



Signs of stress & mental health problems

Adverse weather events, such as a drought, can significantly increase stress and have a negative impact on a person's ability to cope and make good decisions. The first signs of stress or mental health problems can be difficult to recognise, as the type, intensity and duration of symptoms varies from person to person. Sometimes a person experiencing mental distress may hide their symptoms because they are worried about what others might say or think about them.

Generic warning signs

Depending on your relationship with your client you may notice some of the signs listed below in someone who is not coping with stress or experiencing mental distress.

- **Marked change in personality.**
- Losing interest in activities and tasks that were previously enjoyed.
- Poor performance at work.
- Inability to cope with daily problems and activities.
- Increased alcohol consumption and/or using drugs to cope.
- Mood swings that are very extreme or fast and out of character.
- Self-harming behaviour.
- Sleep problems – too much or too little.
- Increased anxiety, looking or feeling 'jumpy' or agitated, sometimes including panic attacks.
- Long periods of fatigue and tiredness.
- **Increased isolation, socialising less;** spending too much time in bed.

All of these signs can vary in severity. Often they can be relatively minor, or occur as normal responses to the stresses and challenges of day to day life. However, if they are particularly severe or distressing, or continue for more than a short while, you should encourage the person to seek professional support e.g.:

- their GP
- Rural Support Trust – 0800 787 254
- Depression Helpline – 0800 111 757 www.depression.org.nz/rural
- Suicide Prevention Helpline - 0508 828 865

This information is an excerpt from the resources provided by the Rural Life: Keeping the Balance programme.

How to start a conversation

You don't need to be an expert on mental health to talk about it. It's often the everyday things that make a difference – like asking someone how they are or sending a text. It might seem awkward at first but ignoring the issue will not make it go away. It is important that you give them your undivided attention and listen non-judgmentally. If you are ever unsure about how to respond to someone who is experiencing significant stress or a mental health problem, just treat them as you would wish to be treated – with respect and honesty.

What you can say...

Here are couple of examples of conversation starters as a guide. Make it your own.

- ❖ *Everyone's finding the drought really tough right now. How are things for you?*
- ❖ *You don't really seem like your old self and I'm concerned. What's going on with you?*

Top Tips

Take the lead: If you think someone is having a tough time, don't be afraid to ask how they are. They might want to talk about it, they might not. But just letting them know you're happy to talk is important.

Avoid clichés: Phrases like 'Cheer up', 'I'm sure it'll pass' and 'Pull yourself together' definitely won't help the conversation. Being open minded, non-judgmental and listening will.

Think about body language: Try to be relaxed and open – regular clock watching or looking uncomfortable won't go unnoticed.

Ask how you can help: People will want support at different times in different ways, so ask how you can help.

Give them time: Some people might prefer a text or email rather than talking on the phone or face to face. This means they can get back to you when they feel ready.

