

Coping with stress in our rural communities

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There are no magic solutions in these times of rural difficulty. We need to find positive ways to work our way through. Hopefully some of this information will assist you to understand yourself and avoid some pitfalls.

In any crisis it is normal to have a variety of strong feelings which may change from time to time. These feelings are normal and they usually last for only a limited period and give way to other feelings.

Normal feelings and emotions in a crisis may include anger, helplessness, fear, disappointment, failure, guilt, shame, sadness, longing, isolation, numbness, let down and hope for the future and for better times.

Expressing strong feelings when they are aroused is not Loss of Control. Bottling them up may lead to increased stress and result in explosions – (eg. violent outbursts) and reduced efficiency. Crying gives relief and is a natural and healthy way of expressing feelings for men as well as women.

Never battle a crisis alone – find someone you trust to talk with about your feelings and the facts of your stress, loss and grief. Choose someone who will listen to you as often as you need to talk.

Stress occurs when we lack the resources to meet the extra demands on our health, energy, emotions or thoughts – prolonged uncertainty increases anxiety and stress. Stress can show up in a number of ways as in physical symptoms, a change in our habits, a difference in our social connectedness, our thoughts and/or our emotional state. When you notice changes like these in yourself it's your body's way of telling you to slow down. People under stress are often so busy coping with the causes of the stress, that they do not notice stress build-up.

Preventing stress build-up involves firstly being aware of how you are feeling and then using strategies such as relaxation, reality checks as in facing the problem and working through it, coming to terms with the situation, time out or some solitude, activity and recreation.

DON'T – bottle up feelings; say bad things about yourself; avoid talking about what is happening; isolate yourself from other individuals and groups.

DO – express your emotions; discuss the problem with others; accept support from people who care; look after yourself – diet, sleep, time-out, exercise, relaxation; take time to be with close family and friends; express your needs clearly and honestly to family, friends and those in helping professions; let your children talk to you and others about their emotions; explain to your children why expenditure is being cut back - they will cope! Try to keep the rest of your life as normal as possible: play sport; drive more carefully; be aware that accidents are more common during and after stress and remember – laughter is as good as a dose of medicine.

As well as taking care of yourself, keep an eye on your family and other members of your community. Take the time to stop and have a chat and ask how people are doing. Notice if someone is withdrawing and invite him or her along to a community or family activity.

After all, the most precious resource we have is one another – so let's take care of our communities and ourselves.