



The day **Marc Gascoigne** told family and friends about how stressed he felt was the moment his life began to improve.

His message to other farmers who may be struggling with the ups and downs of farming is 'stop bottling it up, start talking.'

"Really good friends of mine had no idea anything was wrong. Only I could decide to get help and get better," he recalls.

Marc and his partner Marcia run a successful 150 hectare, 450 cow, family dairy farm just south of Cambridge. The farm's production rates and results are impressive enough to feature in industry case studies.

But years of long hours and pressure had taken a toll on Marc's wellbeing. A few years back he started to feel 'under the pump'. The trigger was continued wet weather over winter and spring.

"Weather was one of my main pressures. You can't control it and if you're talking about mental wellness that was certainly my biggest challenge. Wet weather makes everything difficult and adds a lot of stress to the whole farming system."

Marc says a lot of his anxiety stemmed from concern for the wellbeing of his animals. "If they're not happy, I'm not happy. Of course it's always going to rain in winter and spring but when it's constant rain, it makes it nearly



impossible to properly feed them. That really added to my stress levels.”

Marc says things reached the point where the pressure felt ‘totally overwhelming’. “I couldn’t think straight. I remember going to get the cows one morning, and despite nothing being wrong, I had a huge panic attack. I felt like the whole world was closing in on me. I felt absolutely shit-scared, but didn’t know what I was shit-scared of.”

“My body shut off the part of my brain that helps you make decisions.

The phone would go, it would be one of my staff, but I just couldn’t answer it because I couldn’t make decisions. It was pretty crippling.”

Marc says he’d experienced those feelings for a while but never acknowledged them. “I’d always wanted to be the rock for my family. The strong one. I wouldn’t admit there was anything wrong.”

“The biggest part of getting better for me was admitting I had a problem and not trying to shut it away. The turning point was telling my family. Just admitting to people that I was suffering from anxiety and depression was a weight off my shoulders and huge relief.”

Now Marc’s made it his mission to share his story so other farmers seek help before they burn out. Two and half years on, his working life looks a lot different. Exercise – running and cycling – have played a major role in his recovery.

“When you’re getting stressed and anxious on the farm and dwelling on everything, the world closes in. What I discovered was the best thing I can do is pull on the running shoes and go for a run. It clears my head and gives me a sense of escape, I guess. It also burns off stress.”

Getting more time off the farm was another priority. He hired help and learned to delegate. “I think having a relief milker is as important an investment as fertilizer or putting detergent through your milking plant. When I was younger I used to think, ‘I don’t want to spend that, I’ll do it myself.’ But that’s the wrong way to look at it. Yes, it’s a cost, but it’s your whole wellbeing at stake. Everyone needs time off.”



Marc also made greater efforts to stay connected with other farmers. "It has been another really wet spring, and I think it helps to touch base with other farmers and see they're going through the same thing. Getting off the farm and going to a DairyNZ discussion group is a great way to see how others are tackling the problem and helps see your own farm with fresh eyes.

Marc's been farming for 24 years and his love for the industry hasn't diminished, but he's a lot better at looking after himself these days.

"I love farming because you are producing

something tangible and I'm proud of producing a high quality product. I also love being self-employed so your work benefits you and your family - if you put the work in and make the right decisions you get rewarded for it."

But nowadays when things get busy Marc's a lot easier on himself and uses a range of strategies to keep well. "I don't get hung up with doing everything 100% during busy times. These days I use the 80/20 rule because it's usually the last 20 percent of jobs that take the most time getting things perfect. A good example is how I used to go around after the contractors had put fertilizer on the paddocks and covered the bits the truck couldn't reach on my four wheeler and spreader. It was a huge amount of work at a really busy time. Now I leave those bits because it's not going to make a big difference. My own energy levels and wellbeing are far more important."

"The main thing I've learnt about staying well on the farm is before you can look after your family, your farm and your animals, you've got to look after yourself. If you're feeling tired, fatigued and not in the right head space, you won't be able to look after what's really important."

"My message to farmers is that while some stress is normal, when it becomes overwhelming you've got to do something about it. Don't wait for years and years and suffer like I did." ■



*Employing more help has freed up Marc to pursue one of his favourite projects – planting to restore a wetlands area on his property.*



# Marc's top wellbeing tips



## 1 Managing Busy Times

"Planning is the key. It's important to have good systems and routines in place at busy times like calving so everyone knows what's happening. Delegating and trusting stuff is a big one too. Make use of people like farm advisors. It's such a cooperative industry. A lot of people are only too happy to share their experience."

## 2 Sleep

"At calving time I used to get stressed and not sleep very well. My mind would be churning. Now I keep a piece of paper and a pen by the bed, write down the jobs I need to do and tell my brain to deal with it in the morning. That helps me get to sleep."

## 3 Giving Back

"I'm President of the Te Awamutu cycle club which ticks a lot of boxes in the Big 5 – giving back, exercise, staying connected. We've got 350 members and run 40-plus races every year on road and velodrome. When you're helping people like that it energises you and makes a real difference to your own wellness. I've also recently become a facilitator for the Waikato Hauraki Coromandel Rural Support Trust and I'm keen to help people going through the same struggles as I have."

## 4 Enjoying the simple things

"If you start the day doing some exercise, I think it helps your brain work better and you start your day knowing you've already achieved something good."

## 5 Nutrition

"I've found exercising gives you appetite. It makes food tastes so much better. I never skip a meal. When I was milking, I'd always grab a plate of cereal and banana before milking. I have fruit and snacks for during the day and try and eat a balanced diet."

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