

Rural people are known for their resilience, but drought can really put this to the test.

Drought can prove just as stressful as family breakdown or serious illness. It can leave many people feeling trapped in a situation which is not of their making and which is beyond their capacity to resolve.

Drought doesn't just affect those who live on the land. Its environmental, economic and social consequences affect most members of rural communities. Some people feel strengthened by their ability to cope with the experience, but many feel weighed down by the stresses it causes.

A degree of stress is normal in life. Common triggers for stress are frustration, conflict, change and pressure. In difficult times, such as drought, the number of stress responses and their intensity increases. Some examples of stress symptoms are given below.

Physical

Tiredness, headaches, accidents, tightness in neck and shoulders, restlessness, ulcers, hypertension, respiratory problems, diarrhoea or constipation, chest pain, back pain, upset stomach, skin problems, weight loss or gain.

Psychological/Emotional

Irritability, mood swings, nervousness, low self-esteem, worry, anxiety, tearfulness, guilt, fear, anger, grief, sleep problems, disappointment, depression, helplessness, hopelessness, shame, confusion, forgetfulness, dull senses, negative attitude, poor concentration.

Behavioural/Social

Seeking isolation, fewer contacts with friends, overworking, lashing out, blaming, nagging,



resentment, aggression, arguing, alcohol/drug/tobacco use.

If stress is experienced for long periods of time it can result in physical, mental and emotional exhaustion or 'burnout'. The following strategies may help you handle these stress responses. They may also help you reduce some of the stressful effects of drought.

Tool Kit

1. Exploring financial options

Drought usually brings financial problems which in turn, make the situation more stressful. Stress is particularly intense when decisions must be made about the use of resources, especially when these decisions involve selling assets. Stress can also mount when it seems that no matter how hard you work, you keep going backwards.

It is important to discuss your financial situation with people who are trained to help. Financial counselling services can help you assess your situation so you can make more informed and timely decisions. See the list of resources on the back page.

The financial situation affects the whole family so it is important to involve everyone in discussions. Together you can plan financial goals, set priorities and plan a budget. Don't make quick decisions – discuss ideas and seek financial advice.

2. Improving communication

Stress saps energy and makes us want to withdraw from problems. Families and individuals under stress may withdraw from friends, their community and others around them. Yet this is when they need their support network the most.



People under stress may also communicate in unhelpful ways. For example, families may find themselves bickering more than usual, withdrawing from one another or becoming more verbally or physically abusive. Criticising, blaming, interrupting or dominating conversations are other common responses.

Effective communication begins with establishing guidelines for dealing with sensitive topics.

- Treat other people with respect.
- Listen to each other until you have 'experienced' the other person's side of the issue. Pay attention to the other person's ideas, and how they feel about them.
- Maintain eye contact and be aware of your body language (avoid crossing your arms, rolling your eyes, clenching your fists etc).
- When expressing your views, state your needs and feelings briefly. Be specific about what you hope to achieve. Try not to use loaded or accusatory words. Try not to exaggerate, withhold important information or raise your voice.
- Focus on issues rather than personalities by using 'I' statements (*I feel upset when...*) rather than blaming 'you' messages (*You always...*).
- Focus on the present, and resist the temptation to revisit old hurts.
- If the situation becomes negative or hurtful, take time out until everyone has calmed down.

Crying is often unavoidable when feelings are intense and this is perfectly natural.

3. Coping with changing roles

Crises such as drought can lead to considerable personal and community upheaval. People are often forced to take on additional paid work, leave long-term employment, or become unemployed. In all these situations, it is important to maintain good communication with those affected by the changes.

In close relationships the best plan is cohesion – ride the situation out together. Be sensitive to one another's feelings and pay attention to unspoken pain as well as verbalised distress. During these times of adjustment, it is important to spend regular time with those who are important to you.

Changing roles can lead to feelings of guilt and embarrassment. When things go wrong, people tend to blame themselves or think they've failed in some way. These feelings are seldom justified. By examining the whole situation, you may be able to see things more realistically and reduce your self blame.

- List the outside influences (weather, equipment breakdown, interest rates etc) that contributed to the role change.
- List any people involved and their needs (fellow workers, your children, your bank manager etc) and include yourself on the list.
- Being realistic, give each a score out of 100 for how much it/they contributed to the role change. Score yourself last.
- Ensure the scores add up to 100.
- Look back at all the factors and re-evaluate your level of responsibility.

People under stress may also use alcohol to 'unwind' or 'drown their sorrows'. But, alcohol can increase feelings of depression and sadness, and overuse can lead to further family and social problems, farm injuries, and serious physical illness. GPs recommend no more than 4 drinks a day for men, and 2 drinks a day for women, with 2 alcohol free days a week.

4. Helping children and adolescents through tough times

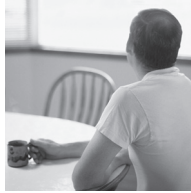
Children are often very aware of what is happening around them. When adults withhold information, it can result in mixed messages, confusion and tension. Children know something is wrong, even though they may not know what it is, and they fill in the blanks themselves. They tend to imagine the worst and may think they are to blame.

Children may hear you say, "Everything is fine", but see the distress on your face, hear it in your voice and experience it in your lack of patience. Parents should admit their concerns to children and involve them as far as possible in decision making.

Children can learn valuable lessons from watching how parents deal with pressure and stress. They can learn that painful feelings can be handled, and that decision making involves information gathering, looking at alternatives and selecting the best option.

- Have family meetings to discuss issues.
- Be honest and open about what is happening.
- When a decision has been made, point out what will remain the same and what will change.
- Outline the children's responsibilities, ie: to do well at school and help at home.
- Outline your responsibilities, ie: to worry about...

Adolescents have similar needs but are more susceptible to their own stress. Communication is



even more important with them, as events may directly affect their future.

With both children and adolescents, parents need to be aware of changes in mood, behaviour, friendships, eating or sleeping patterns. Discuss these changes with them and seek professional help if concerned. Talk to your GP, community nurse, school counsellor or call Lifeline on 13 11 14, to find out about other local services.

5. Gaining a sense of control

Everyone responds differently to stress. Those who handle stress more effectively tend to have a realistic sense of their limits, a knack for turning problems into opportunities, an ability to challenge their reactions to situations and maintain a positive outlook.

You can start to develop a sense of control by:

- Not overreacting to the problem;
- Becoming aware of negative self talk (*I'll never survive this, I will never work again*);
- Replacing negative self talk with realistic self talk (*I've been through other tough times, I'm not a quitter*);
- Maintaining routines and networks with other people.

People under high levels of stress can take their frustrations out on themselves and others. They can blame themselves for events or turn their frustration to others in the form of anger. Anger can be expressed within the family or directed at others in the community, including people in authority.

6. Controlling anger

Anger is an expression of hurt, frustration and a sense of being treated unfairly. It is often a rapid and instinctive response which takes time and effort to control.

To begin to take control of your anger:

- Learn to recognise warning signs, such as muscle tension, changes in breathing, flushed face, clenched fists;
- Take a few slow, deep breaths (*In 1-2-3...Out 1-2-3*);
- Imagine a place that makes you feel calm and peaceful;
- Think before you act – consider alternative explanations for what the person did or said;
- Determine your course of action and consider the consequences;

- Learn to negotiate – look at alternative solutions and compromises;
- Take 'time out' from the situation if necessary.

Above all, learn to talk about your feelings and to express yourself calmly without losing your temper or fighting. A trusted friend or health professional may be able to help you with this.

7. Don't go it alone!

Although the natural inclination is to isolate yourself in times of crisis, it is one of the worst things you can do. All the research shows that people with strong connections with families, friends and communities cope best in times of crisis. Social support is important because it reduces the sense of isolation, lessens depression and anxiety and provides a network of people who can listen and offer support.

Unfortunately, people may draw away from a family in trouble thinking that their distance is polite and respectful. They may feel their well-meaning help is a burden to the troubled family or fear they will say the wrong thing. Sometimes the family itself may not want help. Men often find it difficult to talk about problems or to ask for help. It is important that during difficult times the community continues to offer support.

Make sure you know:

- Where to go for help and advice;
- What services are available;
- How the finance industry is dealing with people in this situation;
- What support is being offered in the community;
- How to recognise and cope with stress.

8. Coming to terms with loss

Prolonged drought brings a range of losses including loss of property, stock, financial security, expectation, self-esteem and identity. It is not surprising that people facing these difficulties experience grief. It is normal and appropriate to feel hopelessness, sadness, shock, depression, denial, helplessness, despair, guilt and anger.

Points to remember about grief and loss are:

- It is normal and healthy to express intense and painful emotions;
- Grieving is important for healing;
- Each person's experience is unique;
- Over time, sometimes years, the pain will diminish but it is normal for these intense emotions to resurface periodically;



- Unexpressed or prolonged emotion may mean professional help is needed.

Communities also suffer the consequences of drought through the loss of population (particularly young people), jobs in agriculture, hope and vision, and people to participate in community activities. Some communities recover and even flourish, but others find it difficult to survive.

9. Looking after yourself

To cope well in stressful situations you need to look after yourself. If stress is allowed to accumulate, such as when many stressful events occur together, the body can be affected and health, decision-making capacity and relationships may suffer. Your ability to cope is a combination of heredity and learned responses, so you can improve your ability to cope.

- Become aware of your stress level.
- Regularly take time out for relaxation and fun.
- Maintain links with family, friends and community.
- Make sure you eat and sleep well.
- Keep involved with sport, hobbies and other recreational activities.
- Vigorously exercise 30 minutes a day to relieve tension.
- Don't let the crisis dominate your life completely.

Occasionally stress may result in a physical illness. Be aware of any changes in both yourself and others and if you suspect any problem, contact your GP or other health professional.

10. Mental health and suicide

For some people, the stress of coping with drought may trigger a psychological illness. Times of crisis, such as drought, result in a higher incidence of anxiety, depression and suicide. This is not surprising considering the prolonged nature of the stress and how little control people have over the situation. If anxiety or depression becomes disabling, or there is a risk of suicide or self-harm, seek professional help. Talk to your GP, community nurse or call Lifeline on 13 11 14, to find out about other local services.

Don't forget, use all the resources that are available to you. Seeking appropriate care and support is always a positive step.

Useful resources

Centrelink Drought Assistance Line:
13 23 16 or visit www.centrelink.gov.au

Australian Government Drought Assistance:
www.daff.gov.au/agriculture-food/drought

Rural Financial Counselling Service:
Free call 1800 686 175 for your nearest service or visit www.daff.gov.au

Australian Government Regional Information Service: Information on the full range of programs and services. Free call 1800 026 222 (Mon to Fri 9am – 6pm) www.regionalaustralia.gov.au

Lifeline 13 11 14: 24-hour telephone counselling and referral to other support services



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We invite your feedback and comments at infoservice@lifeline.org.au



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