



Clinical Psychologist Sarah Donaldson Answers Farmer Questions on Stress and Burnout

Being a farmer means wearing a lot of hats. You're managing staff, tending to stock, caring for the land, responding to changing weather patterns, analysing global markets and doing the books. Oh, and you're also trying to be a good partner, parent and family member. Juggling all these things can increase our risk of unhealthy stress and getting burnt out.

So, through our Farmstrong Facebook page we asked farmers their questions about stress and burn out and asked Sarah Donaldson to answer them. Sarah is well qualified to do this, as she lives on sheep farm in the Wairarapa, and is also a clinical psychologist. As well as working on the farm, Sarah works in her own business and for the Rural Support Trust. Here are your questions and Sarah's responses to them.

Farmstrong: Thanks for helping us out Sarah. Here's the first question. "What is burnout and how do you know if you've got it?"

Sarah Donaldson: Burnout is essentially your body hitting the wall and saying 'I've had it. You should've given me a break and you haven't.' Your body is letting you know that it is mentally and physically exhausted. It can no longer sustain being pumped up to keep working or coping with ongoing demands.

So, burnout is characterised by physical and mental exhaustion, such as finding it hard to have the energy or motivation to do even normal, everyday tasks. Another sign is severe irritability, where little things become highly frustrating, and you lose your temper very easily and often. Other signs are general inefficiency in tackling and completing tasks, or often feeling ineffective and that you are not accomplishing enough. Feeling like this takes its toll on our

emotions with people saying they feel flat or down. At the extreme end of burnout, people may just no longer feel like they can keep working.

Farming people are often so passionate about what they do, they tend to ignore the fact that they're working exceptionally long hours, taking on exceedingly heavy workloads, and putting enormous pressure on themselves to excel—all of which makes them at risk of stress and burnout.

But burnout does not happen overnight, it's a continuum, with low level stress at one end and burnout at the other. It can creep up like a slow leak on your tractor tyre. However, our body and mind give out some warning signs, so awareness is the key. If you know what to look for, the earlier you intervene the better and quicker your recovery.

I have produced a list of signs to watch out for "The Warning Signs of Stress" which people can download at www.farmstrong.co.nz or read at the end of this document.

FS: This next question is closely related. “How do you manage stress and prevent burnout?”

SD: As I just mentioned, the earlier you recognise the signs of stress and burnout, the better able you will be to manage them. Awareness is key. For example, knowing that when you’ve got a bit on your plate, it can take its toll. That’s not a sign of personal weakness. It’s the same for everybody.

If you feel like you or a partner are not coping, it’s about being proactive. Recovery periods are vital – bigger ones like holidays after busy periods, but also daily and weekly ‘down time’ is important.

Secondly, come up with an action plan. Instead of trying to do everything, it’s about asking yourself what are the one or two top things I need to work on right now? Is it de-stocking, fertiliser, getting extra staff on – what’s going to make the biggest difference? Focus on the top two things and park everything else. Once you are feeling back in charge some of the others issues bugging you may not even be issues anymore once your stress levels go down.

When people are under pressure the things that go out the window are often the factors that keep us well. Things like socialising with other people, exercise, nutrition, continuing to learn, contributing to the community. That’s often your off-farm stuff, but could also be on farm e.g. taking the kids eeling or for a motorbike ride. But you also need to build in recovery and break time that will enable you to get away from the farm where all your stress triggers are. Getting off the farm – whether it’s hunting, a girls’ night out, a movie, team sport, motocross or kids sport – it gives you respite. Building in those enjoyable activities is really important. Those are the things that give us more coping space. And keep us on top of life.

If you are struggling to cope with stress that’s when it’s good to talk to others about it. Surround yourself with people who are upbeat and pragmatic and able to give you a different perspective. That can change the way you look at a situation. Connections with family and friends, professionals and your

community, are a big part of staying well. Everybody needs to be able to call on extra resources from time to time. The businesses or people that are thriving are often the ones that use those support networks and aren’t afraid to say when they are stuck and to look for another perspective. These people may see options you can’t.

FS: Here’s a question about handling stress as a couple. “How can I talk to my wife about me feeling overwhelmed? I have tried a few times but it always turns into a fight as she feels like I blame her (which I don’t).”

SD: You’re right, these can be tricky conversations and sometimes as a couple we are quick to come out from our corner of the ring ready to defend our position. Firstly, choose your moment to have this talk – pick a time when you are both not wound up, busy with other distractions or tired. Take the stance of it being about both of you. If things are tough right now, you are probably both finding it challenging. If you ask her to share what she is finding overwhelming and you can acknowledge this, she may be more likely to then listen more to what you are finding hard.

Try hard to set it up at the start of the conversation that you will try to talk about issues without blaming each other, or interrupting the other. It’s really key when you are both taking turns to get stuff off your chest that you both try to listen, without defending your part in it – at least initially. Then it’s about what can ‘we’ do to change this, what’s our plan and what can we do or not do to support each other. Even small specific changes can make a big difference e.g. when you get home tell me what kind of day you had, take a day off that week, or get in someone to help work out a plan.

If talking about it always turns into a fight, you can initially use that dedicated time to write down separately what you think the main challenges are, then share or swap to read. Either way, you are trying to get on the same page and come back to a plan about what can ‘we’ do to change or improve this.





FS: This question's about the challenge of juggling a big workload with family commitments. "My partner is a sheep and beef manager who has recently stepped up to the manager role. He has been farming for 10 years and he works very hard. He gives so much of himself to the farm that he forgets about himself and us (we have two boys), a lot if not most of the time. I believe he has some sort of social anxiety. He becomes very agitated and can be angry at times when in a situation he feels is uncomfortable but to me seems fine. He also doesn't really have time off and when he does he goes to work anyway. Some advice on how I could help him with this or what help he could get would be very much appreciated. Thanks."

SD: This is such a common issue, where farmers give so much of themselves to their job or business, which shows their passion and commitment, but can often mean their health, relationships and family life suffer. There is a culture that the harder you work the better the farmer you are. But no one can stay at the top of their game doing 110% on an ongoing basis and remain efficient. It's just not how we are built. You'll start to become more inefficient and make mistakes or become stale, unmotivated or burnt out and despondent with farming. If you want to stay productive and sustainable as a person on your farm you've got to have breaks and inject the things that are proven to keep us well – exercise, recovery time, spending time with others, doing enjoyable activities. Sometimes that's a bit challenging for people. So maybe it's good to come at this from a business angle to help him see time off as a business priority i.e. if he wants to remain at the top of his game, and still be an effective farmer in five years then it's time to think about changes which will ensure this.

The social situations may possibly be either that he has given so much of his effort to the farm that he has nothing left in the tank to go out or talk to others. He may need a quiet Friday night before being able to be available to others for a social function the next night. Or secondly, as you mentioned, it may be that he does not feel comfortable in social situations and becomes anxious. Either way, if he is feeling full-up with no coping space left, he will 'lose it' pretty easily. Try to see if you can gauge where and with whom he is comfortable so that you may plan what kinds of contact are most tolerable for him. But this may be a long-standing issue. If so, he may need someone like a psychologist to help teach him skills and strategies to manage or overcome this anxiety. Your local GP or Rural Support Trust may be help support you with this process.

FS: Here's a question about people's attitudes towards stress and burnout. "Why is it that on this kind of sickness, people do not share the problem or speak about it?"

SD: Good question. While it's getting much better, there is still a lot of stigma and misunderstanding out there which makes it hard for people at times to let us know they are struggling. The word mental health is scary to some, believing that this reflects a personal fault or failure or else that you are 'mad' or 'crazy'. Therefore people may think that "other people have those problems but I don't". Some people may resist asking for help because they think or fear others will see them as a weak.

The reality is we all have mental health just as we all have physical health. When we have good mental health we are emotionally ok, feel in control, have energy, think clearly and are connected with others. Yet just as we get help when we have an

infection or physical injury, we should do the same with our mental health. Being proactive about your health is a strength and the earlier we do it the better the outcomes. As the old saying goes “a problem shared is a problem halved”.

These days a resilient farmer is one who adapts to change, is ready for change and is proactive and ready to learn. A resilient farmer is also someone who’s not afraid to ask for help when they need it. There’s a much more collaborative approach to farming now where people are sharing information and working together to solve farming challenges.

FS: Here’s one about the impact of stress on farmers’ partners: “What about farmer wives/partners being ‘burnout’. They have to be strong for everyone – children, husband, finances, feeling guilty if hubby is late and they are tied up with children or overcommitted on farm and can’t be there for the children – how do they cope?”

SD: Women often face completely different pressures to men, but the effects are essentially the same where the demands outweigh our ability to cope – they are just different demands. Women are often trying to juggle too many hats and keep too many balls in the air.

The trouble is what usually gives way are some of the essential elements to keeping well e.g. sleep, exercise, nutrition, recovery time, self-care, leisure time with kids, friends or family. Often women feel guilty if they say ‘no’ to others or take time out, or feel like they should be able to do it all because they feel others are. Often the reality is that others are feeling exactly the same. The message overall is the same one as for the guys who work long hours. To be sustainable and healthy, for not only ourselves but others, we either need fewer

demands (ie reducing the load or saying ‘no’ to some things), or to have enough down time for our bodies to relax and recharge. Avoid viewing the very things that keep us well as an indulgence or an extra, but rather as the key to helping us cope on an ongoing basis with daily demands.

FS: Here’s a question about tracking the signs of stress. “How do I know if my husband and I are functioning as we should be after three years of emotional stress then financial stress and lack of time away from job?”

SD: Overall, it may be helpful to think back to times when there was less stress in your life, when you have felt well, happy and in charge. Ask yourself, what did this look like in terms of how you were feeling physically and emotionally and how does it compare to now? How are your energy levels, sleeping, mood, thinking skills, physical health? How are your relationships with others and how are you coping with day to day tasks?

It would be normal for these ongoing pressures to have impacted to a certain degree, but it’s also true that rural people can be incredibly resilient in the face of adversity if they are proactive, use healthy thinking skills to keep perspective and get good support.

As I mentioned earlier, when people are under pressure the things that go out the window are often the factors that keep us well. Do a self-check to see whether you have these important elements in your routine (even if it’s in small doses): socialising with other people, doing enjoyable activities, exercise/activity, good nutrition, continuing to learn or be stimulated, and feeling like you have a role or contribute in some way. That’s often your off-farm stuff.





FS: Here's another question about the impact of long working hours on family life. "How can we expect a family life when Dad is working seven days a week and he never knows when he'll be home due to weather and staff?"

SD: You're quite right that family life definitely takes a back seat if one partner or parent is working all of the time. When we are caught up in the day-to-day demands it is often hard to see the big picture. Yet taking time to review what everyone's priorities really are is really important if day-to-day life is to work for everyone.

My advice is to firstly communicate to your partner that you want to review the current way of life. Then set some time aside to look at where you are at and what is important to everyone e.g. is it the health and happiness of family, a successful business, being financially secure? What does everyone want life to look like in one year, five years, ten years. What then needs to change to make this a reality? If you get stuck working this out, think about who can sit around the table to nut this out with you.

However, the flip side is that during certain periods in the farming season, the reality is there are going to be some big hours regardless. Another possible strategy in the meantime is whether there are some opportunities to bring the family life to him e.g. meeting him on farm with the kids for a picnic, getting extended family or friends to have a working bee on farm, with a meal provided afterwards for everyone. Or whether you could have a few ideas up your sleeve for family time when a rainy day strikes so that you roll it out quickly and easily. During busy times it's also about being flexible and creative in your thinking.

FS: This one is about feeling socially isolated on farm. "For farmer's wives, how do you deal with the anxiety associated with the isolation? We have no town close by and found it hard to break into a group here. It's very isolating not working and being at home with the kids."

SD: It can certainly take a while to fit into a new community. It can also be hard to push yourself forward to make new friends, although often, that is what is required because many people may not know that you would like more contact. Although it might mean being out of your comfort zone, if you can find the confidence to initiate and look for as many opportunities (even if previously you never would have considered them) to connect with others, you'll greatly increase your chance of developing some friendships, e.g. Rural Women, Dairy NZ groups, Women's discussion groups, sports teams, hobby groups etc.

Are there any key people in your community/district that you could confide in to help you with this? Sometimes a slightly older woman who knows how it is to be isolated may be someone either to talk to, or to help bring you into the fold of the community. Another option, if you are quite far out of town, is more social media contact through the likes of Farming Mums or regional groups like Farming Women Tairāwhiti on the East Coast of the North Island. Don't be put off if you are a wife/partner doing 'behind the scenes' support rather than on-farm support – these kinds of groups, along with the groups mentioned above, are full of a cross-section of women, all with the common link of living rurally.

Equally, in the meantime while you are finding your feet locally, be proactive about staying connected with old friends and family who can offer support during this transition. Can you plan a weekend to meet old friends, invite others to stay with you, a joint holiday or break with another family?

FS: Ok, here's a question about helping an unhappy partner. "How do you help your partner who says to themselves every morning 'why do I do this job?'. What questions should I ask them, and how should I answer their questions?"

SD: It's really hard to see and hear our partner unhappy, particularly on a daily basis. Often we feel helpless not knowing what to do to help. Your situation sounds like maybe your partner has been feeling like this for a while, if this is their thinking pattern every day.

Here's what I suggest. Firstly, you might be able to say something like, "You seem so unhappy most days about work, it seems like something needs to change – shall we make some time to nut it out together and see what might help?" It will be good to check how long they have been feeling like this and does this tie with long sustained work periods or extra pressures for months or possibly even years? In which case, how they are feeling may be a symptom of 'burnout' which I described in question one.

If this gets addressed they may regain their satisfaction with work as their health is restored or at least be in a better place to decide how they really feel about with their work/role going forward. It would also be good to tease out what's the next level down from that thought e.g. which bits of the job/business are they 'over' and which bits still 'spin their wheels' – or give them satisfaction. Ask them what could help them feel more motivated or feel like they can move forward e.g. is it someone else to work with them, selling a block of land, someone else to do the fencing or calf rearing, having a break for a period, doing a different role, or it could even be a complete job change? Bear in mind though, it is good to get your health and wellbeing back on track first before making any big decisions.

FS: This question's about knowing when to seek help. "At what point would you consider it more than just 'calving stress' and be seeking help from a counsellor?"

SD: We all have stress hormones in our body. They are activated on a daily basis. They help pump us up, get us out of bed and down to the yards or shed to get the job done. Healthy stress gives us energy, it helps keep us motivated, focused and alert. It helps us work efficiently and in a productive way. That's when stress works well for us. It's when those levels of arousal are ongoing without a break from the ongoing physical or mental demands we are facing that it's hard for our body to sustain and the cracks begin to show.

A general rule of thumb that a person is under stress is when your daily functioning and relationships are being impacted. In other words, when the person does not seem themselves and you notice changes in their normal behaviour, thinking patterns and emotions that have been ongoing for a few weeks or beyond calving or lambing.

There are a host of other specific signs which you can find in the accompanying resource 'The Warning Signs of Stress' at the end of this document. But the fact you are wondering whether you need to get some help with this, suggests you are concerned and being proactive before the wheels get too wobbly is always a positive move. Sometimes even a quick catch-up with your GP, a local counsellor or Rural Support Trust worker can give you some ideas or a plan to get things back on track.

FS: This question relates to managing financial pressure. "Any suggestions for coping with stress when the financial issues of the last year mean that insane work hours and pressure are unavoidable to just keep the business afloat?"

SD: It's been a really challenging year for a lot of people just as you have found. Financial pressures can limit the opportunities for more staff or time off and more demands fall on you. We are pretty resilient to cope with this kind of pressure for a while. So if there is light at the end of the tunnel for you, break down the next period of say the next two to three months to make a plan of two to three things within your control that would make a difference to hang in there. For example, one or two weekends off, meeting with your bank manager to look at managing cashflow or overdraft or reviewing or adjusting stock plans.

Depending on where you live, there are sometimes options to take on ag students to lighten the load or is there anyone who could do a bit of green dollar work i.e. they help you out in return for you helping



them at some stage. If recovery and break times are challenging to achieve, try to be a champion of mini breaks that will enable you to get away from the farm where all your stress triggers are. Getting off the farm, even for a meal or a game of squash or tennis gives you some respite so that you can keep hanging in there.

If it feels like your situation is a longer term issue I would really recommend pulling in someone else for a new perspective to help to nut it out with you. There is almost always some options but they are often really hard to see when we are bogged down. It could be another farmer friend or family member whose opinion you really trust, or a rural professional. Although money may be tight it could be money well spent to have a consultant review your situation. Alternatively, the Rural Support Trust are a great network and can have someone confidentially visit you at home to help support you to work out a plan to move forward in a way that is sustainable.

FS: Sarah, the last two questions relate to nutrition and diet. Here's the first one, "Are there any vitamins we should take to help combat stress and exhaustion? As a breastfeeding mother and dairy farmer I find that taking iron helps my energy levels. But maybe I should be taking more, as well as my husband? I've found that stress/exhaustion results in lazy cooking/diets which doesn't help the problem. A cyclic effect for us."

SD: Breastfeeding means that you have higher nutritional requirements for some nutrients, so make sure you are having a well-balanced diet with plenty of fresh, unprocessed foods. Check in with your GP around your blood iron, vitamin B12 and folate levels to ensure you have good levels.

I also understand that when you are tired or exhausted it can be really hard to be motivated to shop and cook healthy options, but good food should be a priority at this time to ensure you are getting a balanced mix of nutrients. Practical strategies to help may be:

- cooking once and eating twice (cook a double or triple batch of bolognaise, soup, casserole or curry and freeze the remainder for tired times)
- make use of labour-saving equipment such as slow cookers which do most of the work for you (pile everything into it in the morning and hey presto by dinner time you will have a hearty and nourishing meal!)

- have some fast and easy options available for those days when you don't have the energy, such as a nourishing smoothie, scrambled eggs, muesli with fruit and yoghurt or a meat, cheese and tomato toasted sandwich
- eat small and often so that you are regularly having some fuel into your body to help with energy levels.

You may also benefit from a short course of vitamins designed for breastfeeding mothers, (and your husband could try a men's multi) but discuss this with your GP and ideally focus on food before supplements. We also have higher requirements for B vitamins during times of stress, so again discuss with your GP to see if this is the right option for you.

FS: Ok Sarah here's the final one. "What are some foods we can eat for a bit of extra energy? I'm feeling exhausted with no day off in sight. Need a boost."

SD: Food is just like fuel for a vehicle, so we need to make sure we have regular meals and snacks to give us the energy to keep going. When we are busy, food planning and healthy options often take a back seat, but that is the very time that they are the most important so we don't get sick, and so that we have adequate nutrients for energy, work and life!

Aim to eat three meals a day, as well as some nourishing snacks if you need them. Quick and easy snacks can include fresh fruit, a muesli bar, dried fruit and nuts, a smoothie or a meat sandwich. Aim for more unprocessed foods, as choosing options such as noodles, chocolate biscuits or energy drinks won't give us the range of nutrients our bodies are craving. Include some protein foods (meat, eggs, cheese, yoghurt, milk, nuts, legumes, fish or chicken) at each meal to keep your blood sugar levels constant, which will also help you keep going for longer. ■



Managing Stress – The Essentials

Watch out for the signs of unhealthy stress. A mixture of feelings can happen such as feeling overwhelmed, losing control or getting wound up. One of the biggest signs of stress is irritability. People lose their tolerance and little things start to bug them a lot more. Other signs are when our thinking becomes a bit jumbled and intrusive with our thoughts jumping from one topic to another. Often we repetitively think about outstanding tasks or concerns e.g. “How am I going to get everything done.” That intrusive kind of thinking can be draining. On the physical side of things it often means we’re not sleeping well or waking up during the night thinking about what we’ve got to do the next day.

Make a plan. If you’ve got bit on your plate or have a busy time coming up it’s about being proactive and coming up with an action plan. Instead of trying to do everything, ask yourself what are the one or two top things I need to work on right now. Is it de-stocking, fertiliser, getting extra staff on – what’s going to make the biggest difference? Focus on the top two things and park everything else. Once you are feeling back in charge your stress levels will go down.

Look after yourself. When people are under pressure the things that go out the window are often the factors that keep us well. Things like exercise/sport, leisure activities, sleep, healthy eating, taking breaks, socialising with others and contributing to the community. These are the things that build resilience and help us cope with pressure. If you want to stay on top of your game, you’ve got to be proactive about your health. If there is a situation where you feel really wound up, take yourself off for a quick break and do something distracting – reducing the chance that you will ‘lose your cool’ at someone or something.

Build in recovery time. If you want to stay productive and sustainable as a person on your farm, you’ve got to have breaks and inject recovery periods. Think of the All Blacks in the World Cup, how they built up to compete each week. They wouldn’t go out and play another game two days later. Within each week, tournament or World Cup they built in recovery periods to their schedule. It’s no different

with farming. Getting off the farm – whether its hunting, a catch up with mates, motocross or kids sport – gives you respite and recharges your body.

Reduce your arousal level. When your body is under threat from being too busy or mentally pressured, it releases stress hormones that increase your arousal level, pepping you up and making it hard to relax or sleep well at night. To bring this arousal down again, try exercising (in the day), deep abdominal breathing and other relaxation techniques.

Use helpful thinking. Helpful thinking is about catching negative thoughts and then thinking about the situation in a more helpful way. An example of helpful thinking would be, ‘Yes, it’s a tough year with drought, but the long range forecast is more promising and every farmer in this area has been through this before and got through ok. We’ve just got to tighten the reins and learn what we can for next time.’ Helpful thinking gives you better balance and helps contain distress.

Talk to others, stay connected. If you are struggling to cope with stress that’s when it’s good to talk to others about it. Surround yourself with people who are upbeat, pragmatic and able to give you a different perspective. That can change the way you look at a situation. Connections with family and friends, professionally and in your community, are a big part of staying well. Everybody needs to be able to call on extra resources from time to time.

Communicate as a couple. Managing stress as a couple is about talking through issues together, formulating a plan and sharing the load to get things back on track. It’s all about awareness, realising when you or your partner is under pressure and coming up with a plan. Make breaks and time off farm part of your business plan. Don’t think of recovery time as a luxury, think of it from a business perspective. ■



The Warning Signs Of Unhealthy Stress

Your Body

- ☐ Breathing problems
- ☐ Chest tightness
- ☐ Upset stomach e.g. nausea, diarrhoea, constipation
- ☐ Tension, aches and pains
- ☐ Headaches
- ☐ Fatigue
- ☐ Feeling 'wired' – unable to relax
- ☐ Lower immunity, inclined to catch any little bug going around and take longer to recover
- ☐ Altered sex drive (reduced) or alternatively, increased need for sex as a release



Your Emotions

- ☐ Worrying excessively (similar to anxiety)
- ☐ Feeling overwhelmed, stuck or trapped
- ☐ 'Short fuse' – sudden bursts of anger and irritability often at small issues
- ☐ Tearfulness
- ☐ Feeling down
- ☐ Loneliness
- ☐ Loss of motivation and enjoyment



Check to see if these signs sound like you.

Your Mind

- ☐ Thinking feels sped up and thought are intrusive.
- ☐ Difficulty making decisions
- ☐ Forgetfulness
- ☐ Poor concentration
- ☐ Poor problem solving
- ☐ Easily distracted



Your Actions & Behaviour

- ☐ Sleeping problems e.g. can't get to sleep or wake up thinking about farm tasks, or sleeping too much and can't get out of bed
- ☐ Poor eating
- ☐ May become withdrawn – failing to share daily goals with partner and staff, shutting off from community events and socialisation
- ☐ Alcohol, tobacco and caffeine use may increase
- ☐ Become reactive rather than proactive
- ☐ Avoiding situations or issues e.g. not returning phone calls or opening invoices
- ☐ Delaying demanding tasks e.g. dagging sheep



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