

23 July, 2019

Local Farmer Rallies for Mental Health

Living with mental illness and having a personal experience of life on the land has motivated St Albans Farmer, Sherri McMahon, to help local farmers weather the drought.

Armed with a *Well-being Grant to Support Farming Communities* received from Wentworth Healthcare, provider of the Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network (NBMPHN), Sherri and her partner are rallying the community to connect and build resilience. The grant, given to the Trustees of the St Albans Common, is part of the Empowering Our Communities initiative introduced by the Federal Government to support communities affected by drought.

Using the grant, over the next year a variety of health services, as well as vets, solicitors, mental health services, and rural financial counsellors will be attending musters, fishing events, working bees and an annual whole of community social dinner to ensure the community is seeking and receiving support.

Mental health training will also be delivered to community advocates who will run errands such as preparing firewood and feeding cattle to support elderly or injured members of the community. Additionally, workshops will be delivered on the Commons to locals interested in learning new skills.

Sherri knows first-hand the effect the drought has had on the community and just how hard it can be to acknowledge you have a problem and to seek help. Like many adverse events, the current drought can exacerbate existing mental health issues and trigger negative feelings.

“Farmers have had to put down their sick stock that are in poor condition, or who have eaten poisonous plants that they would not normally eat. Other community members have left the St Albans valley in search of other employment to support their farms.”

“We could see we were in for long hot, dry spells with little or no chance of rains. We watched our pastures turn to dust despite our efforts to irrigate our small paddocks. The price of grain has increased, as well as fodder due to shortages in grain being harvested.”

“We chose to downsize our beef cattle herd by about 50 per cent and take the loss rather than trying to keep all the animals. By downsizing we lost female breeding stock we had selectively bred over the years.”

Sherri says that without her friends and family noticing the signs she may have continued undiagnosed. She agrees that seeking help led her to some breakthroughs.

“Professional help has been able to give me coping tools and techniques. They were also able to give me different ways to look at things and direct to services that (were) available to assist myself and my family.”

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Sherri looks forward to getting underway with the community but in the meantime she offers some words of advice to anyone who may be experiencing a difficult time.

“Don’t downplay your situation, don’t compare yourself to others. You may not think you need help, but if you have the symptoms, get help. I literally wouldn’t be here if I didn’t. The sooner you accept you are suffering and reach out, the sooner you can get back on track.”

Her message is simple and to the point. “It may just save you, your farm and your family.”

Wentworth Healthcare is currently accepting grant applications and are open to a variety of proposals from community groups, individuals, sporting clubs and the like who can raise awareness of mental health, reduce stigma and improve community well-being.

Applications for Round 4 close on Friday, 18 October. For the full application guidelines and to apply, go to www.nbmphn.com.au/grants.

If you or someone you know needs help, contact: Beyond Blue 1300 224 636 or www.beyondblue.org.au; Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467; MensLine 1300 789 978; Lifeline on 13 11 14 or visit www.lifeline.org.au.

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