



Recognising the signs of stress and burnout is often the first step in making some life-altering changes.

Stephen Anderson is no stranger to hard work. He used to be a small fruit grower in Hastings, running his own orchards, as well as working at TaylorCorp, a large fruit-growing, packing and exporting company. Work weeks of up to 70 hours were not uncommon.

It was on a rare family holiday to the States that the penny dropped.

"In 2011 we took the girls to the United States to Disneyland and to see family. I suddenly saw things in my kids that I hadn't noticed before, and it was because I'd taken a month off work. One of my girls was 14 and the twins were 12. I'd see them doing something and I'd think, 'How long have they been doing that for? I haven't seen that before.' I realised that I was spending way too much time at work.

"You work long hours because you're trying to get ahead, to give your kids and family the best things you can. But at that moment I knew I needed more balance in my life and I needed to make that happen."

## Decision time

Stephen finally concluded that working 70 hours a week was detrimental to his health and wellbeing. He opted to give up running his own blocks and work fulltime for Taylor Corp as Operations Manager. He also decided to try and get some better work-life balance.

He had always been an active sportsperson when he was younger but the busyness of his life had put an end to that. He recommitted to a regular sports involvement.

"I started playing social hockey again about five years ago on a Thursday night. I have a couple of games of hockey a week with guys my own age, and have a beer afterwards. We chat about things that don't have anything to do with orcharding because they aren't orchardists. I always feel a lot better afterwards. I've done that for the last five years. Once my kids got older, a couple of them started playing too."

## High-pressure job

The decision to work fulltime at TaylorCorp brought plenty of fresh challenges with it. Stephen's job is a high-pressure one, dealing with lots of people and their problems on a daily basis. The company employs nearly 300 staff in its pack-house and out in the field.



He's on the management team for the pack-house and is responsible for 11 external growers plus Taylor Corp's own orchard blocks.

"I've got six orchard managers under me. I do all the maturity testing on our own blocks and for all outside growers, telling them when they can start harvesting, what varieties they're harvesting and making sure they stick to our grade standards. I'm responsible for spray programmes and things like that. We've got to meet strict customer protocols overseas, so I have to make sure all our growers are doing things in certain ways."

It's been a boom time for horticulture over the last few years and TaylorCorp has been expanding, says Stephen. "We've had three really good seasons and it's on an up."

He said to me that it might just be burnt-out and I needed a break. I sat back in my seat. I hadn't thought about that. It was probably true. You don't think that you do, until somebody points it out.



## But growth brings added pressures too.

"Over the last couple of years we've been growing quite quickly and I didn't take a holiday last year after the end of apple season. So I'd been going for about 12 months, and I was at a point where I didn't want to be at work. I'm thinking, 'I can't take time off because we're planting up these new blocks, these guys need direction, this, that, and the other', and by October I just didn't want to be at work."

## Healthy Thinking workshop

Stephen was approached to attend a *Farmstrong Healthy Thinking* workshop to see what it was all about. He says it was very instructive and timely.

"You're always worrying about everybody else's health and wellbeing. People had told me I needed to take time off, and I'd say, 'I'm fine. I've got all these holidays owing but I'll be all right, I'll last until Christmas.' Dr Tom, who was running the *Healthy Thinking* workshop, had us doing group exercises, then discussing them with the class. When we were discussing our reactions to different scenarios he said to me that it might just be burn-out and I needed a break. I sat back in my seat. I hadn't thought about that. It was probably true. You don't think that you do, until somebody points it out."

Stephen took a three-week break over the last Christmas period, turned the cell-phone off and spent lots of time with family.

"A break like that makes a big difference. You don't realise how much of a difference until you do it. You have better relationships with managers and the people you work with, and you find that you are actually listening to people rather than barking at them. I've decided that after this season I'm going to take another week or two off."

Stephen says you don't have to go on a big holiday to reap the benefits.

"Take little breaks, take yourself away. Go and do something different. Play tennis, hockey, collect stamps, whatever you like to do. Just do something totally different.

"We've got three teenage girls and it's really good to go and watch them playing their sports, in their choirs, orchestras, acting. You go and support them and it gets you thinking about something different. When you finally realise the importance of this stuff, it's almost too late."

## Learn to delegate

Learning to delegate and trust others to get the job done can also be a game-changer, says Stephen.

"Delegation is a big thing, trusting the guys. If you've got workers, and you've got them for a reason, then trust them to do the job. The thing is that you'll never get someone to do the job 100% the way you want it done. You've got to learn to accept that. The more people you employ the more things you've got to learn to accept.

"If you can get it 90% right all of the time, you're doing pretty well. I think we're too hard on ourselves sometimes. We're striving for everyone to do it the way we would do it, and then you get down on yourself when it's not like that. But it doesn't always work that way."

Training yourself to think positively, or at least not to think the worst, is also an important contributor to wellbeing, says Stephen.

"Last year just about every orchard in New Zealand had hail. It was all doom and gloom at the start of the season, but for whatever reason the fruit packed out better than we thought, the markets were better than we thought, and we actually ending up having some of the best returns we've ever had.

"I guess the message is not to make decisions based on what you think might happen. It's good to be cautious, but don't always come down too hard on yourself, and don't always feel like the worst thing is going to happen, because 99% of the time it comes out fine."

## Enjoy the team

Stephen sees big advantages in working as part of a big team. Being in it together is something to celebrate and be grateful for.

"I like working with people. It can be stressful when there's lots of people but most of the people are good people, and you can have a hell of a lot of fun. You build good friendships and it's really rewarding when things come together.

"I prefer working in a team because if you're down about something, if you're in the wrong frame of mind, people will lift you up." ■

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