



# — THE — FARMSTRONG TOOLKIT

# Building resilience

Mental resilience is more than just 'toughing it out', writes Farmstrong content expert Hugh Norriss.



**The storms we experience in life – whether they're real like Cyclone Gabrielle or personal ones – can wreck our sense of self for a while. The good news is that we can lessen their impact and shock by proactively doing things that increase our mental wellbeing.**

After the February 2023 floods, communities focused on strategies to make the land more resilient – better flood protection, stop banks, riparian planting, controlling slash. We're making sure we build back in the right way in the right places. So, it's been a learning process. It's been very painful, but we've learnt.

I think you can make a similar case for people – staying mentally well is about changing your mental landscape as well as your physical one. You're not just going to go back to the way things were. This is an opportunity to try new things and change it up.

## What is resilience?

Resilience means that even though we're facing setbacks, we're adaptable and we still feel able to get on top of them. Wellbeing and resilience are closely connected. If our wellbeing is high, then that's going to make us more resilient. And being resilient when we're facing challenges, protects our wellbeing.

The science tells us that one of the reasons people stay mentally well is that they've learnt from their knock-backs. For me that's a good way of describing resilience – it's actually about learning. It's lifelong learning, building greater awareness of your inner world and how you can make that work best for yourself, those close to you and your business.



## Make a plan

It starts with having a vision for both you and the land. Where do you want to be in a year, two years', five years' time? It's a little like having a succession plan for your own mental fulfillment.

We all have plan A, which is keep doing what we're doing, but sometimes having a Plan B or C can be useful too. It allows us to see ourselves differently or even become a different version of ourselves. It gives us options and freedom to change.

## The power of visualisation

The brain is stuck inside a dark cavity in our skull. It can't see anything, so it's very much influenced by what we tell it. It's very good at making a reality of what we visualise – good and bad.

So, transport yourself into the future and ask yourself 'where would I want to be in two years to be able to cope better with situations like this?' Then go back and write down 'what changes do I need to put in place, in six-month increments, to achieve that?'

## Train your brain

What might this look like in practice? It could mean learning how to better manage anxious thoughts and deal with uncertainty. It might mean being aware that your emotions come and go, so you're not swept up by them. Or appreciating the soothing effect of getting together with neighbours or becoming a better listener to help others. These are all skills you can learn.

## Practice every day

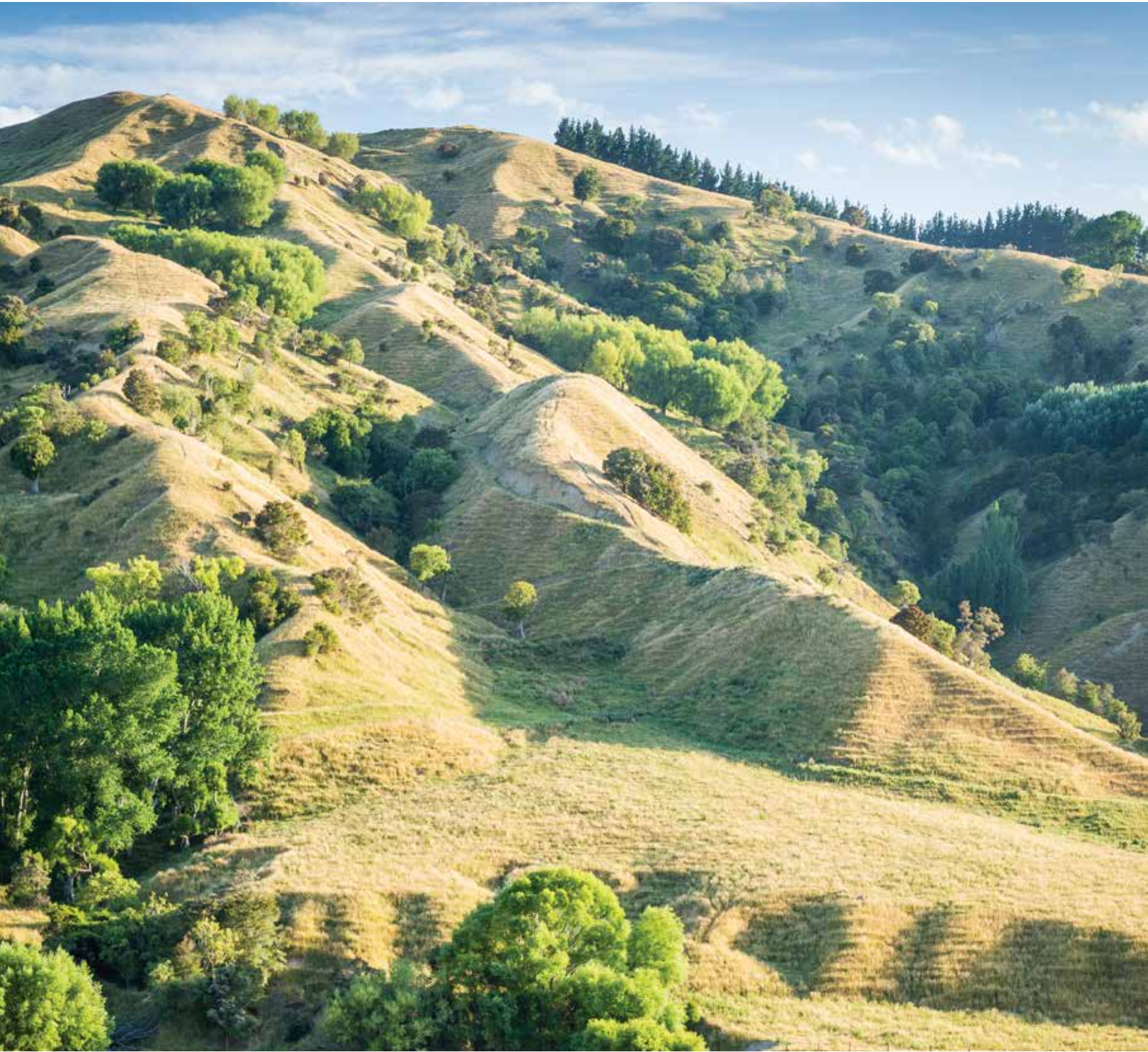
Mental skills are like any skills, you can't just go from zero to 100. It's like learning to sail. It takes practice and turning these skills into daily habits. The Farmstrong approach is to apply your mental skills to the little problems in everyday life, so you can scale things up when the big challenges arrive.

## Talking is good, but it's just a start

Some people think that we just need to talk to get through adverse events. Actually, we need to do far more than talking. Talking is an important first step, but then we need to get on and do.

Just like there are business skills required to run your farm or orchard, there are practical skills required to run yourself. You're the CEO of yourself and your inner self is actually the enterprise you've got the most control over in life. There are many things you can do to keep yourself mentally fit and increase your wellbeing.

The stories in this book demonstrate that farmers and growers don't sit around and dwell on things. They want to get on and work out a way to get through and be successful. Adding some mental skills to your toolkit is going to be a big help during this process.



# Farmstrong's all about practical solutions that work for busy people in demanding jobs.

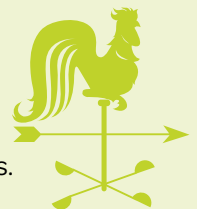
Every year between 14,000 and 17,000 farmers and growers increase their mental strength and fitness thanks to something they picked up from Farmstrong. These small, daily habits can make a huge difference to how you work and feel.

## The benefits of learning skills that increase mental strength and fitness include:

Better focus and attention	More flexible thinking	The ability to see the 'big picture' when prioritising/ planning	The ability to 'reframe' challenging situations/days
The ability to remain calm in stressful situations	Higher quality rest and recovery time	More positive work communication and relationships	Enhanced mind-body connection – better diet, sleep, exercise

The tools that follow have been 'farm-tested' by lots of other farmers and growers. Head to the ones you think will work best for you and adapt as required to suit your workload and weekly schedule.

Lock in the ones that make the biggest difference for you and share them with your team and neighbours. Even if you are not a farmer or grower, you can benefit from making these skills a habit.



# Know your 'why'

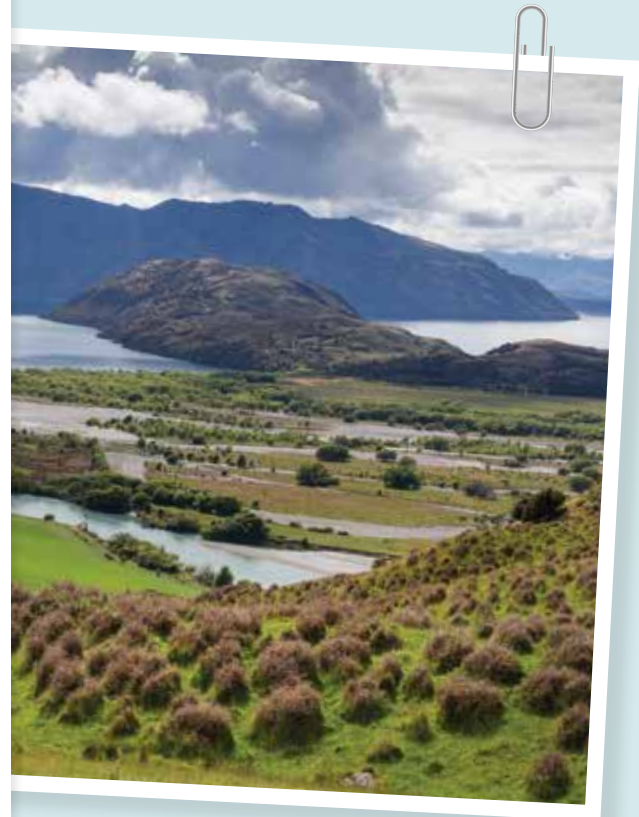
One thing that's really helpful when you're feeling 'under the pump' is having a sense of purpose.

Having purpose and direction helps you prioritise what matters in life/work and allows you to walk away from thoughts, people or activities that don't help with where you are heading.

It's also a key driver to staying motivated when things get tough and helps you set and meet short and long-term goals. And best of all, it makes you feel like you are making a difference in the world, based on your values, personality and skill set.

Sometimes it can be hard to work out your purpose. Let's face it, sometimes it's easier just to 'go with the flow' rather than consider why you are doing what you are doing. But in the long run, allowing other people or random circumstances to dictate what you do, can be a recipe for feeling lost and resentful.

**Knowing your 'why' puts even the toughest day on farm or orchard into perspective, because you know why you are doing it.**



# Control the controllables

A great way to relieve stress and worry is to work out what you can and can't control on farm/orchard.

A trap that many of us fall into is worrying about something beyond our control. But worrying is not a solution. Maybe one time out of 10 our worry might lead to a solution, but it's very inefficient and a big drain on our energy. It can also cause distraction, low mood and sleep loss.

It's much more efficient to prioritise the things you can control and focus on them. This allows you to create an action plan and keep moving forward with a sense of control. You may decide to include another column on your piece of paper called 'Things I can influence'. Sometimes we can't fully control a situation, but we can have some influence on it by what we could say or do.



## ACTIVITY

- **Grab a piece of paper.**  
.....
- **Divide the page in two and on one side list the things you feel you have some control over on farm/orchard and on the other side list the things you can't.**  
.....
- **Aim to let go 'mentally' of the things you can't control.**

# Practice 'box breathing'

When we are feeling stressed out, our breathing patterns can become short and shallow, keeping our nervous system stuck in a high state of alert and starving our brain of the oxygen we need to think clearly and stay calm.

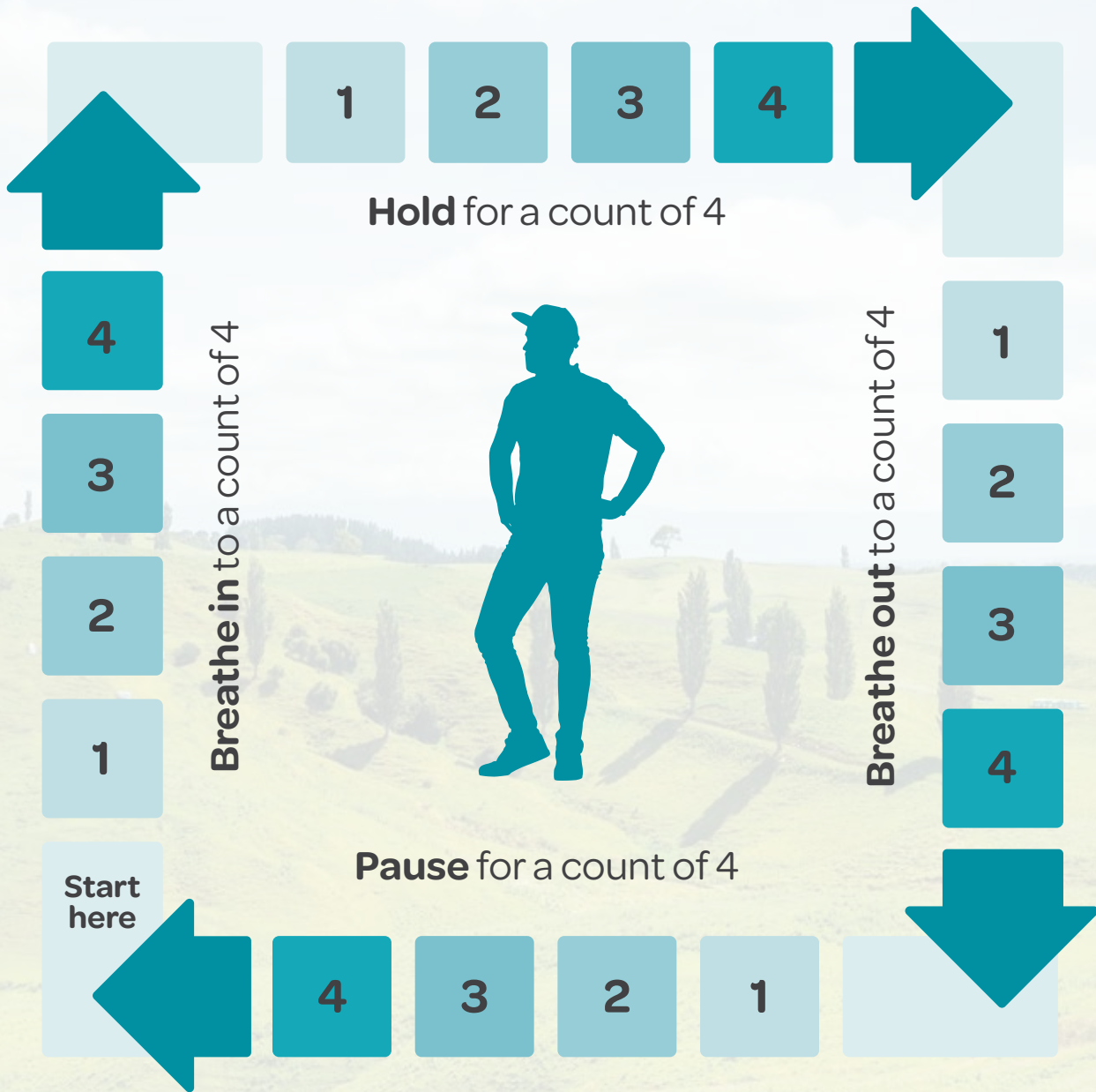
## **Using a simple deep-breathing technique like 'box breathing' is proven to reduce stress and anxiety levels in high-pressure situations.**

Box breathing gets its name from the four sides of a box. It involves breathing in for a count of four, holding your breath for a count of four, breathing out for a count of four and then holding your breath out for a count of four. Repeat this cycle ten times. At each stage of (1) breathing in, (2) holding, (3) breathing out, (4) holding, imagine that you are moving around the four sides of a box.

To get the full benefit of 'box breathing', it's important that when you breath in you are doing this slowly and from deep in your lungs. Box breathing brings a sense of calm and relaxation by slowing down your heart rate, reducing stress hormones and increasing the oxygen levels in your body.

Box breathing will help you improve your headspace in a challenging situation.





# 'Reframe' a bad day

Everyone has days when nothing seems to go right on farm or orchard. You can use a technique called 'reframing' to feel less negative and achieve better outcomes. To use it when you are in the heat of the moment – you could start by doing some deep breathing to help you calm down and focus.

1

Ask yourself if there are other explanations for what has happened that are less negative? For example, if someone was rude to you, were they just having a bad day? Or did you get overly defensive?

2

Get some perspective – take a step back and ask yourself 'how important is this setback *really* in the overall scheme of things?'

3

Talk to someone who will help you see any upsides and affirm your good qualities. Avoid people who are blamers and complainers.

4

Even if the situation is difficult, ask yourself if there is anything that you could learn from it so things go better in the future?



# Resist the urge to complain

It's fair enough to complain if we get poor service or a bad product, but complaining about life is generally not so helpful. Complaining can feel good in the short term, but takes a real toll on our wellbeing over time.

**That's because negativity, like an 'emotional virus', is contagious. If you complain a lot, you spread your bad mood, which means that those around you may become more negative and feed it back to you, making you feel even worse.**

The reality, however, is that we all sometimes need to vent. If you do that, choose a trusted listener, and tell them you just need to vent and you are not looking for a solution.

Or complain, but immediately follow up with a realistic solution that you can contribute to, or make a formal complaint in writing if necessary. This will help you regain a sense of control over the situation.



# Choose what you pay attention to

In times of stress, prioritise your attention on things that are going to boost your mental health, not make you feel anxious and depressed.

You can achieve this by hanging out with people who are positive, inspirational or helping others rather than those who are overly negative, pessimistic or judgemental. It's been said that we become the average of the five people we spend the most time with.

It's also worth reflecting on who is trying to take your attention. The attention economy is a huge business with all manner of phone apps, social media and entertainment platforms, all wanting to take our attention as part of their business model, but without necessarily having our best interests at heart.

**Of the millions of bits of information our brain takes in each day, we can only pay attention to a tiny fraction of them. So, what you choose to focus on has a big impact on how effective you will be.**



# Learn to be a good listener

One of the best ways to help someone 'doing it tough' is to be a good listener.

You don't need to solve their problems, simply listening can help change the way they feel about themselves and the situation they are in. When you listen to someone properly it helps them feel more in control of their lives and therefore able to find their own solutions.



**People worry about what to say when ‘being a good listener’, but the best approach is usually to say very little. So this makes it easier. Instead of worrying about saying the right thing, focus on the following:**

- 1** Put your judgements to one side. This builds trust and will get people talking more.
- 2** Don't jump in with your solutions. If you listen openly without interrupting, people will often find their own solutions as they hear themselves talk through a problem.
- 3** Make sure you are really listening and not distracted by phones or your own thoughts. Use body language to show you are really listening.
- 4** Focus totally on what they are saying, not rehearsing in your own mind what you want to tell them when there is a pause in the conversation.
- 5** Allow for pauses in the conversation without getting uncomfortable. It doesn't matter if there is some silence at the start. Leave space for people to feel comfortable and start talking.



**Sam Whitelock**  
FARMSTRONG AMBASSADOR

# Stay connected, start a convo

A good wellbeing boost is to have a quick conversation with a mate or even a stranger. It might be someone at the supermarket checkout, at the farm supply store, while you are waiting in line somewhere. Try it out and see if it works for you.

## SOME TIPS

- Be aware of their time. Signal that the conversation will be short.
- Ask for advice.
- Give a compliment.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Smile.

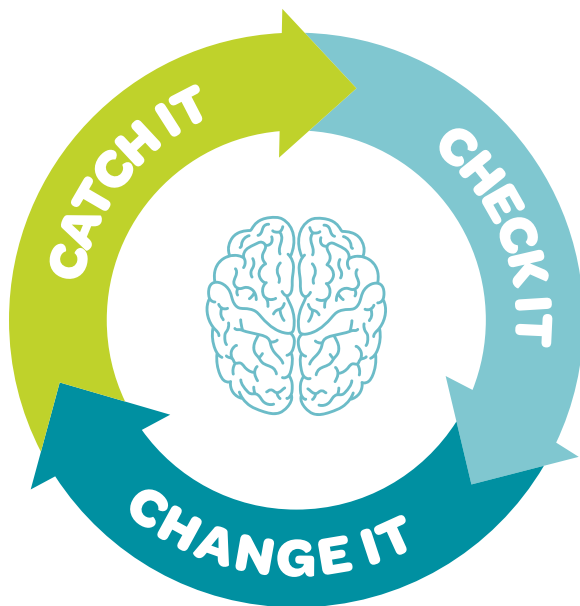
*(For wellbeing boost conversations, it's best to steer clear of politics and complaining.)*

Real-life connections with people close to us, or even complete strangers, help make us feel good and aware that we don't have to deal with life's challenges on our own.



# Breaking unhelpful thinking cycles

We can change the way we think to be more helpful while still acknowledging the difficulties and challenges that we are facing. This is possible using a simple tool called *Catch it, Check it, Change it*.



When we notice something negative happening, it can trigger emotions such as frustration, anger or sadness. This can lead to a downward spiral where unhelpful thoughts, emotions and behaviours reinforce each other.

One way to break the cycle is by noticing the unhelpful thought and applying **Catch it, Check it, Change it**.



## CATCH IT

1

When you get upset about a situation, imagine standing outside yourself and hitting the pause button. Take a deep breath. Name the emotions you are experiencing e.g. anger, frustration, feeling worked up and notice any impulses to behave in a certain way. Then see if you can 'catch' your thought.

## CHECK IT

2

Now examine the thought and decide if there is a more helpful interpretation without denying the reality of the situation. Try to be curious about what you are thinking, rather than assuming you have all the facts. We often decide that the thought we're having is the one and only reality, whereas almost always there are a number of interpretations about what's happening, or what someone meant by what they said. Helpful questions to ask yourself are – Is this thought really true? Is it helping me with my goal or the problem I am trying to solve? Is it worth it in terms of how it is making me feel or behave?

## CHANGE IT

3

Once you have checked the thought and decided it is not helpful, then change the thought. More helpful thoughts will lead to easier emotions and calmer behaviours, which will help you problem-solve better. If you do discover that what you're thinking is true, at least you have given yourself breathing space to think more clearly about the actions you need to take.

Applying the above technique helps us get better at understanding how our thoughts affect our emotions and behaviours and will ensure we are less prone to depression, anxiety and angry outbursts. It's also good for our performance and productivity. It stops us getting bogged down mentally and makes it easier to make decisions under pressure.

# Managing emotions

Farming and growing can be a tough gig, so it's understandable if people feel frustrated at times and get swept along by negative or unhelpful thoughts and feelings.

How you choose to interpret your thoughts will have a huge bearing on your mental wellbeing and how the day goes. Here are three different ways to interpret feeling frustrated and angry:

**1** *I'm angry - I am my thought or feeling.*  
(This is most people's default setting.)

**2** *I notice I'm having an angry thought or feeling.* (Gives you some distance from the thought.)

**3** *I'm curious about why I'm having angry thoughts.* (This gives you even more distance, and helps you manage unhelpful emotions much better).

As we go from 1- 3 our chance of having good mental health increases because we get distance from negative thoughts or feelings and don't feel that 'they are us'.

One way to think about it is that there are two of us in there. The first 'me' runs on default settings and tends to be reactive. The second 'me' is the one that can stand back and see the bigger picture and what's best in the long run. The first me is controlled by impulsive thoughts and emotions, the second me guides thoughts and emotions more helpfully.

Many highly successful people, including in professional sport, use this approach, so they can overcome limiting thoughts and feelings. Often, they have a regular practice of meditation or mindfulness, so they can increase this skill.

If you don't find meditation or mindfulness too much of a stretch, there are many simple on-line options to get you started, or contact your local health centre as there could be opportunities to learn more about this with others near you. At the very least, take a breather each day to pause, assess your thinking and 'reset' as required.

# Avoid common thinking traps

In everyday life our brain uses its previous experiences, filtered through our five senses, to make quick assessments of the world around us. The human brain has evolved to quickly predict what might happen, not what actually is happening.

This explains why we might see a situation one way, but our neighbour or co-worker, might view it differently. It also explains why we sometimes have serious 'blind spots' or unhelpful biases in our decision-making.

Thinking biases have developed through human evolution to help our brains make quick decisions that were essential for our survival or to avoid bad things happening. The downside is that we still have an in-built 'negative' bias when we think about past, present or upcoming events.

## **This means when people think about a situation:**

- they're often more motivated by fear than optimism.
- they're more likely to look for bad news than good news.
- they over-estimate the negative and underestimate the positive.

Thinking biases can trap us into negative spirals that make us feel even worse when we're under stress. Three common thinking traps are:

**Black and white thinking** – Black and white thinkers view the world in terms of extremes – things are either all good or all bad, when real life is seldom that clear-cut.

**Over-generalising** – People who over-generalise think that something that has happened before will occur over and over again, when in reality any number of outcomes are possible.

**Catastrophising** – People who catastrophise jump to the worst-case scenario which leads them to worry about things that may never happen.

What these thinking traps have in common is that people are making assumptions about what will happen without first checking the facts or gaining the full picture of what's really going on. That only adds to the stress they are feeling. Once you're aware of these thinking traps and avoid them, your day will go a lot smoother.

# Develop a healthy mindset

Mindsets are the way we choose to view the world. They reflect our core ideas, attitudes and explanations about how the world is.

**Our mindsets drive much of our behaviour. They affect how we think, what we decide to do, our confidence, our relationships and ultimately our physical and mental health.**

Mindsets also create the 'self-talk' in our heads. This can be encouraging and forgiving, but more often than not, for many of us, it's harsh and critical and a source of great stress.

Research shows that people with more of a 'flexible/growth' mindset, tend to be more successful in business and life and enjoy better mental and physical health.

It's worth exploring your mindset to make sure you're not being driven by mindsets you'd rather not have. Here are some examples of healthy and unhealthy mindsets.



#### EXAMPLES OF GENERALLY


## Healthy/helpful mindsets

- I can change, I enjoy learning new things.
- When bad things happen, I feel the pain but learn from what happened and grow.
- All of us struggle with life, no one is perfect and no one is completely bad.
- It's better to trust people, after taking appropriate precautions, even if I get ripped off once in a while.
- The world generally supports me in what I want to do.
- I know some stuff, but want to keep learning.
- I'm a good person at heart, but a work-in-progress.
- My health is good, but it needs maintenance and investment for the future.
- I am grateful for what I have.
- Stress is uncomfortable, but gives me energy and drive to change what I need to change.
- Other people's happiness and attitude is not my responsibility, it is their own.

#### EXAMPLES OF GENERALLY

## Unhealthy/unhelpful mindsets

- I can't change, I'm just the way I am so I don't need to consider doing anything different.
- When bad things happen, I become a victim.
- I'm ok, it's just everyone else who has the problem.
- People generally can't be trusted.
- The world is out to get me. I need to be suspicious or fight back in any situation.
- I already know all I need to know.
- I'm not a good person and I just need to make sure that other people don't find out.
- It's too risky to try new things in case I fail and feel humiliated.
- I am bullet-proof, I don't need to be that proactive about my health.
- I haven't been given what I deserve in life.
- Stress is debilitating and makes me sick.
- I always need to please people to make sure they are not upset.

An aerial photograph of a river with a concrete structure, possibly a dam or bridge, and a large pile of driftwood on the bank. The river is surrounded by green grass and trees. A teal text box is overlaid on the image.

“It can be very challenging to change the external world and its various pressures. Changing your *inner* world is far easier and hands you back a sense of direction and control.”

– Hugh Norriss