain and isolation. When working harder is no longer enough, they burn out, feel ashamed of perceived failure, see no acceptable alternatives and become withdrawn from others. This false resilience reinforces the harmful narrative and feeds the very system we need to escape from.

True resilience is about flexibility rather than rigidity: the ability to adapt, challenge the status quo and think creatively. Nowhere was there a clearer example of this than Zimbabwe. I heard many stories describing civil war, Mugabe's land reform, economic catastrophe and hyperinflation, often involving the loss of homes, businesses and possessions, as well as grave injury and violence. Many understandably had to pivot by leaving farming, but those I met still choose it despite constant unpredictability and insecurity. Their resilience lies in their acceptance, gratitude and creativity to make a plan and, when everything changes, make another despite their grief for what could have been. Despite all this, they retain their identity as farmers and their pride in their country and its people, if not its officials.



Figure 8. Organisations. L-R from top: Leila McDougal 'Just a Farmer', Australia. Joh Gladigau 'Kick off ya boots', Australia. Dr Kate Gunn 'Ifarmwell', Australia. Beatrice Shava 'Friendship Bench', Zimbabwe. Lauren Van Ewyk 'National Farmer Mental Health Alliance



CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS

Although I begin this chapter with recommendations for how individuals can protect their emotional health, I want to be clear: the narrative must move away from ‘farmers need to be more resilient’. Whilst there needs to be personal accountability and agency in the face of adversity, this report will recommend what each sector of the wider system can do in order to ensure change in a positive direction.

For individuals

“If you are finding it hard, it is because it IS hard, not because you are weak”.

(Birger Bull, Norwegian farmer)

Whatever your role in farming, protecting your wellbeing is not a ‘nice to have’; it is essential. Too often the temptation is to wait until something breaks to fix it, but maintenance is an investment in yourself, your business and your family, no different in principle from the daily care you give to the farm.

Firstly, get to know yourself. Understand your key stressors, what you find most challenging and what your warning signs are that your system is overloaded or depleted. Then, pay attention and check in with yourself regularly, in the same way you check your herd or walk your crops looking for signs of distress in the system. Are the signs there? Are you ignoring them? What are they telling you? What needs to change?

Learn what works for you when those warning signs appear. Identify what gives your nervous system a break, helps you feel more positive, restores energy or creates a sense of achievement. Finding what works may involve trial and error, and several small changes rather than one large one, but the key is to discover what fits *you* and your life. If this is hard to figure out seeking professional help - as you would a vet or agronomist for farm issues - is not weakness but good sense.

Approach your wellbeing as a holistic system: diet, sleep, physical health, substance misuse, relationships and technology use all form part of the picture.

Build a network. You are not an island; you are part of a continent. Think about who you could reach out to for support, whether emotional, financial, legal, practical or business-related. It may be one person or many people, and if you don't know, find out and make connections now *before* you need them. Keep at least one helpline or assistance number in your phone; even if you never use it, someone you meet might need it.



Acting before crisis hits helps you remain safer, more productive, creative and connected, as a farmer, partner, parent, friend, employer, employee or community member. Recognise your value and invest in yourself accordingly. When challenges come, you will have a clearer next step; much of crisis overwhelm comes from not knowing what to do. Remember that you are not alone and that help exists, whatever the problem.

Sometimes it is hard to do things for ourselves, so thinking about modelling a healthier approach to others (particularly the younger generation) can help. Do your children see someone who is burnt out, doesn't talk about feelings, and takes stress out on others? Or do they see someone who can admit how hard the challenges are but still recognise what they love about the job, makes mistakes but apologises and repair relationships, looks after themselves as well as others and strives for balance rather than overwhelm? That's not easy, and it may take work, but that's how we start to change a culture, and by doing it for them, it has a beneficial impact for you too.

For farming and rural community members & allied farm professionals

"Put on your own oxygen mask before attempting to help others"

(Every plane safety demo of my travels)

Firstly, and most importantly: apply the advice in the previous section to yourselves too. The burden of care to perform the role of a mental health professional is not yours, however you are often the people who have the most regular contact with farmers and their families and are often there at points of crisis. There are some key things that will allow you to help support others.

Pay attention: you will know the people you see regularly so be alert to warning signs indicating things aren't quite right. Changes in behaviour, irritability, withdrawal, unexplained slips standards of care (with themselves or on farm). Above all trust your gut.

If something feels off, ask the question. If all seems ok, check in anyway. We tell farmers to reach out in a crisis, but doing so can be extremely difficult. Even if the initial response is 'it's fine', asking shows that the door is open, and that you are a person they could have difficult conversations with in the future. If you are seriously concerned that someone may harm themselves, asking directly does not increase the risk; it offers another possible route out.

Know the next step. Some problems may be within your power to help with and others will not. Keep helpline and organisation numbers readily available, you do not have to take someone's load for them, but help them carry it to someone who is equipped to assist.



Know where to turn yourself. Being the person who witnesses something traumatic or distressing, or who has to be the bearer of bad news will have an impact on you too, and it is ok for you to need support too.

For managers and leaders of these professions and organisations, please do not underestimate the additional cost to your staff of being at the coalface. Ensure you in turn are offering the same to them, checking in, and providing easy routes of professional and peer support for them without judgement.

For support providers & organizations

“Farmers want local, friendly trusted connection, Farmers need educated, experienced support with skills – To bridge the gap, get the wanted to introduce the needed”

(Kate Gunn, Ifarmwell AUS))

As with the above section, supporting your volunteers and staff is as important as the people you are hoping to help.

Be the link between trust and knowledge. Deliver messages and services that farming communities can relate to and engage trusted members of those communities to help. Enrol professionals to ensure messages are consistent and use responsible, ethical language that will not inadvertently cause harm or distress. Make those messages part of everyday conversation, use health by stealth and get creative!

Make sure there aren't parts of the community falling through the cracks. It is easy to underestimate the ripple effect of mental health challenges on those supporting someone else: family members, work colleagues, friends. Look at how your offerings can support the supporters too.

Try not to let ego or protectionism obstruct your values. Collaboration prevents unnecessary duplication and waste. If that's not possible with the organisation next door, look further afield and build national or international connections.

For clinicians / health professionals

*“CRUSH Farmer suicidality: **C**ulture, **R**espect, **U**nderstanding, **S**ensitivity & **H**umility”.*

(Susan Jones, University of Kentucky)

Have cultural humility and curiosity. If you are a health professional working in rural spaces, acknowledge that you may not know everything about the community you are trying to help, and engage, learn and seek further knowledge and training as you would for any other community. Strategies applicable to the



general population may not be applicable to those in farming. There is the widely accepted narrative that if a farmer turns up at A&E you can be sure it's serious. And if that's true of physical health, it's definitely going to be true of mental health too.

For researchers

"You have to get to know someone before you can impart your wisdom"

(Egnacious Chisauka, Zim Farmer)

Research is an important link between farming communities and decision makers. Those with power and purse strings often require evidential proof that things are an issue and that interventions have an effect before they will make changes, therefore the research in these fields is fundamental to driving change. It is imperative to involve farmers and their communities in the process, both in identifying relevant research questions, and in disseminating findings back to those communities in ways that provide clear paths for action.

For the industry

"Overused strengths can become a weakness"

(Lauren Van Ewyk NFMHA, CAN)

As an industry we need to have the courage challenge harmful narratives, not to destroy our farming identity but to evolve it into something healthier. We need to challenge attitudes around work martyrdom, misogyny, xenophobia, homophobia, bullying and coercive behaviour. We are rightly telling people to reach out if they are struggling, but we are not always providing a safe environment for them to do so.

Celebrate those who are modelling healthy strategies through responsible storytelling, promote the positives of the industry as well as the negatives, maximise the protective factors, and normalise the conversations around making change, retirement and stepping away from the industry when necessary to ensure that people feel less trapped.

Embrace the power of our collective identity. Too often we get caught up in livestock vs arable, traditional vs regenerative, multigenerational vs married-in etc., and we miss the fact that we are all in this together. We are the continent and if we can unite behind the positives to our industry – no matter what sector or role – we communicate our value in ways that allows wider society to value us too.



For government & supply chain

"All challenges are solved by understanding people first"

(Egnacious Chisauka, Zim Farmer)

Consider the potential impact of policy decisions on individuals before making them. Sustainability has three pillars: profit, planet and people. For too long, the human element has been missing from calculations and a lot of that stems from disconnection between those making policy or price decisions and those taking them. Farmer wellbeing is a significant issue and government and supply-chain decisions have the ability to drastically impact it, for better or for worse. Engage with farmers and their families: consult, listen and learn. Decisions that result in a happier, healthier and better-supported farming community result in a safer, more productive and more sustainable industry and economy.

Financial packages are welcome and, unfortunately, often necessary, but they rarely address the underlying problem. When support is offered for distress caused directly by policy, it can feel tokenistic. It is important to understand how those circumstances arose and address the cause rather than only the symptoms.

View wider services through a rural lens. There are many scenarios and struggles which are harder for rural communities because of the difficulty accessing care and services. Health and social care, education, transport, public services, connectivity, are all part of the system. When they are designed with urban communities in mind, they fail those in rural areas.

For everyone: invest in relationships

"Relationships are the glue that hold things together, they are the fuel that makes things work, and they are the thing that's going to be left after we finish working"

(Peter Green 2025 NSch)

We accept that farming can be hard, but crisis often arrives when that pressure damages relationships: a marriage is struggling, family members become estranged, work feels hostile, friendships fade, or someone feels unheard, invisible or unappreciated. Disconnection is where crisis takes hold, and isolation magnifies its effects.

Often, it will be someone else that notices what's going on, reaches out on your behalf, or provides the support you need. We know many calls to helplines are on behalf of someone else. Another time, it will be you doing supporting someone else.



Investing in relationships is therefore one of the most positive things you can do to protect your wellbeing, both now and for the future. This does not just apply to relationships with spouses or friends. It applies to relationships with family members, colleagues, employees and landlords. With land agents, financial advisors, machinery dealers, and accountants. With local community, consumers, suppliers, and customers. With local politicians, government inspectors, lobbying groups and members of parliament. You are not an island.

Relationships, like crops, don't grow overnight. They need consistent care now so that they are there when you need to lean on them in the future, and investing in a relationship opens the door to receiving that investment back. It's not always easy, sometimes it requires recognising and challenging harmful or unhealthy relationships. Sometimes it is about suspending judgment, resentment, and the desire to be right in order to make progress.

In Figure 9 I have included what I believe are 5 key steps for investing in relationships, regardless of what role you hold or who they are with. By doing this you communicate the value of that relationship, and hopefully receive similar in return.

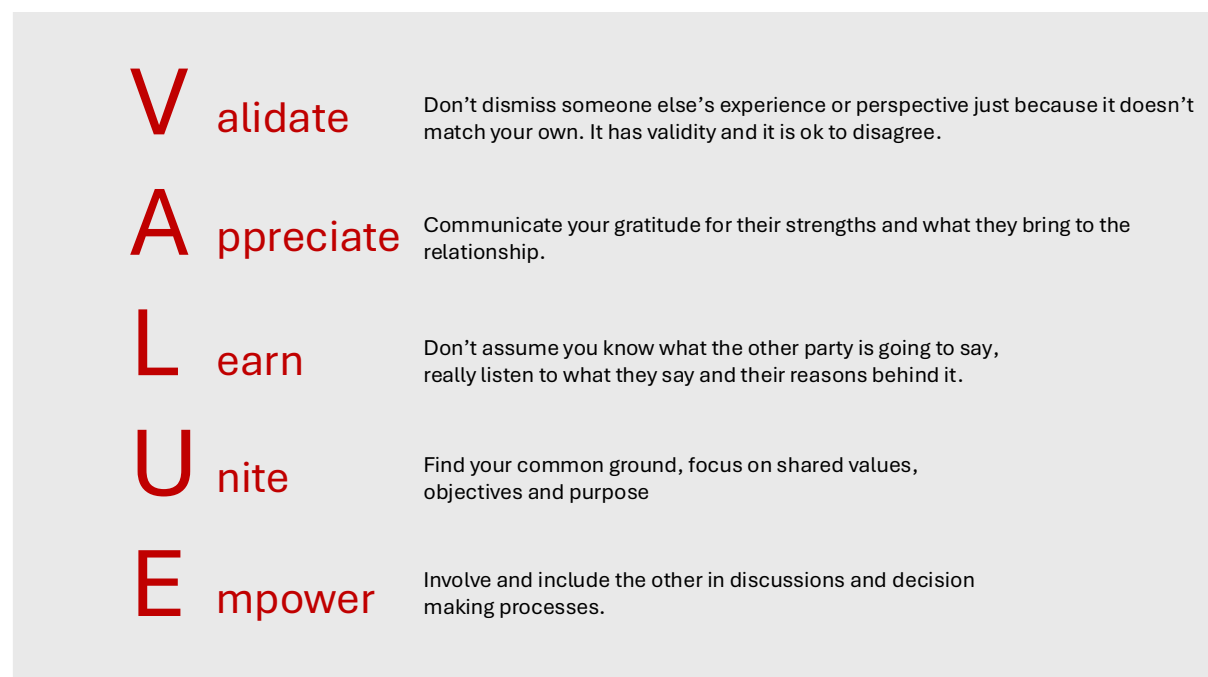


Figure 9. Key steps for successfully investing in relationships



CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

How best to support farming families is a broad topic and difficult to capture succinctly within a few pages. My hope is that this report has generated greater awareness of the complexity because recognising that mental health in agriculture is not an individual issue, but a systemic one is essential if we are to facilitate change.

Farmers are not islands. They are part of the continent and part of the whole. Their families, businesses and stewardship are necessary to protect our planet and feed the people who inhabit it, but they need to be supported to do so. We know with farming that a system under stress is less productive, whether that is livestock or soil. When a crop or animal fails to thrive, we do not blame it, we look at its environment and adjust what we can. It is also the principle behind the core conditions of offering therapy. We do not try to enforce change on people, we work on providing the right conditions to enable people to grow into their potential.

Farmers and their families do not need to be stronger; they are already some of the strongest people I have ever met. They do not need rescuing; they need the right conditions to grow. Farm families need economic, political, practical, social and emotional resources to meet the challenges they currently face, and will inevitably continue to face as the world changes.

If we support everyone in our community, the community is then better placed to support itself and becomes self-sustaining. With the right conditions, our industry can grow to be more productive and more sustainable, in all three of the spheres that matter: Profit, Planet and People.

To do this we need to work to close the gaps: between farmer and non-farmer health, between clinical knowledge and boots on the ground, between consumers and producers, between policy makers and those whom policy affects, between rural and urban communities, between health care providers and patients - and we can only do those things by building and nurturing relationships from both sides..

My future role in that process is something that I have considered carefully. I fully intend to keep working with farm family members on an individual level in my professional capacity. I am also keen to continue my close links with the study into the Health and Wellbeing of Women in Farming with the University of Exeter and The Farming Community Network. In addition I have recently assumed the role of Ambassador for agricultural and rural communities with the National Counselling and Psychotherapy Society and I hope to use this position to make access to counselling support easier for those in rural communities, and support counsellors working in that space. Most of all, I continue to be passionate about



ensuring an agricultural industry that is safe and supportive for the next generation and therefore I would love to share the knowledge I have gained as a result of this study with any group, company or organisation involved in agriculture in order to help facilitate those much needed changes.

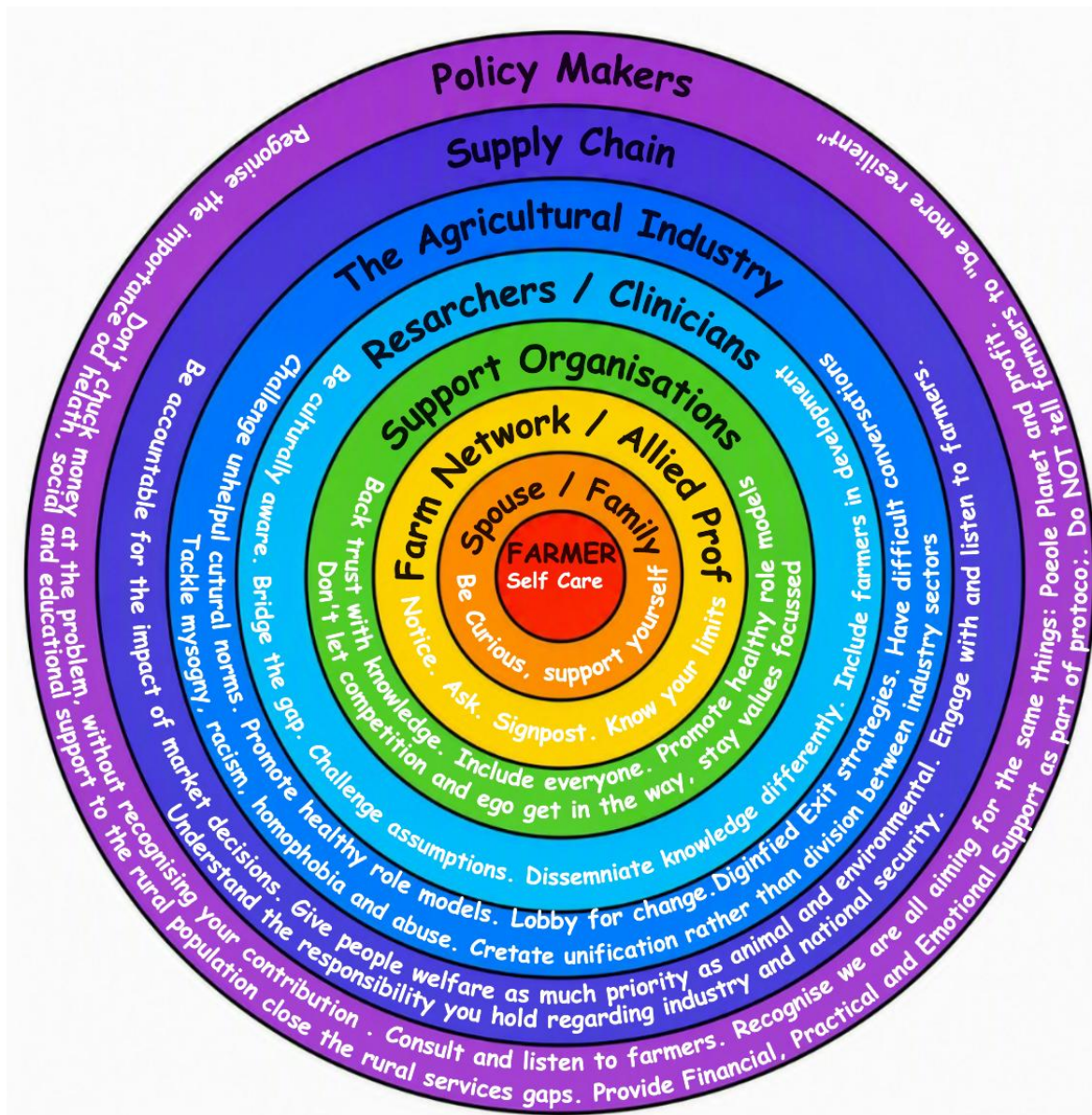


Figure 10: No farmer is an island - the roles of each sector in providing support



CHAPTER 7: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANKS

No farmer is an island, and neither am I!

I am very grateful to Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust for this incredible opportunity to study a topic I am so passionate about in such a life changing way, and for giving that topic the spotlight it needs.

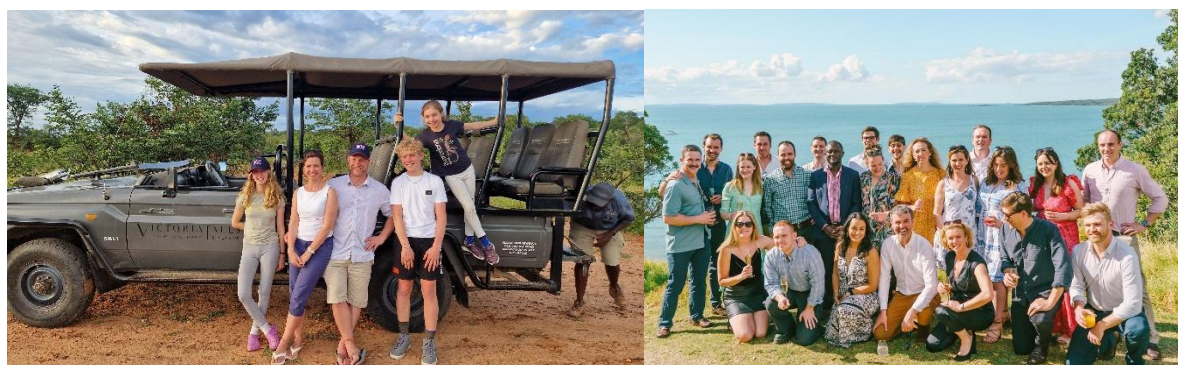
My sincerest thanks go to my sponsors The Farming Community Network and Len's Light (the Eadon family). Thank you for your faith in me and your support. I hope to continue to work closely with you in the future.

I am also grateful for the additional sponsorship received from the National Counselling and Psychotherapy Society: I am proud to be on board as an ambassador.

My beautiful children Toby, Bella and Sophia are my motivation for everything I do and particularly for my desire to drive change in this area. I definitely could not have completed this scholarship without the home support of my husband Tim – at least being a Nuffield Scholar himself, he knew what it was all about! My thanks also go to my Dad for his support. We sadly lost my Mum the same week my scholarship was announced so it was not an easy time for any of us, but he has always been my biggest cheerleader.

To my 2025 cohort: I am so very grateful to have met you! I was incredibly lucky to have you alongside me on this rollercoaster. You are all such inspirational, generous people, and - I hope - friends for life.

And finally, to everyone that took the time to open their doors and share their stories with me: for that I am so very humbled and honoured. It has been an utter privilege to talk to such a wide variety of people that I would never have otherwise met. I will always carry your stories and memories of your loved ones with me wherever I go.





APPENDIX

Links to mentioned organisations

The Farming Community Network	https://fcn.org.uk/
Lens Light	https://lenslight.co.uk/
Motherland	https://motherlandaustralia.com.au/
Just a Farmer	https://www.justafarmermovie.com/
Kick of Ya Boots	https://littletown.com.au/koyb/
Ifarmwell	https://ifarmwell.com.au/
3 Oaks Cabin	https://www.threeoakscabin.com/
Friendship Bench	https://www.friendshipbenchzimbabwe.org
NYFarmnet	https://cals.cornell.edu/nyfarmnet
Rural Aid	https://www.ruralaid.org.au/
Institute of Agromedicine	https://ncagromedicine.org/
Fat Farmers	https://www.fatfarmers.com/
Back on Track	https://farmerhealth.org.au/back-on-track/
National Farmer Mental Health Alliance	https://nfmha.ca/
MELA	https://www.mela.fi/
NLR	https://www.nlr.no/
Safehabitus	https://www.safehabitus.eu/



978-1-916850-86-6

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ISBN: 978-1-916850-86-6

Published by The Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust
Bullbrook, West Charlton, Charlton Mackrell, Somerset, TA11 7AL

Email: office@nuffieldscholar.org

www.nuffieldscholar.org