Speaker 1:

Welcome to AgVic Talk, keeping you up to date with information from Agriculture Victoria.

Drew Radford:

It's been a difficult year for many farming communities. Some have had to deal with everything from drought, fire, right through to the pandemic. The physical impacts of these are often easy to see. However, the mental effects on those living through it are not always so easy to detect. Recognizing those and dealing with them is important for not only your own mental health, but also ensuring that you're in the best position to make good decisions for yourself, your business and also your loved ones. David Cherry is a psychologist with over 35 years’ experience. 25 of those have been spent practicing in the agricultural sector. He's recently been running a series of workshops to help regional Victorians deal with challenging times. He joins me in the AgVic Talk studio. David, thanks for your time.

David Cherry:

Thank you.

Drew Radford:

David, we can usually see the impacts of flood, drought, fire and so on, what is harder to tell though is how challenging times affect the individual in terms of their mental health. What signs should people be aware of?

David Cherry:

The things that people should look out for in themselves are loss of energy, worry, sometimes quick mood changes. It might be anger. It might be feeling tearful or crying. It might be using alcohol to a greater level than they might've done in the past or using it too much against their own interests, and also possibly being inclined to make poor decisions and impulsive decisions. So they'd be some of the things that I would think about that a person would look for in themselves and indeed look for those same sorts of things in others.

Drew Radford:

You mentioned there David impulsive decisions and often mental health particularly with blokes is pushed away in the corner, but poor decision-making impacting on your business. That's a really tangible thing that I imagine a lot of people could relate to and understand, but not until it's pointed out to them like this in regards to mental health.

David Cherry:

Absolutely, okay. So, you made some really interesting points there. So people under stress and people who may be experiencing poor mental health are inclined to make, or sometimes make poor decisions against their own interests. You made that important point. And the other thing I just want to add too what might lead you to be concerned about your own mental health is if other people express concern about you. So, I would always encourage people to listen to others. So, if other people express concern that perhaps you need some assistance, I'd always encourage people to pay attention to that.

Drew Radford:

David, you've mentioned a range of things to be on the lookout, but what about those broader things that we talk about like anxiety and depression?

David Cherry:

Sure. If an individual feels that they are anxious a lot of the time, if they're worried a lot of the time, if they feel depressed or miserable or low in energy, I always encourage people to seek assistance and they might seek assistance through their GP, their local community health centre. So, you may be aware that at the moment, individuals are able to access up to 20 sessions with a psychologist through their GP after they got a mental health plan. And as I understand it, that help or assistance can be provided remotely.

Drew Radford:

David, what about another thing to be on the lookout for, is poor sleep an indicator that maybe something else is going on for you?

David Cherry:

Absolutely. So look, it's interesting that you mentioned sleep because sleep, as you would know, is an important pillar of health and I'd encourage anybody who experiences a sleep difficulty any time in their life to get assistance sooner rather than later. So what I mean by sleep difficulty is having difficulty getting off to sleep, having difficulty remaining asleep or awaking and not feeling refreshed. So many sleep difficulties can be assisted or improved or changed quite quickly. And as you've said, Drew, sometimes poor sleep is an indicator of poor mental health or may contribute to poor mental health. So always encourage people as soon as they experienced any sort of sleep difficulty, get assisted sooner rather than later. And it could be through a GP, it could be by approaching a counsellor or a psychologist.

Drew Radford:

David, you mentioned their sleep being an important pillar of mental health. What are some other things that people can do to maintain their mental health and look after themselves on that front?

David Cherry:

Things that assist all of us in maintaining good mental health are social connection, time with others. Ideally, we'll all have at least one person in our lives that we can talk to about things that worry and upset us. So, that's one important thing that contributes to mental health. Second thing is getting regular exercise and you may be aware that with increased mechanisation in the agricultural sector, that some people are getting far less exercise than they might've done in the past. So, getting enough exercise, that's really, really important.

Another really important thing is getting regular physical check-ups, including regular dental check-ups. They're some of the things I'd say. In addition to that, ideally all of us has at least one activity that completely absorbs us and relaxes us and might take us away from our daily worries. It could be gardening, it could be swimming, it could be spending time with friends. Any sort of activity that completely absorbs you. Crafts are also really useful for many people. So, these are some of the things that are really important for people. Another really important thing, which is easy for nearly everybody in the agricultural sector, is time in the outdoors and being in the sun and being in nature. Those things are really, really important.

Drew Radford:

You mentioned there David, the importance of absolving yourself in an activity and also the importance of actually social interaction can be often difficult. The social interaction part though for primary producers and it requires really that extra step.

David Cherry:

I think many people, primary producers, work very long hours because they're committed to their business. They're committed to looking after their families. They're committed to their communities. And that may mean that sometimes they don't look after themselves as well as they could. So, taking time for yourself and connecting with others is an important part of looking after yourself so that you can continue to contribute to the wider community and run your business as effectively as possible. Taking time for yourself is really, really important, both for yourself and also to help you continue to make your contribution to others, family members and the wider community.

Drew Radford:

That's such an interesting way to actually look at it and a logical way to look at it, David Cherry, because usually it's sort of, put up the shutters and all I'm ok, but actually now I'm not being effective in all these other areas that are important to me if I'm not looking after myself.

David Cherry:

Absolutely.

Drew Radford:

David, we often see people that we are concerned about. We go “Well, maybe things aren't going so well for you” or wonder if they're not going so well for an individual. How should you go about dealing with that?

David Cherry:

I think it's important that people are prepared to say to somebody that they may know that they're concerned about just to simply ask them how they're going. And then if the person says, "Well, I'm not going all that well," or say something, "Really worried about this,' it's just to learn what the person's concerns are and possibly suggest that they might seek assistance with that concern professionally, either from a GP, either if it's financial issues from the rural financial counsellor community health centre. So finding out what a person's concerns are and then suggesting that they seek assistance and doing it tactfully.

And the way you might do that tactfully, is rather than say, "Look, I think you need to go here and get this." You might say, "Well, I know other people who've had these concerns or these worries and they have been helped by going here and doing this.” So rather than saying, "So, you need to do that," you might tell, "I know of other people who've had these concerns and they have been helped by doing this."

Another important thing is that the language that you use when you're discussing another person's concern is important. Some people are happy to discuss feeling stressed, but they're not happy to discuss feeling anxious or depressed. So, you might say, "Look, many people are stressed in these times because it's difficult, they have been helped by going here." I wonder if that might be useful to you. So being tactful and being mindful of the language that may be acceptable to the other person, I think is important.

Drew Radford:

David, any tips then on how people can look after themselves during tough times when they're feeling stressed?

David Cherry:

One way that people may be able to help themselves is to use the difficult time to develop themselves, to develop their self-awareness and to develop new thinking skills and new behaviour skills. For example, for people who may be anxious, it's important to become aware of when your anxiety may be building so that you can take steps to reduce your anxiety. For example, by examining your thinking and changing it where possible to reduce your anxiety. I'd always encourage people, if they're going to learn new skills, to do this with the support of others. For some people, anxiety can be reduced by adopting new behaviours. For example, by meditating regularly. Another way people can help themselves, ideally with the support of others, is to learn new thinking skills and it might be important for some people who are depressed to learn to be less self-demanding and possibly less demanding of others. Another important new behave that people may be adopt, in particular for those people who are depressed and or anxious can be spending time with others or spending time engaged in enjoyable activities. And a really good resource for people who want to develop their own awareness, their self-awareness or develop new thinking skills or new behaviour skills is the Beyond Blue website.

Drew Radford:

David, some great insights there for dealing with difficult times. Thank you so much for joining me in the AgVic Talk studio.

David Cherry:

Thank you.

Drew Radford:

If this podcast has brought out any difficult emotions for you, please find someone you can talk to or call the Beyond Blue service on 1300224636, MensLine Australia on 1300 78 99 78 or Lifeline on 131114.

Speaker 1:

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