

Getting through

WHAT IT TAKES TO RECOVER FROM EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS



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weather events

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“When you are in a tough time, the resilience that will get you through is not some kind of elusive fixed trait. **It is a capacity that we all have.**”

– *Dr Lucy Hone*





Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the farmers and growers whose lives and livelihoods were impacted by the cyclones and floods of 2023. Our thoughts go out to families and communities that lost loved ones.

We thank everyone who has taken the time to share their experiences and insights for this book so that others may benefit in future. We acknowledge that these stories are just a 'snapshot' in time and there is still much that needs to be done.

Stay safe, stay strong and stay connected.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Finding a way forward

First, our thoughts go out to the families and communities whose lives were impacted by the devastating cyclones and floods of 2023.

We'd also like to acknowledge the scale of the challenge these communities have faced. Recovering from a major weather event involves months, in some cases years, of hard work, planning and perseverance.

Which raises the question - how do you keep yourself going through a long haul like that?

It was while visiting flood-affected farmers and growers, that I noticed how many people mentioned the importance of tapping into local knowledge. People who could put what had happened into some sort of perspective. People with practical advice you could follow on farm or orchard. People who could act as 'a bit of a roadmap' or 'sounding board' for what lay ahead.

That's the thinking behind this publication – a collection of farmer and grower stories designed to help people facing similar situations in future.

I know these events are still raw for many people so I'd like to salute the courage of the farmers and growers who feature in this resource for 'going there'. We really appreciate your honesty and openness.

The result is a collection of hard-won wisdom – practical, actionable tips for anyone facing a daunting workload and an uncertain future. A catalogue of what helps and what doesn't when you're busy trying to get

your farm, your family and yourself going again.

There's also analysis and advice from organisations and individuals who've worked alongside these communities in a professional capacity.

The main message of this book is a hopeful one – people can get through extremely challenging times. Families rally round, neighbours support one another, communities come together and sector organisations act as essential advocates. There are a few surprises here too. Sometimes a crisis presents unforeseen opportunities or gives people a fresh take on what really matters in life.

But there's no sugar-coating the fact that getting back on your feet is often an emotional roller coaster. An accumulation of demands and frustrations that anyone would find draining.

That's why people's mental and physical wellbeing has to be a priority despite the upheaval. The stories here really underline the benefits of taking the time to look after yourself and refresh mentally and physically, especially as time goes on.

Different things work for different people – there is no magic formula – so have a read and lock in the things that work for you.

Samuel Whitelock

Farmstrong Ambassador



The Roller coaster

Getting back on your feet after an extreme weather event takes time. It's a marathon, not a sprint.



Along the way, it's natural to feel a wide range of emotions, sometimes within the same day. Tough times affect each of us differently. That's why we have to deal with them in our own way, at our own pace.

Feeling angry, upset, helpless and on edge are all perfectly normal reactions after a disaster. So is needing a hug, having a cry or sharing your fears and frustrations with others.

The diagram opposite shows phases of the ups-and-downs that people commonly go through. As you can see, it's not a straightforward process and it's very normal for people to feel as if they're making 'two steps forward, one step back'.

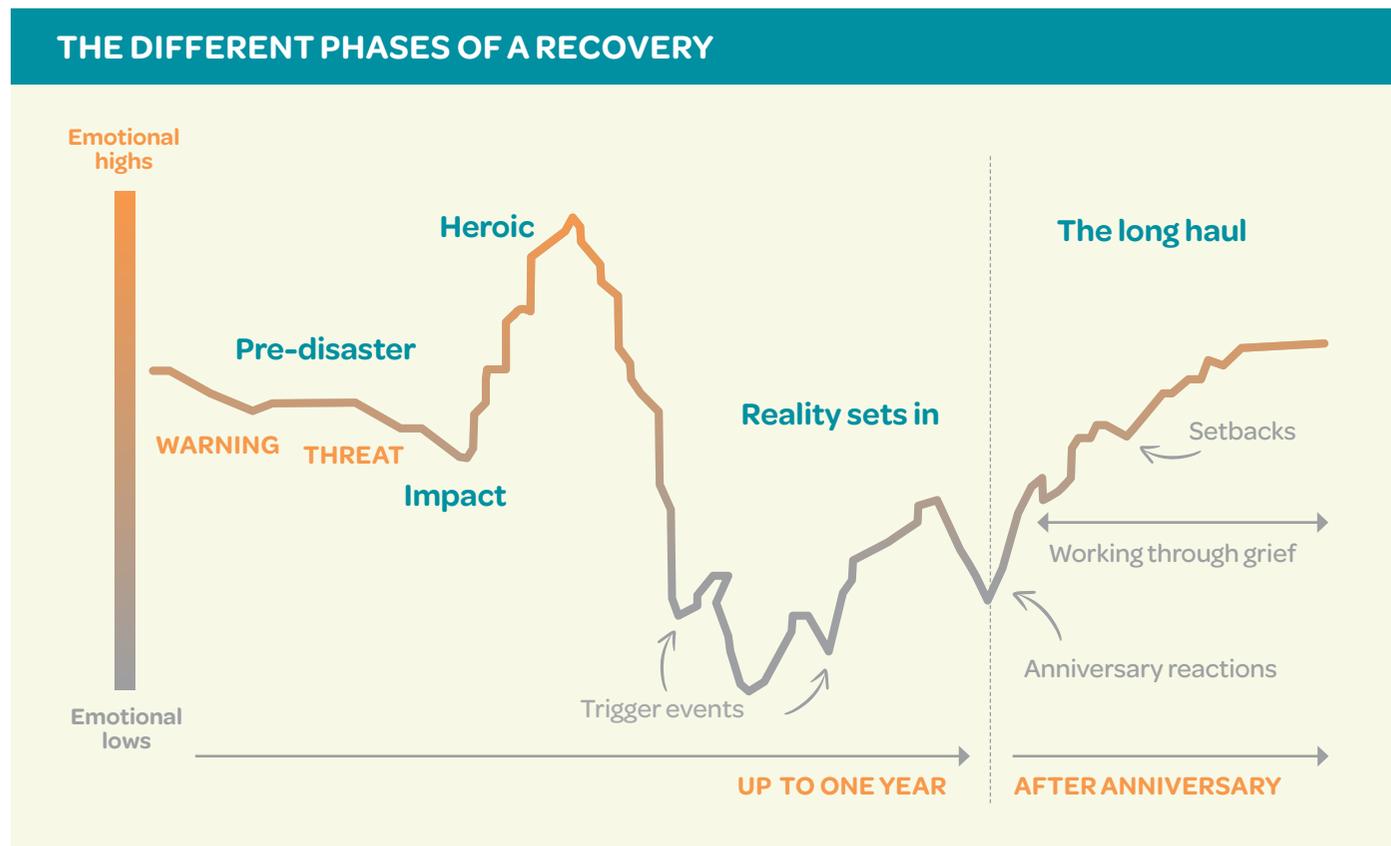
In other words, a long-haul recovery can be an emotional roller coaster. That's why it's important to cut yourself some slack and make time for the things that refresh you mentally and physically. It'll help you get through.

To make time for this when there are so many other things that need to be done sounds strange, but the benefits are definitely worth it. As the farmers and growers in this book tell us, it actually makes you more productive, better able to cope and make decisions.

The tool-box tips covered at the end of this book show a range of practical things that you can do to keep yourself in the best condition possible through the different phases.

Master of recovery

The chart below gives you a rough idea of what to expect as time goes on.





Pre-disaster

It's no surprise that disasters make us feel very vulnerable. That's because things are out of our control in a way we probably have never experienced before. So, the anticipation phase is often characterised by fear and anxiety. Fair enough too.

Initial impact

The event itself can trigger a range of really intense reactions, from shock and fear to panic. The greater the destruction and scale of the disaster, the greater the impact on people. Initial confusion and disbelief are typically followed by a focus on survival and protecting the family. That's exactly what kicked in for many people during the cyclones and floods of 2023.

Heroic phase

In this phase, individuals and communities rally around and respond heroically by rescuing others, offering supplies, and generally giving the best of themselves to help others. Family members, friends, neighbours, and emergency teams are the most important source of help. Despite feelings of loss or grief, people unselfishly reach out to help one another. There's plenty of evidence of that throughout this book which is a real testament to the strength of rural communities.





Relief

Understandably, there's enormous relief if you have survived, which gives people an emotional high. At a community level people come together and support one another emotionally, as well as with practical necessities. There is a strong sense of having shared a terrible experience and lived through it. Media attention means there is an outpouring of goodwill, funding and practical support from the wider community. Volunteers also come forward to pitch in which is a great encouragement.

Reality sets in

The scale of the challenge to get back to 'normal' becomes clear. People may start to feel isolated and disappointed at the lack of progress. Real grief for what has been lost sets in. The stress and sheer workload and paperwork associated with an ongoing recovery causes people to feel exhausted and 'flat'. There can also be a feeling of guilt that I have survived while others have not, or even that I have fared better than others.

Rebuilding

This is the longest phase of the recovery and may last years. The emotions people experience vary widely, depending on how badly they were affected, what resources have been made available to them and their own personal situation. The main take-out is that there are going to be plenty of ups-and-downs along the way.

Maintaining your personal wellbeing during this phase is critical. So is celebrating progress – 'small wins' give people hope and motivation. Ongoing connection with friends, neighbours and the local community also plays a huge role in helping people get through tough times.





**‘Look for the good,
however small’**

GEORGIE MOORE

Stock bridges, yards and about 15 kms of fencing were wiped out when Cyclone Hale hit the 550-hectare property farmed by Georgie Moore and her father. Their Homewood farm is made up of beautiful terraces and a bit of hilly back country, says Georgie.

What Cyclone Hale didn't take, Cyclone Gabrielle took a month later. For Georgie, who has been farming for just six years, it was, to put it mildly, an "eye-opener". For her Dad it was worse even than the rains of 1977, the worst he could remember.

Months on it was still very frustrating, says Georgie, with "stock running rampant round the back because it was too wet to get there. The mud has lingered, doing even more damage."

Georgie shares her thoughts on getting through a devastating year.

How big a shock was it?

"There were warnings, of course, but you would never expect what actually happened. I don't think anyone expected that, did they?"

My first reaction was just disbelief. You drive around the farm and you're just like, what's happened? You just genuinely don't know where to start. You don't know what you're looking at, you don't know what's happened.

It probably took a good few weeks for it to actually sink in, to really understand what we were facing and what we had to deal with. All these months later, we are still writing our to-do lists, adding jobs that we keep finding from the cyclone.

A roller coaster is the best way to describe what it's been like for me. You get beautiful days where the sun's shining and you're like 'oh this is great' and then the rain comes back and you're like 'goddamn it'.

It's been blimmin' hard to get the mind right to get up and go to work every day in the mud. Putting on your wet weathers and having to deal with it again. Farming is not a job that you can just switch off from. You live on the farm, you live and breathe it, and going home doesn't exactly switch it off either. You look out your bedroom window and you're reminded of it every second."





How do you deal with the overwhelming emotions that follow a disaster?

“Getting through something like this is incredibly hard so I’m very lucky that I’ve had a lot of support with my family – my husband, my mother, my father. We’re all pretty open about our feelings. When we’re having a crappy day, we’ll voice that and that’s probably a little bit of a reminder to be gentle with each other.

If you’re being told by your daughter or your dad that he’s not feeling okay today, you just need be a bit more gentle and a bit more caring with how you work with them.

You need to remind yourself that it is going to end, it can’t stay this way forever. But as the weather kept coming, I have to say it was pretty hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Hearing the rain on the roof each night did give me anxiety.

I think I’m a naturally optimistic person but there’s definitely days where I’ll go home and have a good cry, or have a good scream out in the paddock where no one can hear me. Just screaming, you know, letting that

anger and frustration out and then it’s not turning into sadness.

Support from other people really helps. Our community is awesome. I’ve got a lot of friends down there. I catch up with a lot of my neighbours regularly and we’ll check in, which is so nice.”

How do you find some positivity amidst the tough stuff?

“My advice is look for a bit of good in your day. It may be something very small. I know for my father it’s my daughter. I’ve got a 15-month-old daughter and she comes farming with me every day. And seeing her loving the farm is a huge win for me and it’s a very good part of my day.

And it just reminds me why we moved home to the family farm – to give my family, my future family, the lifestyle I had growing up. Seeing her so happy reminds me why I’m doing it.

Finding the good, the joyful thing, might be seeing someone you haven’t seen in two weeks or waking up and it’s just the sunshine. There’s always one bit of good in a day.

I think, personally, I’m a big talker. I love to talk it out before it becomes an issue. My husband probably gets a little bit sick of me! If I’ve had a crappy day, I’ll let it out and then move on. That’s better than going home and letting it fester at night because that’s when you think about all of it again and again and again. If you can’t let it go, it turns into something bigger and bigger.” 🌀

“There’s always one bit of good in a day.”



“I think I’m a naturally optimistic person but there’s definitely days where I’ll go home and have a good cry, or have a good scream out in the paddock where no one can hear me.”



Busting a gut **is** **not the answer**



Harry Gaddum is thankful to be part of a tight, local community. He knows from experience that in a time of crisis, your family, neighbours and community are what keep you going.

HARRY GADDUM

It was about 10 days after the cyclone hit. Harry Gaddum remembers feeling so tired he was ready to keel over. He had been running on adrenaline, racing around trying to get stuff done.

“It was bloody hard, carrying deer netting around and posts and warratahs and what not. I was stuffed.”

Then one Sunday morning some help arrived that turned things around. A helping hand at that moment was a game-changer.

“A stock agent, a family friend, arrived with a trailer-load of fencing gear. He lit the fire again and we got stuck in. There was this bit of fence that needed work and it really got to me because it was our main lane-way. He said let’s attack that bit. It didn’t take much. It just took him and a bit of motivation really. He was there for a couple of days and just having someone to talk to from outside was massive.

“And then another crew from Manawatū turned up and we went out and attacked some slips. It was having some people to talk to, a few fresh minds on the whole situation.”

“One day out of the blue, a 20-ton digger was dropped off at the end of our driveway. It was from a gasoline-laying company based in Taranaki and was organised through a mate. In the driver’s seat was a box of grease and a note saying ‘best of luck with it all Harry’. It was a miracle the transporter truck made it out over our little gravel road through all the mayhem.”

A floating plateau

Harry Gaddum has a 160-hactare farm at Mangatahi, about 20 minutes west of Hastings. It’s one of four blocks they have around Hawke’s Bay. Harry, his

wife Emily and three children live in Keruru, about 25 minutes up the road.

“This farm is like a little floating plateau in between two big gullies on the front and the back. We farm mostly deer and cattle, angus beef, with some wagyu grazers as well. It’s a beautiful spot.”

Farming has always been part of Harry’s life. Three years ago he and his wife Emily came back to lease the family farm. Since then they’ve had some big challenges to deal with – a drought in 2020, Cyclone Hale in 2023 and soon after, the big one, Cyclone Gabrielle.

Hale was a wild event and gave them a taste of what could happen with a mighty rain. They got some substantial slips but it was nothing like what was to come. They were house-bound for a week when Cyclone Gabrielle struck, power and communications were cut off. They couldn’t get down their driveway with water three-foot deep roaring by. There are 10 houses up their road and they were all locked in.





“It was running shoes on and getting around the farm that way. Just running and running. Every ridge you’d go over would be another blow, another slip and another mob of deer out. Those first few days were tough, witnessing everything you worked on disappearing a little bit.”

With communications down, there was nobody to call. He had no idea the extent of the devastation elsewhere in the country. Neighbours banded together as best they could.

“It was like a neighbourhood of super-humans. There was a fair group of us just going hard to try and sort as much out as we could in the first few days.

“People were coming over to help with the holes and we’d go over there to help fix fences. Then we were on tractors in the night trying to get the roads cleared. It was pretty unreal really.”

Having neighbours around and a strong community is a massive thing, says Harry. It makes all the difference.

“For anyone that is in the community and hasn’t

become part of it, the real lesson from all this is to get amongst it. It’s just so important to be connected. In a time of crisis, support is literally the neighbour.”

At a broader level, being connected with the deer industry was also a big help.

“Support just piled in from the industry. They were sending fences up from the South Island to help. We got streams of emails. You could take some comfort from that. I hope all deer farmers in Hawke’s Bay felt that because we certainly did. It was amazing to be part of that.”

In it for the long haul

One of the key insights Harry has gained is that their response to all the cyclone damage didn’t have to be so rushed. It’s hard to see it at the time but some of the jobs you are throwing yourself at can wait.

The immediate reaction is to think the worst, he says.

“We were trying to wean all our deer that week and then put stags out. It’s an important part of our

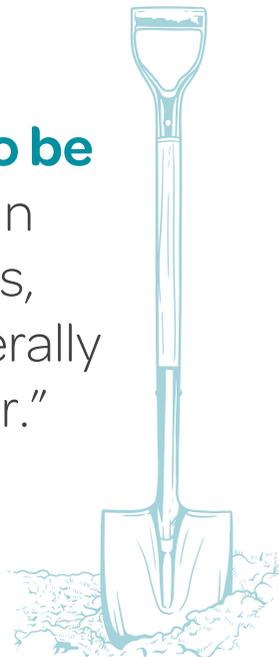
breeding cycle at that point and so it all seemed a disaster. Half the weaners are out in the forest. You think, crikey, this stagging is going to be hopeless and next year is going to be hopeless!”

But, says Harry, when you step back and break it down you can see it’s not the end of the world.

“It took chatting to my old man and a stock agent and a bit of support from the industry to make me realise that you can actually just carry on with the fences down in the middle and they can run together and we can multi-task. There’s ways around everything.

“Once I had that awareness, I realised we didn’t need to bust a gut to fix those internal fences just now. It was too wet anyway. We were trying to fix in the mud and it was silly. It was better to wait till summer.”

“It’s just so important to be connected. In a time of crisis, support is literally the neighbour.”



“The big take-away for me is we’re in it for the long haul. We know we’re going to be here in 10 years so what’s another six months of waiting? The aim is to be here. It’s not to go bankrupt and it’s not to exhaust yourself into a hole.”

Fitness

One thing that's helped hugely has been exercising and keeping fit, says Harry.

"For a while there I felt so bugged I couldn't do any exercise. I just got into a funk I guess. But exercising has made such a difference. It's an ethos that my wife and I have always had. Coming out of that hard time has probably been through fitness and I've felt stronger for that. Being fit is a mood boost isn't it? There's nothing quite like it.

"It's funny, there's guys on our road that are doing the same and so we meet each other on the road at 5.30 in the morning. It's a pretty cool thing, running around the place."

The passion to get fit has spread to the community, with a fitness club now established and proving popular.

"It's something we do every Monday night and it's really cool because everyone from all walks of life comes along and does a bit of circuit training. No one really knows what they're doing but we put some music on and get it done in the hall and it just takes our mind off other things."

"The aim is to be here.

It's not to go bankrupt and it's not to exhaust yourself into a hole."

Wins along the way

Another thing that helps with a positive outlook is to recognise the wins along the way. Harry noticed the change in his own thinking over time.

"It was nice to get into a mindset eventually where we were recognising what we're achieving. In the rural scene, there's always something else that can knock you back a bit if you let it. Problems can easily accumulate. You have to recognise your wins and take those away with you."

The scale of the damage caused by Cyclone Gabrielle was unprecedented. Older very experienced farmers were blown away by the storm. It was something different.

Harry benefited from the wisdom of those farmers and especially from talking with his Dad.

"He was just awesome to talk to the whole time. He's always going to be someone I look up to and go to for advice and he certainly was a calming point through the whole thing."

Harry's wife Emily was a rock amidst all the turmoil and another calming influence. "You're bloody lucky to have a good partner because they're the person that gets you through."

His kids, he says with a laugh. "just thought it was a big game. They lighten things up when you come home because they're living in a different world really. All of a sudden there's a cave at the end of your driveway, and that's amazing to them. The great thing about having little kids is that they can take your mind off the pressures around you."

The family went on a holiday recently for a week to recharge the batteries. "It was so good, just amazing."



For Harry the wider circle of support includes all the people that help him make good decisions. Whether it's stock agents or fertiliser reps or agronomists, bankers and accountants, they're often the people that are so connected with the rest of the area.

"They give you that little bit of motivation and help you make good decisions. It's key to just keep in contact with those people."

The community has been through a massive low, says Harry, but he can feel the upswing.

"We had a fire brigade meeting last night and people in the community seem in pretty high spirits at the moment, albeit they're travelling half an hour extra on a metal road. The people are getting through and the weather has improved. There's sunshine and sunshine makes a difference." 🌱



Finding the magic in the mud

KRISTA FRANKLIN

Northland kumara farmers, Krista Franklin and her husband James, were looking forward to kumara harvest week when Cyclone Gabrielle turned their world on its head.

Tell us a little about your farm.

“We’re second generation kumara farming as well as some beef and lamb on a couple of blocks – our home farm and some land nearby. James’ parents founded the kumara business and have farmed kumara for 33 years. We’ve been kumara farming for ten years.”

What impact did Cyclone Gabrielle have?

“The cyclone was the biggest life event that we’ve experienced as a family. It rocked us to the core.”

How did it unfold?

“The early part was devastating. The floodwater breached the river adjacent to our property. When the water first started rising, my husband and his Dad were focused on the farm and crops. But after a while, I said ‘What about us?’, because it didn’t feel safe and literally within five minutes we were scrambling to pack bags. That’s how fast it all happened. By the time we got in the cars we were driving through flood water! It was scary. I guess you go into fight or flight mode. We just went into flight and headed to our in-laws.”

What happened to the property?

“Fortunately, our house is built up on piles because in the end the flood water was only a doorstep away from entering the house. However, the water flooded all the flats, all our kumara land, which was fully cropped at the time, so the impact was devastating. In the end, we only harvested 16% of our crop, so the financial loss was substantial.”

“We used what happened as an opportunity to think about how we could move forward more positively. The cyclone’s proven to us that life is fragile and **it’s important to enjoy the small things in life.**”





How did you get through those early days?

“When it first happened, we felt really reclusive and didn’t want to see people. We felt so low. To be honest, what helped us most was just getting off-farm. The Northland Rural Support Trust and Northern Wairoa Vegetable Growers Association were great at hosting community events like luncheons and dinners with fellow growers. That really helped because you could see other people going through a similar experience which gave you a sense of support. You felt connected. Also the Ministry for Primary Industries/ Kaipara District Council funding grants helped give some much-needed financial support in the early part.”

How did it impact your mental wellbeing?

“It was more devastating for my husband, because he was the green fingers out on-farm, pouring his heart and soul into growing these things, whereas I was doing all the office and admin work and being Mum. So, while farming’s a team effort, he was the one out on-farm, and I could see he wasn’t coping well.”

What did you do to help?

“Well, James had a fishing tournament with friends that had been scheduled soon after the cyclone. He was tossing and turning about whether he should go. We’d literally only moved back into the house that Friday. In the end I told him he had to go and find his soul again at sea because he’d definitely lost it for a while after the cyclone. That first week was just so tough. It was important for him to get off the farm for a little bit to alleviate some of that stress and come back a bit refreshed.”

How did the cyclone affect your daughters?

“It was traumatic for a five-year-old and a two-and-a-half-year-old to see floodwater going over the road across from our house. You couldn’t prepare them for it either because it happened so quickly. It was important in those early days to give them routine because they were out of whack and feeling it. Getting back to things like kindy/school was important.

We also moved heaven and earth to get the property back to a more liveable state before we moved them back in, because there was floodwater everywhere. I didn’t want the kids to come home and see what we’d left behind. Through Rural Support Trust counselling services, we received some great tips on how to move forward as a family.”

What did they suggest?

“They helped with the type of language to use with your kids. After the cyclone, whenever my eldest daughter saw heavy rain, she would instantly say, ‘is it going to flood Mum? Is it going to be bad for the kumara?’ It was a trauma for her.”

How did you handle those convos?

“Instead of being fluffy and saying ‘it won’t happen again’, we had open and real conversations with the kids. We’d say, ‘Yes that was bad, but if it ever happens again, we’ve got a plan now and we know what to do.’ We could talk them through those situations.”

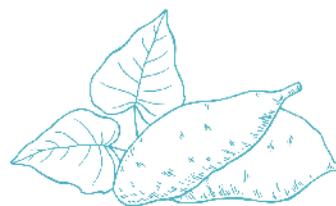
We also took the kids out to the kumaras and made a fun thing of casting a spell, using glitter potion to wish the kumara plants well for the new season. It sounds silly, but that little bit of light-heartedness made such a huge difference for our family. It was a beautiful thing to do and the kids really enjoyed being a part of that.”

What else helped your family get through those early days?

“We just took it day by day. The support of family, friends, our kumara team and other growers was vital. We had everything from random food drops to people turning up to help us with the clean-up and make sure we celebrated our wedding anniversary. Things like that were great because we didn’t feel like doing that ourselves.”

What was your priority farm-wise?

“At first the financial worry meant we couldn’t sleep. It was consuming us. So, talking to our bank as early as possible helped. Just hearing the words that they were there to support us restored some peace of mind. They also came out on-farm in those initial recovery weeks when they were assessing all the kumara farmers and that really made us feel like we were more than just a number. We felt they heard our voice.”



What helps you get through a stressful period like that?

“I’d emphasise the importance of self-care. In those early days we just weren’t sleeping and that makes life so hard. So, sleeping well, eating well, exercising and still making time for your hobbies like my husband did with his hunting. Pre-cyclone he couldn’t find the time for it, but post-cyclone it was so important for him to just meet up with mates and get off-farm, de-stress and do something he was passionate about. That’s what gets you through.”

Anything to avoid?

“Yes, drinking too much. There’s no point drowning your sorrows because you need to be able to get up every morning and make decisions with a clear head, in the right frame of mind.”

Another thing to avoid is telling someone that their home is ‘only a house’ because your home is at the heart of everything you do on a farm.”

Ok, so what about your physical living environment? How did you tackle the damage?

“One thing that helped was changing what you saw when you looked out the window. I reckon the trauma stayed with us until we hoed the damaged kumaras back into the ground and saw new life coming back through. Seeing the new season starting again was an important part of the grieving process and overcoming the trauma.”

Looking back over the last year, what was the most challenging aspect mentally?

“The hardest part was dealing with the unknown. For farmers, not knowing ‘where to from here’ is unsettling. For example, after the flood there were different opinions about how long to wait to harvest so it was a good month before we got into it.

Harvest is usually such an exciting, positive experience, but this was a salvage operation. It was daunting. There was a question mark over how we’d survive this. Would we even stick with kumaras? The support from our kumara team was fundamental in getting us through the most devastating harvest and post-cyclone clean-up. The weight we all held on our shoulders to continue with our business with the help of supporting staff was huge – it was a real team effort from one full-time, one part-time and 20 casual team members.”

How did you deal with that uncertainty?

“Coming up with a plan to move forward was crucial. We actually came up with plans A, B and C. Plan A was plant kumaras again. Plans B and C involved us both doing other jobs. James, for example, is a qualified builder. So we had these other plans which meant we could work towards them, instead of going round in circles and questioning ourselves. That gave us a sense of purpose again.”

How did things pan out?

“We managed to get going after a long, agonising wait. I ended up doing a lot of Ag Facilitator work for the Rural Support Trust. I was also a qualified massage therapist pre-kids, so I went back to doing that one night a week. I also took on another admin role. At one point I was doing four roles to help make ends meet.”

What about the farm?

“The cyclone made us rethink our current business plan, spread the risk and not have all our crops in one basket. We did some business coaching through EMA with the amazing Cass @ Fontein Coaching. This was powerful and helped shift our mindset towards more positive goal-setting. We set simple goals at first but ended up actioning some long-held dreams.”

Tell us about that.

“My hubby ended up building a backpacker facility on our other block which was a huge shift for him. He really enjoys building and that gave him a productive project to get excited about during the off-season. That has been a game-changer for the business in terms of being at full staffing capacity for the first time in over three years since Covid.”

It sounds like there’s been some upside despite the trauma. Would that be fair comment?

“Yes, I think it’s made us a heck of a lot more resilient. It’s also made us work together better as a team. Today, we are a world apart from where we were on 14th February 2023. Our business is thriving and that’s down to an awful lot of hard work, business planning, talking things through, mindset adjustments.”

So how would you describe your mindset now?

“We used what happened as an opportunity to think about how we could move forward more positively. The cyclone’s proven to us that life is fragile and it’s important to enjoy the small things in life. It definitely took us a while to shift out of that ho hum space, but now we’re grateful for what we have, as opposed to what we lost.” 



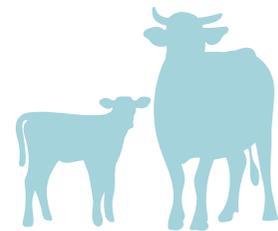
"I told him he had to go and **find his soul again at sea** because he'd definitely lost it for a while after the cyclone."





'Don't forget about you'

A trifecta of major setbacks has really tested the resilience of South Auckland dairy farmers Amber and Fraser Carpenter and their young team. Amber talks about what it takes to get through the tough times and still enjoy life on the farm.



AMBER CARPENTER

Talk us through the trials of 2023.

“We had a pretty rough start to 2023. We had a robbery at home at the beginning of the year that cleaned us out – anything that wasn’t a large piece of furniture was gone. They took everything, right down to my shoes, all our computers and hard drives. They took all our wet weather gear, all of our torches, every piece of warm clothing possible, so when the Auckland floods hit two days later, we were out moving stock in t-shirts and jandals.

We’ve never really been burgled like that before. We’ve had little burglaries but nothing quite so massive and the shock was something that I hadn’t anticipated. My first reaction was to make sure the kids hadn’t seen it – we got them out and did a big tidy-up. It was quite a whirlwind really with the police coming and writing down everything that we’d lost.

What put things into perspective was that we were okay, we still had a roof over our head, things are things. They’re replaceable and we’re healthy. We’ve got air in our lungs, and had food on the table once we went shopping again. We hadn’t lost anybody, or our home. People have been through a lot more.

It was the accumulation of three events – the Auckland floods, the robbery and Cyclone Gabrielle – that hit us. We were emotionally exhausted, physically exhausted, and then just after that I did my back. At times like that, it’s a case of just grasping on to those things that keep you going – connecting with people, getting off-farm, reminding ourselves every day what we’re grateful for and what we do have. It’s not all bad and things could actually be a lot worse.”

Given all that, how do you keep your head up on a day-to-day basis?

“We take each day as it comes. We put a plan in place every single day and concentrate on the positives as much as we can. Every day there’s a raft of things that you can be hit with, both good and bad, things you can’t control.

We’re really aware that how we present ourselves and our mindset affects our team. Turning up in the morning upbeat, giving the team a positive lift because they turn up every day and do some incredible mahi. We’re really fortunate with our team and we’re just going to support them the best that we can.

Sometimes it’s really challenging. It’s rained for however long and we’ve got so much ahead of us, but there are still so many positives in a day. So it’s just a matter of finding that little fire in your belly and remembering why you get up in the morning and do what you do. Your ‘why’ is a big thing and reminding our team of their ‘why’ is too. It also makes the days go a lot better, having that positive mindset and adding some fun into the day.”



How do you look after yourself?

“Looking after yourself is really important. I think if you ask farmers what their biggest asset is on farm, a lot of them will probably say their herd, their team, pasture, all that sort of stuff, but they actually don’t mention themselves. And at the end of the day, you’re the biggest asset because if you’re not working properly, the rest of the farming operation is not going to work properly either.

We make a big effort to look after ourselves during the busy times of the year. A big thing for me is sleep, food and exercise. It’s busy on farm, but I do find a good gym session helps my mental health incredibly and I need that.

It’s really easy to forget about yourself because farmers in general are giving, passionate people. They want the best for their team and their animals and their farm in general. So it is easy to forget about you. You give your energy to everyone else and then on top of that, your community.

Looking after yourself is flipping that narrative and actually putting yourself first. And if you’re performing, then everything else will perform around you too. Then you’ve got that clear mind and you’re well fed and well rested.”

How do you manage the busy times?

“I always think about that when we’re going through calving too. I don’t always make the best choices, especially when we’re in a rush, but I know I’ve got to fuel myself properly to keep myself going. It’s the same for our team – we fill up our farm office with food for them so they can have a good breakfast in the morning and when they have a chance to catch a break there are bars and trail mix and yogurt.

“We hadn’t lost anybody, or our home. **People have been through a lot more.**”

We do a good team lunch for them during a team meeting and we put on a cooked breakfast on the weekend as well.

We tell our team that if they need time and they’re feeling a bit fatigued, they just have to say. We can’t always just keep going and fatigue hits people at different times. It’s okay to say, ‘hey I’m tired’ and we can adjust the roster, give them the morning off for sleep. The busy times are a team effort, it’s not an individual effort, so it’s really important to support each other.

We’ve got quite a young team and we want to make sure that we’re building their resilience. They are the next generation so to help them on their journey is really cool.

We start the team meeting each week going around the table and everyone tells us what their win was for the week. We’ve also got this little ‘good vibes’ box – if you notice someone has done something really cool, their name goes into the ‘good vibes’ box. The person with the most good vibes gets a voucher at the end of the quarter and then we take everyone out for dinner and celebrate.

There’s so much goodness in a week, even if it’s raining constantly and you’re covered in mud. If you’re not focusing on the good things that you’ve done, the negative stuff can really play on your mind.”

How do you avoid bringing farm worries home?

"It's hard when you live on a farm because you can see everything that is happening out the kitchen window. But we make a really big effort, once we come in from the farm. Once the gear is off, that's it, that's where we leave it. Home's our safe space where we can relax and put things behind us. That's where we can look after ourselves.

We make sure that home is where our family time happens and we show our kids that they're the priority there and not the farm. But we don't always get it right, especially during tough times of the year. We're only human.

On days off we try and get away from the farm with the kids. It's easier if the distraction is not there. Whether it's going to the park or taking the kids swimming, or going out for lunch, we've found it's good to get away instead of having a home day so we're not worrying about things or seeing something that needs fixing."

What does it mean to you to be Farmstrong?

"We really take on board the five ways to wellbeing, ensuring that we're connecting, giving, keeping fit, enjoying the simple things in life and learning. On the good days it all comes so easily but it's on the bad days that those five tips come in real handy. That's when you've really got to dig deep and think okay, I need to look after myself or I need to connect with someone to have a yarn about how things are going.

When you are talking to someone else things don't seem so bad. Being Farmstrong ensures you're being your best for yourself, your family, and your farm, putting your best foot forward every day, no matter what that looks like." 🌱

"When you are
talking to someone
else things don't
seem so bad."





**'Recovering vision
and hope'**

BRYDON NISBET

Fruit-growing is an industry which has shown it can dig deep and bounce back from severe setbacks.

When Cyclone Gabrielle struck, Brydon Nisbet and his wife couldn't get out to their apple orchards in the Puketapu area for three days. When they finally made it, they didn't look like the same orchards.

One small block, which was near where the river breached the stock bank, was completely flattened. Across the road 400-800 mls of silt covered every square inch of another orchard block. The scale of the devastation was so great it was pretty hard to take in what had just happened, or to know what they should do next.

"On that first visit we didn't know what to do, so we left," says Brydon. "The next day we came back again, walked around, didn't know what to do. On the Sunday we came again and still didn't know what to do. And then on the Monday, we came back and made a decision that we needed to get in here and try and save the orchard."

It was heart-breaking. Harvest was just around the corner.

"We were 10 days away from harvest. The week before I'd mowed the whole orchard and all the bins were lined up. The orchard was looking fantastic and I thought I've got one more spray to put on and then it's harvest time. But you know your tomorrows aren't guaranteed so it was all pretty hard."



A massive job lay ahead but the decision to save the orchard was a turning point, providing a focus when it was desperately needed.

Says Brydon: "To save the orchard, we had to get the silt out. We'd heard from industry consultants that if you got the silt out within four to six weeks, the trees were going to survive. A friend of mine made a phone call to a digger operator and the next day, we had about 10 operators and machines turn up to start work on clearing the silt.

"Once we made the decision to save the orchard, it gave us real vision and hope and we got busy getting on with the work."

There was still a mountain to climb however, physically and emotionally.

A massive job lay ahead but the **decision to save the orchard was a turning point**, providing a focus when it was desperately needed.

"A few days into the clean-up a friend came out and put a drone up over the orchard. My heart sank when I saw how little we had done in three days.



“We had barely cleared a few tracks and there were mountains of silt and debris still to remove.

“A feeling of hopelessness came over me and I thought, ‘oh this is just impossible, how are we ever going to do this?’

“But I talked to my wife and we thought, well what’s the other option? We lose everything anyway. We’ve got no choice, we just need to go for it and we did. In the end we removed 30,000 cubic metres of silt off the property. We gained strength from talking about things and being open and not isolating ourselves. That helped us stay on target.

“It’s different for everyone but especially for guys there is the tendency to want to isolate, you just want to handle it yourself, carry all the weight of it but that’s the wrong thing to do. You’ve got to share it out. Talk to some friends, your husband or wife, get the communication going and invite people to check up on you.

“And then get busy, get a focus, get a vision, know where you want to go and get help if you need it.”

As well as having his own orchard, Brydon is also President of the Hawke’s Bay Fruitgrowers’ Association and a Director on the Board of Horticulture NZ, which meant lots of media attention in the aftermath of the cyclone.

“Being President gave me another focus because I felt a responsibility to speak on behalf of the growers. There were a lot of people suffering who had devastated orchards like mine and even worse.”

With so much on his plate, Brydon knew he had to have some checks and balances in his own life to make sure he was okay. The first thing he did was ring a few mates and ask them if they would check in on him from time to time, which they did.

Community support and encouragement was another big factor in getting through. One positive to come out of the disaster was the way it connected and united people, says Brydon.

“There was a lot of community support in Puketapu. Neighbours were checking up on each other. The Fruitgrowers’ Association was checking up on growers and social media was key to connecting growers with volunteers.

“We had volunteers come here from all over the country and that brought hope. We had businesses send people down, paid for their accommodation for two or three days, to help out on the orchard and scrape silt out from around the trunks. So that was great, knowing that people around the country cared.”



“The PSA outbreak was threatening to devastate their whole industry but they dug deep and pushed through ... So we’re looking at that and thinking **we have to grow back better, bigger and stronger.**”

The Fruitgrowers’ Association worked hard to support the local industry in the months following the cyclone in February. They raised a lot of funds to support growers and hosted functions for people to get away from their orchards and socialise with one another. They’ve also engaged a psychiatrist who is available to the growers at no charge.

Brydon says that the impact of the cyclone on growers and the local community will stretch far into the future.

“We’re keeping funds back for next year because of that and the psychiatrist will continue to be available for growers and their families.”

Despite the challenges of the last year, Brydon remains an enthusiastic grower. The silt has gone, tracks have been cleared and new buds are starting to burst in the orchard once again. It’s a weather-dependent industry, he says, but one which has shown it can recover from severe setbacks.

“I think about the Bay of Plenty kiwifruit growers in 2010 when the PSA outbreak happened. That was threatening to devastate their whole industry but they dug deep and pushed through. They came up with innovative varieties and now look at their industry. So we’re looking at that and thinking we have to grow back better, bigger and stronger.” 



INSIGHT DR LUCY HONE



'You will get through it'

"My biggest message is this. It's not easy. It's so hard and you can't believe you're here, but you will get through it. From my research perspective, the stand-out finding is that most people get through all kinds of potentially traumatic events that they didn't want to live through. The most common response to all these things is resilience. We have it within us, this extraordinary capacity to get through all kinds of dire situations. It doesn't mean it's fun, it's not pretty, it's not what you wanted, but you will get there."



Ebb and flow

"People seem to think that resilience is like just being able to cope with everything and you should just be able to continue to cope day in, day out. And actually, that's complete BS. Resilience is actually more about saying, 'I'm not coping and I need help'.

It's about having an accurate response to whatever is going on. If you're meant to be melting down, if you're meant to be exhausted, you are having the appropriate response. There's nothing wrong with that. That's what's making you realise you need to take time out, and that is really important.

One of the leading grief theories nowadays is that you do this ebb and flow between coping and focusing your attention on the misery of the loss and the grief. So you focus your attention on the loss sometimes and other times you focus your attention on restoring the world around you. You go from one to the other. You ebb and you flow, you oscillate between these two, and what you need is to take breaks."



Dr Lucy Hone is an academic in the field of resilience and wellbeing psychology at The Institute of Wellbeing & Resilience. She is a sought-after speaker and author on helping people cope with tragedy and loss. These reflections from Lucy are taken from The Big Check-in, an online event to support rural people affected by Cyclone Gabrielle. For more tips follow her @drlucyhone.

'People get through this stuff'

"When you are in a tough time, the resilience that will get you through is not some kind of elusive fixed trait, it is there for you all. It is a capacity that we all have. It comes from really 'ordinary magic'. Just leaning on your friends, being willing to have that conversation, keeping a sense of hope, using humour always. These are really everyday processes. The negative emotions that you're feeling right now are absolutely appropriate. As humans we hate being in a situation that we can't control. It does our heads in. So just understand that what you're experiencing is incredibly normal and things will change over time."

Realistic optimism

"We talk about 'realistic optimism'. You want to hang in there and believe that it will get better in time but also be realistic and pragmatic about what you're up against. You don't want to get so helpless and hopeless that it robs you of any action, so you want to work at where you can prevail, knowing that over time it is going to get better."





“My biggest message is this. **It’s not easy.** It’s so hard and you can’t believe you’re here, but you **will** get through it.” - *Dr Lucy Hone*





Celebrate your wins

Cyclone Gabrielle wreaked havoc on a Puketapu apple orchard that has been in the family since 1992. Craig and Gill Wilson talk about what it takes to come back from the brink.

CRAIG WILSON

Seven months on from Cyclone Gabrielle, apple trees are being planted once again on the Wilson family orchard and block posts are being layed out. The re-development of Craig and Gill's orchard is well underway.

The goal is to get half of their 50-hectare orchard in Puketapu in the Dartmoor Valley back into full production. The other 25 hectares of orchard was completely demolished.

"We've planted 5,000 trees on land that we cleared straight away," says Craig. "With the 25 hectares that we've lost, we'll just take it slowly over a number of years and build up again."

It's incredible to think the progress they have made, given the scale of the devastation they experienced. When the cyclone hit, they had harvested 1500 bins of apples. Most of the harvest, another 6,000 bins, was lost.

Cyclone Gabrielle was far worse than Cyclone Bola which hit the area in 1988. There was a three-metre difference in the height of the water, says Craig. He looks across the road at the house where his parents lived when Bola struck. Their house was surrounded by a lake of water but water never went inside their house. This time the water rose above the roof guttering level and the family living there were lucky to escape through the roof using a kindling axe.

The first few months after Gabrielle were the toughest, says Craig.

"To begin with, just getting around was an impossibility. To do anything, just to get into your shed, was such a challenge. Everything was lost – every bit of machinery, every tool.

"You couldn't just clear something. You had to find a tractor on a hill property, bring that down, get tote tanks from another neighbour, bring down a pressure washer, try and clean a shed. Everything was very hard work because you're wading through thick silt all the time. There was nothing easy about it."

Removing the silt from orchard land and getting back to fertile soil has been a huge undertaking.

"For the last four months we've been clearing out with tractors, trailers and diggers. The infrastructure involved was huge. At some points we had up to 20 tractors and trailers and three or four diggers going on various properties. The contractors were a magic bunch. They would help you out everywhere. They're all cool."

Recovery has been hard yakka every day but having great contractors and the support of the community has made all the difference.

"Having a great bunch of friends around you is the key. Blokes tend to bottle things up but if you've got some real good friends around you, you can talk through things. Everybody round here has a situation to deal with. So all you can do is look out for each other really."

The local Puketap pub has been a great refuge for locals to share stories and support one another.

"We've got a community hub down at the Puketap Hotel that has been huge for the community, and that's what you need. The premises there were wrecked too but Mary opened up her garden bar so she could get the community together. Every Thursday we could go down there and have a drink, just chew the fat. That's the way through something like this."

Craig and Gill's business is a family business and family members have been fully involved in the recovery.

"My son's on the property so at the moment I've just said he can manage the horticultural side of it, I'll manage the clear-up side of it. My daughter is managing the insurance issues and Gill's doing all the compliance work for the businesses."



When you are in recovery mode, it's very easy to get buried in endless immediate demands, says Craig.

"You've got to take a breather, you've got to have some time out and look after yourself. We had a trip to Raro with the family just two weeks ago. That was our first break. It was so good to go somewhere that you don't have to make a decision and people aren't making demands on you."



When you are getting back on your feet, you're making a million decisions that you don't have to make when it's business as usual, says Craig.

"It does take a toll. The contractors and everybody helping have been cool right from the get-go but it all requires decision-making. You're involving lots of machinery and lots of people. What are your priorities? What are they doing? Where do they go next? That's been constant day after day."

Making time for family has been vital to relieve the pressure. In the first few weeks after the cyclone it was pretty much non-stop work but since then, Craig starts his day early round 7 and knocks off at 4.30.

"I like to go home, talk to the family, have a beer and chill out. I try and stick to that."

"Having a great bunch of friends around you is the key.

Blokes tend to bottle things up but if you've got some real good friends around you, you can talk through things."



“The cleaning-up process is a **healing process** as well.”

Craig’s other ‘go-to’ for relaxation is fishing. But the cyclone scuttled that too in the short term. Once he could get his shed open, he found his boat had sunk in the flood waters! It’s getting fixed now and will hopefully soon be back in operation.

The other key thing for Craig is to do with mindset – accepting that recovery can only be done in small steps.

“Everything is such a mess it has to be done one step at a time. You can’t just look at the end goal. You have to take it one step at a time to achieve that goal. If you don’t do that, you get overwhelmed. It just all comes in on you.”

“So my advice is celebrate your wins, 100%, and have a bit of a laugh with the people you are working with. Celebrate when you achieve something, when you clear an orchard or whatever it may be.

“Now, six or seven months later, it’s those small steps that have got us here. The cleaning-up process is a healing process as well.” 

GILL WILSON

Cyclone Gabrielle not only devastated Gill and Craig Wilson’s 50-hectare orchard, it also threatened the lives of their family and workers. Months later, when we visited, they were making the best of things. They had saved half their orchard and the horror memories were fading.

Gill and Craig Wilson live up on a hill above their apple orchard in Puketapu, Hawke’s Bay. The area was among the worst hit by Cyclone Gabrielle. When the cyclone hit they could do nothing but watch as the Tutaekuri River rose and breached the stopbanks, knowing that they had family and 15 RSE workers living down below.

“Emotionally it was just awful because we knew our kids were in trouble, in dire straits,” said Gill. “We knew all our workers were on the roofs – we’d rung emergency services, they couldn’t get in. They’d actually told my son to stop calling them because there was nothing they could do to help them. We tried to get down there and we just couldn’t get out of our driveway. We felt absolutely helpless.





“You could see what the water was like from the house. It was just a huge river rushing. The size of the trees that were being swept away and the amount of stuff that was barrelling down was incredible. It was a complete feeling of helplessness. We had no idea whether they were going to survive, what was going to happen.

“You cannot believe what nature can do, how quickly it can turn and the force of it is just incredible.”

Thankfully the helicopter arrived and got those in immediate danger off the roof while the water was still rising. Once the water began to drop, it dropped pretty quickly and the helicopter moved off to where it was more urgently needed. There were still people stranded on their roofs, including Craig and Gill’s son and partner. When the waters got low enough, they were able to get themselves down.

The farmer from up the road helped with the rescue effort, says Gill.

“My nephew, who had been on one of the roofs, had managed to find a way out of the orchard and he took the farmer back in to where everyone had gathered at the RSE accommodation. They got everyone organised and then walked and crawled their way out through the thick silt.

“They all turned up at home freezing cold, covered in silt. For the first three or four nights we had 17 of us in the house. Then someone in town offered a house for our workers which was fantastic.”

In those first days, Gill says, they didn’t know where to start. They couldn’t get into their blocks to evaluate things. It felt like it was all too much for them to deal with.

“At that stage, we thought the trees were going to die. We had been told, based on the experience in Nelson, we had a month to get the silt out or the trees would start dying.”

With the help of their consultant’s son, they got a drone up and were able to mark the areas they thought they could save on the orchard maps they had at home. That became the priority. Being able to call on people like their accountant and industry advisors was a great help.

“We formed a plan from there and tried to focus on the priorities. What needs doing straight away? What can wait six weeks?

“To anybody in a similar situation I would say ‘hang in there’. It seems an insurmountable task ahead straight after the event but just take it a day at a time. Look after yourself.”

For Gill looking after herself has meant relying on family and friends, and keeping in good contact with a strong local community.

“The community’s been fantastic. It’s always been a good community, but this has just made it stronger. You soon realise there’s lots of people in the same situation or even worse off. We still had our house and our vehicles, others have lost everything.”

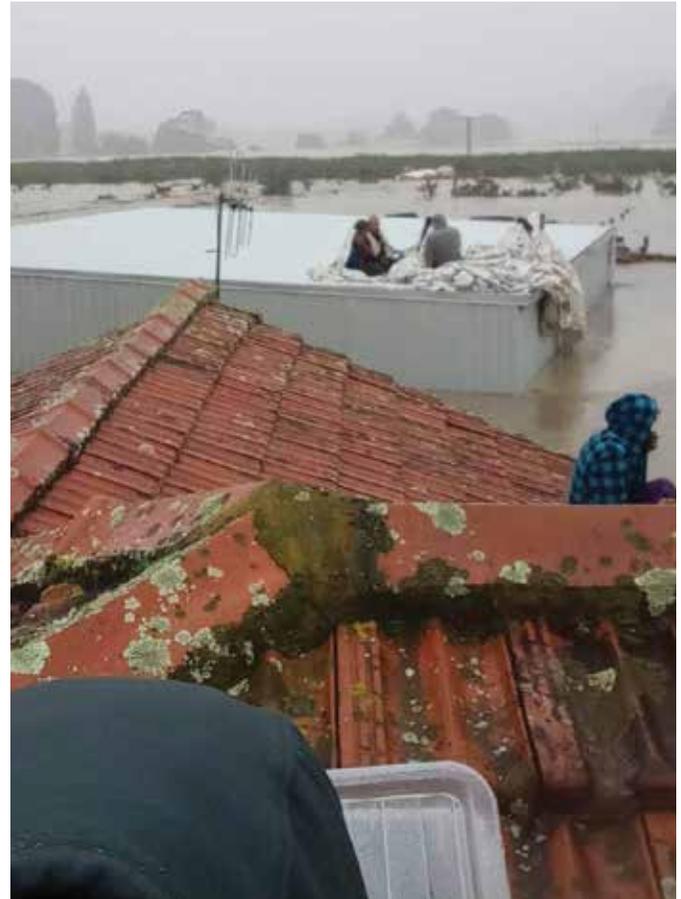
About half of the Wilsons’ 50-hectare orchard has been saved, the rest demolished. It’s been a huge job clearing the silt out of the saved orchards with skid steers and diggers. New plantings are underway in some areas but decisions are still to be made about the future of other blocks.

Looking back eight months later, the horror of the event fades, says Gill. There’s been good days, bad days, good hours, bad hours. It’s been a very emotionally stressful time.

But the progress too has been amazing. People are more resilient than they think, she says.

“Look at all the silt that’s been moved from this valley in a short amount of time. It’s quite incredible what’s been achieved already. Let’s just hope it doesn’t happen again.”

“I’m still not sure we want to go gung-ho planting on all the blocks. Time will tell on that one.” 



*Workers stranded on rooftops when Cyclone Gabrielle hit.
Photo: Gill Wilson.*

“Look at all the silt that’s been moved from this valley in a short amount of time. **It’s quite incredible really what’s been achieved already.**”





**It's a marathon,
not a sprint**

JONATHAN BELL

Jonathan Bell, coordinator for the East Coast Rural Support Trust in Hawke's Bay, was in the thick of the recovery effort after Cyclone Gabrielle hit the region. He used to live in Gisborne and experienced Cyclone Bola back in 1988 but "that was just a pup compared to Gabrielle".

In the immediate aftermath of the cyclone, a local Rural Advisory Group swung into action, made up of sector, local government and community groups. A 'war room' was set up to oversee a region-wide support effort.

"Our first job was to engage with communities to find out what they needed," says Jonathan. "In a response like this, the first thing is people. The second thing is their whanau. If you're a livestock farmer, then it's your animals, and then it's everything else."

"We used all the connections that we had from that rural advisory group to find out exactly what the lay of the land was in all rural communities. Everybody worked as a team and each organisation contributed what they could. In the initial stages we were going around communities, listening to their stories, finding out what they needed."

How bad was it?

"The first four or five days were absolute chaos. We had bridges and roads washed away so there were major issues with access. We had no cell phone coverage and no power – some rural communities didn't get power for weeks."

When we started getting power and comms we realised the extent of the damage and it was huge. You're talking four to five metres of water in some places. So we had people woken up in the middle of the night with the water coming in, sitting on roofs and being rescued the following morning. And when I say sitting on the roof, where the apex is on your roof, literally a couple of feet either side and there's the water. So very traumatic and unfortunately we lost lives."

How do people get through a disaster like this?

"I use the analogy that it's a marathon, not a sprint. My experience in Bola was that it's going to take a long time to get to where you want to be."

But everyone's marathon is different. It depends on where you were and how much damage you had. Some people are well through their marathon and can probably see the finish line. Others are still in that first 15kms and trying to plan for the future, but they can't because of such things as the categorisation of the land. Some still don't know what they can do as far as living back on the land, rebuilding their houses, so it's a matter of waiting.

A lot of people want to move on but they can't. People are frustrated with the delays but you have to make the right decisions. If it takes seven or eight months to get the decisions right, in 15 years' time you'll look back and say thank goodness someone took the time to do it right. If it's rushed, in 10 or 15 years' time people will be looking back and saying they were too quick. Time is needed to make sure that the land categorisation is well-informed, and the infrastructure goes back in a better state."

How can we become more resilient to deal with tough stuff?

“I think part of resilience comes with age. The more summers you see – and you can see by my hairstyle that I’ve seen a few summers – that helps with resilience. It’s also partly your upbringing and also what you have experienced. If you’ve had trauma in your life, whether it’s the death of a loved one or a car accident or an event like a cyclone or earthquake, you learn from it and you learn from how others have coped.

Over time, you build up a set of skills and ways to cope. For myself, if I come under stress, the first thing I do is increase my exercise. I try and go for more walks, try and get better sleep, kick alcohol, those sorts of things. It’s just keeping yourself well, and if you can do that, your brain’s in a better space to cope.

At the Rural Support Trust we’ve been encouraging farmers to look after their own wellbeing. On a day-to-day basis it comes down to some very practical things – drink lots of water, eat proper food, take some time off even when you’re looking at an absolute mess and things need to get done. You can’t work 24/7. Try and make your farm as functional as possible, so look at your boundary fence, fix that, plug the gaps. De-stock if and when you can. Don’t go out hell for leather and put in new fences. Just make them temporary ones because if you get another rain event those fences get washed away. Taking the time may allow you to re-design your fences and other farm infrastructure.

Recovery is going to take time and at some stage, when the adrenaline runs out and cortisol kicks in, you’re in a different space and you’ve got to control those levels so that you can actually think forward and plan.”

What’s the mindset that helps you get through the long haul?

“One of the things that makes a difference is humour – people need to laugh. And human beings are tribal so they need to be with a tribe, with a community. The cyclone has brought everyone together and we’re seeing in the community a keenness to help each other.

The other thing is finding hope again. It’s been really hard and if you talk to the pastoral guys at the moment, they’re looking to spring. We’ve had the winter blues, so today’s a beautiful, warm day here in Hawke’s Bay. It’s just over 20 degrees, so pasture will be coming shortly. For the horticulturists, all the trees are starting to come into bud and flower, so they can see the future in front of them, and hopefully they can start planning.”

What have you noticed about how people cope under pressure?

“If I look at the response to the cyclone, two things that made a big difference were how the rural communities came together, and also the local marae. They really stood up to the plate and assisted their communities.

In a trauma, people just pop up out of the woodwork and do stuff, that’s the amazing thing. We have a lady in Taradale who started making food and leaving it at her gate saying ‘here’s free meals to take’. She’s just one example. There were lots of people who did that. We had a church-based Rapid Response Team that provided between 15,000 and 17,000 meals for the community. Mike Green from the Rural Support Trust organised a fishing competition over in Taranaki and they sent over 350 kilograms of filleted, scaled, packaged fish which we were able to give out. Things like that let people know they are not forgotten.” 



Up for the challenge



Junior Taulago manages a sheep and beef farm in Patoka near the Kaweka ranges in Hawke's Bay. His year was going smoothly til Cyclone Gabrielle roared through. Now, like many farmers and growers, he's in recovery mode. Here's what he's doing to get through.

JUNIOR TAULAGO

How affected was your farm by the cyclones?

“Heaps. Our bridge went so we couldn’t get into town at all. We had no access point, so we just battled on like everyone else. Got things helicoptered in. We had no power for two weeks. It was pretty crazy really. You felt stranded. But the cool thing was everyone in the community pitched in, we all had our diggers and helped each other make a road. Everyone got together.”

Did you lose much land and fencing?

“We’ve probably got around 6-8 kms of fencing to redo. There’s a long haul ahead. When it first happened, everyone was operating on adrenalin. Getting the power back on felt like a big win. Putting the generator away was a nice moment.”

How do you deal with a big setback like this?

“You’ve got to pace yourself so you don’t burn out. Initially, we had all this stuff to do and just went hard at it. But you can only operate like that for so long. Now, I reckon it’s about making the most of the small wins. Trying not to think of the big picture all the time, taking it one step at a time. So, putting up a fence line is a win. We’re probably talking about years of work ahead, so it’s about doing whatever it takes to stay positive and then getting off-farm when you can.”

You’ve started up your gym sessions again for farmers.

“Yes, before the cyclone I ran a fitness class called Rural Rise for the farmers in my area at the local hall.

We used to get together once a week and have a workout. It started off with one or two people, now there’s up to 15 of us. So we’ve got it going again at the Glencoe woolshed every Thursday night at seven.”

What’s the benefit of taking time off when people are so busy?

“A change of scenery and getting off-farm really helps you get through. It gives you something to look forward to, it breaks up the week and it’s fun.

Also, if you work on the body, it clears your head and makes it easier to deal with whatever comes at you mentally. But you know what I enjoy most about these sessions? It’s the chat afterwards. Once people work up a sweat, they tend to drop their guard and open up. It changes your perspective – you realise you’re not going through this big challenge alone. You’re just in a better space and feel more in control of your life.”



Rural Rise fitness programme – great for the mind as well as the body.

“If there’s a silver lining in any of this, I think it’s **strengthened our community** and sense of gratitude.”



What else are you doing to get through?

“Getting enough sleep and eating properly are important so you’re good to go each day. When you’re running a marathon, the energy you can muster is what you’re going to rely on.”

What sort of mindset is required to hang in for the long haul?

“There’s no doubt the cyclone did serious damage to this area and brought a lot of stress and grief for people. Some people are lucky to be alive. The mental challenge is to look for the positives, despite that. If there’s a silver lining in any of this, I think it’s

strengthened our community and sense of gratitude. You don’t take things for granted anymore. I can still remember how just being able to go into town to get our own groceries after the cyclone felt amazing.”

How would you describe life on farm now?

“It’s different, but we’re still up for it. Over the past month, the boys’ workout sessions have been a huge success too, not only for the body but also the mind. Seeing the boys get off-farm and get after it, smashing the workouts keeps that fire burning for me. It’s all about showing up for each other.” 🌀



'We're good at picking ourselves up'



Growers are a bit battle-hardened by what nature throws at them. Despite the monumental scale of Cyclone Gabrielle, growers know how to get back up again, says Gareth Holder.

GARETH HOLDER

It's early spring in Hawke's Bay. Long rows of corn and spinach have been planted out on land leased by Gareth Holder in Meeanee and the first shoots are coming through. For vegetable grower Gareth, it's a wonderful sight seven months on from Cyclone Gabrielle.

"It's a new beginning. We're getting some crops growing again and some cash flow back into the business. Little steps to get going again and make us feel we're making progress.

"There's always demand for fresh produce. If we can get back on our feet again and get going as a business, there's always going to be customers there that need to be fed."

The sprouting of new crops is a huge boost considering the devastation Gareth and his family have experienced in recent months. A large proportion of the 100 hectares they farm is in Pakowhai, Hastings, one of the worst-hit areas in the region.

"The first 24 hours wasn't too bad. The crops were actually looking alright, a bit wet underfoot but nothing major.

"Then it all turned to custard with the breaching of the stopbanks upstream. The two rivers joined into one and our property, along with everyone else in the Pakowhai community, was inundated. We were three and a half metres deep through our home property so our home, our base for the business, a lot of machinery and infrastructure and a huge amount of crops were destroyed."

Gareth describes his feelings at the time as "very numbing". It was days before he could get in and see what had actually happened.

"We weren't allowed back in, so we had no idea. It was only seeing our house on the TV news that we realised what had happened.

"The damage, the debris, the silt and the infrastructure damage that occurred was massive."

Like many others severely affected by the flooding, Gareth went back to his land a number of times, coming away each time with no idea where to begin.

The only way forward, he says, was to try and make a plan and chip away at it.

"We decided we'd just try and get one thing done every day to make us feel we were achieving something and that's what we did. We did that for probably a good three or four weeks or more, and slowly things began to happen."

Getting the family settled has been a priority, says Gareth. He and his wife Anneliese have moved to four different places in the last five months, and then decided it was best to find a long-term home to give the family stability.





“We’ve tried to make life as normal as we can for the kids. We take some time off and do the things we enjoy doing as a family. We have gone away for a couple of days to different places. A change of scenery gives the kids some excitement too.”

Uncertainty about the future has been the major ongoing stress for the family. The land in Pakowhai is provisionally Category 3 which means they will not be able to live there again.

“You’re running through all the scenarios and the what-ifs. We’ve been waiting for categorisation decisions and then we’re in the process of settlement decisions. Do we rebuild our business back in the same location again? All that’s going on.”

Bureaucratic delays in decision-making have been frustrating for growers keen to get on with things. It’s hard from a business point of view but “you need to make sure you don’t bring those stresses and frustrations back home,” says Gareth. “It’s a real balancing act.”

The goal now is to simplify the business and minimise risk, says Gareth.

“So what we’re doing is just minimising our risk as much as we can for now, getting some runs on the board and then hoping we can rebuild. But it’s going to take a long time. We’ve suffered a massive financial hit, we’ve lost a lot of crops. Thankfully our customers, the people we supply year round, have been fantastic and supported us extremely well.

“It was out of our hands, but we’ve just got to build back that trust and confidence with them as well. It’s one day at a time. We need a good season, all the growers do.”

The mental toll has been the biggest thing to deal with, he says.

“You have to try and switch off and find something that doesn’t have anything to do with what’s going on. It’s difficult because in farming and growing you’re immersed in it 24/7.”

“What was amazing to see was how everyone worked together, the barriers came down and **everyone helped out to get through such a tough situation.**”

“It doesn’t have to be amazing, just something different. Go to the rugby or sit down and watch the V8s on TV. Just do something that recharges your batteries. And of course get out and have some fun with the kids and family.”

A key thing which Gareth has learned from this hardship is not to be afraid to ask for help.

“It may be just sitting down with someone and having a chat. It doesn’t have to be anyone official, just a friend or a neighbour. All our neighbours are in bad shape as well, so we’re all going through the same thing. It’s good to get that weight off your chest. We share our strategies for getting through this and we bounce ideas off one another. That’s been really helpful for me, probably it’s the thing that has made the biggest difference.”

“It’s very easy to stay away from people, especially in our game. You can sit in your tractor and go up and down the paddock and stew over it all day, but all you do is wear yourself down.

“I think you have to open yourself up and actually talk with others about it. They might have different thoughts on how to deal with an issue. The big one for me is to try and simplify the issues that you’ve got and pick the easy ones first. The big ones will deal with themselves as time goes on. You don’t have a lot of control over them, but get on with the little things – do one thing a day so you can shorten your list and you feel like you’ve achieved something.”

Gareth has been involved in horticulture since he left school and has owned his own business for the last 15 years. He loves the day-to-day challenges of the business.

“The amount of effort you put in is what you get back. It comes with its challenges obviously, but it’s a good industry to be in.”

When all is said and done, Cyclone Gabrielle is “just another challenge, and that’s how I’ve thought about it too. As growers we’ve always got headaches. Mother Nature’s always going to throw something at us. This ain’t the first storm, but this is certainly on a monumental scale. We’re a little bit battle-hardened, but you know, we’re good at picking ourselves back up and getting going again. As farmers and growers I think we’re really good at doing that.”

If there’s a silver lining to the cyclone, it’s been the way the local grower community has supported one another, and the wider community has stepped up too.

“I’ve been really amazed how organisations and growers have come together. Prior to Gabrielle we all stayed in our own sand-pits and we didn’t tend to share too much. We did our own thing.

“What was amazing to see was how everyone worked together, the barriers came down and everyone helped out to get through such a tough situation. I’d really like that to continue. It’s great for our industry.” 



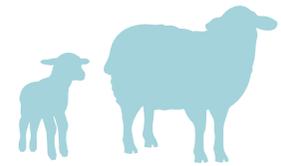
**‘We will deal with
whatever it takes’**

SAM AND SARAH JOHNSTON

Sam and Sarah Johnston run a 900-hectare sheep and beef farm on the eastern side of Masterton in a small area called Tinui. The farm is made up of hill country, some steeper slopes and about 150 hectares of flat land. When Cyclone Gabrielle swept through on February 14, most of their 45 paddocks of flat land were under water. Communications were down for several days, roads blocked, paddocks flooded, fences demolished and slips everywhere. Their house was not flooded but the houses of some of their friends were.

“I am a farmer and I don’t want to do anything else. So I have to find a way. The challenge is to get through this.”

– Sam



When a cyclone hits

Sam: “When Cyclone Gabrielle hit, it rained and it rained and it just kept raining. There’s about 150 hectares of flats and it pretty much wiped them out. We ended up with just nine paddocks out of 45. We got all the stock off which was really good, that was the major thing. There were plenty of slips, plenty of fences smashed on the hill, which we are only getting to fix up now, nearly seven months later.”

The adrenaline was pumping

Sam: “We’re prone to flooding through the flats here but we didn’t think the flood water was going to get that high. Adrenaline kicked in. We could watch it from our house, we got some good video footage and then the stories began coming through about what else was happening in our district. To be honest, it was exciting to start with but then you realise what’s really happened and the huge workload involved to get it back to where it was. The reality sinks in.

In 1991 there was a similar flood and I was just an 11-year-old so that was exciting too at the time. As a kid I didn’t really have to clean up the mess. I just carried on with my life. It’s in my blood knowing that floods are going to come here and it just depends on how bad they are really.”

Sarah: “In those first days it was a matter of working out what you should be doing. Our farm was hit, and the water went right up to the doorstep of [Sam’s] Mum and Dad’s house and everywhere around them. The school was hit and our friends’ houses were hit.



Sam was leading the fire brigade at the time as well so it was a matter of working out where you could put yourself. We knew that our stock were okay, the farm was broken but it would be alright for a bit. Obviously we needed to fence off where those big slips came over the road and things like that. That was sorted pretty quickly but then we spent a lot of time down at school and in the fire brigade and checking if Sam's Mum and Dad were okay and checking on friends."

Sam: "It sounds odd but it was quite a social time because we were seeing lots of people and getting lots of things to do. And then that wears off."

What helped to get us through? Talking a lot about stuff with my wife and just checking in with one another to make sure we were all right. And just doing it at a speed that we could handle really."

Make a plan

Sam: "The main thing is working out what you can handle realistically and then making a plan. That's what gives you a little bit of a kick. The cyclone has happened. Financially it's pretty tough, but that's farming. With every event maybe you get better at dealing with it. But you wouldn't want this to happen all the time, would you?"

Sarah: "Communication was a big thing in those very early days. We lost internet power, our landline was

out for two weeks. But coming here [a high point on the farm] where we knew we had cell phone reception and meeting a couple of people was amazing. To see people, talk to people and work out who needed help was huge. We could respond as a community, link in with people around here and support each other."

When power came back on and wi-fi came back on, people would share information about lots of things, including the grants that were available. Because you were so involved in what you were doing, you didn't necessarily get the time to have a look at the admin side of things. There's still a huge amount of work involved in doing the insurance and things like that. That's still all happening. The people whose houses were completely flooded, from what I understand they still don't know what's happening."

Sam: "Because the cyclone hit in February, there was a real opportunity to get some stuff sorted before it got too wet. We got some insurance money, we got some grant money, we had a plan and we got people in to help. It has been only in the last couple of months that it's dragged on with it being a wet winter."

Check in on your mates

Sarah: "Checking on your mates is really important. Sam was quite overwhelmed by the amount of people who contacted him to try and help in whatever way they could. Whether that was someone calling in with a box of beer and some baking, or someone with a digger they could bring out, or someone who could just come and pull stuff off fences."

Sam: "We were in a situation where we knew we couldn't tackle it all by ourselves. People who were friends might have a skill that would be perfect for helping out. And they felt like they really were helping, which is great. Even so, when the mates came out early on, it was too wet to do anything. So I said: "do you

know what, we just need to go and have a few beers and have a laugh and know we'll get through." I haven't seen some of them since the flood and when I next see them I'll be thanking them for doing that. They might not have felt they helped but they really did."

Kids want to help too

Sarah: "Our kids are old enough they will remember this. They were lucky – they had a house to come back to. Some of the kids' houses were flooded, they lost all their toys and everything. When these kids told their stories at our makeshift school, the others could get a feel for what it was like to have their houses flooded – how they suddenly realised the storm was going to flood their house and they had to race into their room with a little backpack and grab their things and get out. The other kids wanted to be able to give them something, because they imagined what it must be like to lose everything, so they brought in whatever they could from home."

"Farming is for me"

Sam: "I would say we're probably 50% of the way through it. We have a plan, we've been able to borrow some money off the bank to get some fences rebuilt – stuff that I don't have to do now that I physically would have done a few years back. We'll come out of this obviously financially not better off and there's been a lot of stress attached to it, but it's reassuring to know the farm will have had a bit of a kickstart to be able to recover."

I am a farmer and I don't want to do anything else. So I have to find a way. The challenge is to get through this. What choice do I have? There's only one option for us and that's to keep going. That's how I think. And I probably feel different about things now than if it happened 10 years ago. Decisions I'm making now, I wouldn't have made 10 years ago.

I just believe that farming is for me and I will always find a way to get through. That's what drives me. It's exciting. That's the challenge. Throw shit at us and we will find a way. We will deal with whatever it takes to farm. Every farm tells a different story, whether you've been here for 100 years, whether you've only been here for two years, and if you can get that, then you'll be able to see how you can keep going.

Dealing with an event like this is tough, the toughest part of farming. But dealing with major setbacks is part of farming.

If we have another event like this, hopefully there will be systems in place at a community level to cope a bit better. At the fire brigade we are getting a thing called an E-pod – a survival container. People might purchase generators to be a step ahead. And with the rebuild on farms, there are learnings that make you feel it's progress."

Lot of support out there

Sarah: "There's a lot of support out there. Sarah Donaldson (Rural Support Trust) has spent so much time in Tinui helping people one-on-one and organising community events. They ran a comedy night just the other night. They organised a men's bus trip recently to get the blokes off the farm. Our Taskforce Green are out wanting to help out on farms and our 'kitchen fairies', two local ladies, Amy and Bec – their homemade meals and baking have helped so many people."

Sam: "I suppose I'm learning as I'm going about mental health and stuff like that. It's putting yourself in a position that you can make use of these people, see how they can add value. You've got to be in the right headspace to be able to deal with something like this." 



Small victories along the way

ROGER AND MEL WINCHESTER

When nature throws its worst at you, you can't sort it out in a week or even a month. Recovery is a long-term job so make the most of the small victories along the way, say Roger and Mel Winchester.

When Valentine's Day dawned, Roger Winchester thought the farm he manages in the Tinui Valley east of Masterton had escaped the worst of Cyclone Gabrielle.

"The forecast was really bad for the night before. When I got up in the morning the gauge was 80mls and I thought we'd escaped it.

"But when I was having breakfast the rain just set in and got heavier and heavier and didn't give up. By about half past nine, it was full scale and by 11 o'clock the gauge had overflowed. It was over 300 mls by that stage."

Roger and Mel Winchester farm, in equity partnership with Bill Maunsell, a 920 hectare property on reasonably steep hill country in the Tinui Valley, running 4,000 ewes and 500 cattle. They escaped Cyclone Hale when it came through but got a big lashing from Cyclone Gabrielle.

The drive was flooded and the property completely cut off from the road. All main access was out and they were without power for five days.

"I was able to get a bike through a slip so when it did stop I had a bike above the worst of the trouble," remembers Roger. "I was able to walk over the slips and access the rest of the property that way. There were over a hundred fences with slips through or slips underneath them."

Thankfully their buildings and yards were undamaged, but an immediate challenge was to deal with the power outage, says Mel.

"That's when the community stepped up. Our valley's very good at communicating and we get along and do lots of things together. So there was a bit of shuffling of generators until we could get out."

When the water receded, the farm had to contend with numerous slips and silt.

"You couldn't access through it with bikes. Even the horses struggled. People were trying to use horses, but it was too much hard work for them at times too.

"Within a few days we realised we weren't going to be able to muscle in and get it sorted in a month. It just wasn't going to happen. It was a case of 'do what you can, where you can'. There are areas that six months later are still too wet to get machine fence lines done."





In the aftermath of a severe weather event like Gabrielle, the key to mental survival is prioritising, says Roger. It was simply overwhelming so there was no point in stressing, he says.

“We just sat back for a little bit and worked out what we could do. House water was from a spring so it was taken out for a start, so that was a top priority.

“You prioritise the stuff you can do and you’ve got to forget about the rest. You have to realise that perfection is not attainable.

“It was probably mid-May before I realised I had some control. Over the early part of the winter, we put a reasonably big effort into getting our farm electrics going again. Once we’d done that and got the boundaries sorted, it became more manageable. From a hundred things to deal with we now had 20 and it just seemed more do-able. Every time you knocked another one off, it was satisfying. Small victories. After the first couple of months it seemed manageable again.”

Roger and Mel agree that the straw that almost broke the camel’s back was not the cyclone itself but the ongoing post-cyclone wet weather through April and May, followed by a relentlessly wet winter. It didn’t let up until August when the first signs of spring arrived.

“It was bloody wet in June and July,” says Roger. “By the beginning of August it was getting very tedious. It sure didn’t help getting things fixed. But as bad as the cyclone was, it did present opportunities. We had lots of feed during the autumn and stock were healthy. You had to recognise that.”

What are the lessons learned from going through something as challenging as this?

“You need to be able to let stuff go and your repairs don’t have to be spot on,” says Roger. “Adequate is enough.”

“You need achievable goals,” says Mel. “Look at the big picture and break it down. And give yourself more time to get things done. Everything takes longer. You might have to walk, you’re not going to achieve the same amount you would expect to in a day. So you’ve got to give yourself flexibility.”

Roger has an even temperament for dealing with whatever nature can throw at him. But he admits the long-term uncertainty that goes with farming causes him more anxiety.

“Stuff like the cyclone doesn’t get on top of me. As long as you’re able to get out there and achieve something. Everything you achieve feels good. To be honest what’s in front of us is probably more daunting than what’s behind us.”

What lies ahead are the inevitable uncertainties that go with farming – the prospect of a drought over summer and the current global slowdown in values.

“You’re looking forward and hoping that you do the right thing. Getting what’s behind us fixed needs to be done, but preparing for what’s potentially in front of us is more important.”

You can’t stick your head in the sand, says Roger. “The markets are what they are. We’ve been forewarned

“You need to be able to let stuff go and your repairs don’t have to be spot on. **Adequate is enough.**”

about the change in the weather patterns and everybody realises that the tap does turn off at some stage so it’s quite likely it will be a reasonably difficult summer.

“My approach is to just try and be ahead of the game as far as marketing stock and keeping stock in good condition.”

The challenges though have never dented Roger’s enthusiasm for farming.

“I’ve never had another job that I’ve wanted to do. I was a shearer for 20 years to get into this position. I always knew what my goal was.

“I’ve never really felt like I’ve been going to work for the last 20 years. I’ve enjoyed it.” But he notes wryly, “there’s been things in the last three or four months that have taken the shine off.”

For Mel, touching base with others in the local community in a similar situation has lifted the spirits.

“About six weeks after the event, we got everyone together. We had a potluck dinner just to make sure everyone was all good and have a laugh and let the pressure valve off. And even just talking over the fence helps. When you see your neighbours, or you ring to say, ‘hey I’ve got some of yours’ [stock]. We always debrief on the phone and have a yarn and everyone realises, ‘hey we’re all in the same situation’. We had a kind of African plain of free grazing for a while, until the boundaries were sorted.”

Roger finds some respite on the local golf course and continued to go there even when the course was

damaged and not really playable.

“They were just meeting up to chew the fat,” comments Mel. “You need something to get you off the farm. We’ve had a few mini-breaks. It’s a good idea to have something to look forward to, whether it’s just going out to dinner with friends or going to one of the things the Rural Support Trust has put on.”

Another tip from Roger and Mel is to work to your strengths, especially when the pressure is on.

Says Mel: “You have to play to your strengths through these sort of adverse events. Roger’s strength is on the ground. It’s not the paperwork side of things. So that’s where I take over. You get through as a team. Because while he’s out there battling, I’m trying to deal with insurance and funding applications, and find ways to contain expenses.”

“Both roles are very important,” says Roger. “Mel’s contribution has been huge. I think if someone was trying to do it all, they would definitely be underwater.”





Rolling with it

Being able to accept change and “roll with it” has helped orchardist Stu Burns get through many tough times.



STEWART BURNS

The fruitgrowers of Hawkes Bay had two of the wettest summers on record to contend with even before Cyclone Gabrielle came hurtling through.

“The last two years have been a real struggle. Summer fruit doesn’t like the rain,” says Stu Burns who runs Camelot Fresh Fruit Company, a family business in Twyford, Hawke’s Bay. The company grows peaches, plums, nectarines, apricots, cherries and apples for the domestic and export markets.

“We’ve been in the game a long time,” says Stu.

“Hawke’s Bay definitely has had many great years but the last two have been hard on the staff. It’s been hard to get the work done and get the right results. Quite often you just had to choose the best way through, knowing it wasn’t going to be perfect.”

Then came Cyclone Gabrielle which “unfolded unbelievably.” Stu was at a concert in Auckland but headed home when he saw the storm coming.

“We never imagined it would be anything like what it was. We lost communications at the start of the day, so we had no idea what was going on. It was frightening. My heart went out to the growers who had to leave their houses and properties and were more seriously affected than we were.”

After the cyclone passed through, usual orcharding practice went out the window while they attended to the basics to keep the operation going, says Stu.

“We had nine days without power, which was unprecedented for us, and we couldn’t pack any fruit. We had cool stores that weren’t functional, so we had to find sources of cool storage that still had power in Hawke’s Bay.”

Even though they had escaped the worst, the chaos caused by the cyclone was a huge stress for the business and for Stu and his family. They immediately cut back on spending, knowing that the cyclone would have a major financial impact. And they took measures to cope with the stresses.

“We took it quietly. We shut down to basically just doing what needed to be done and took weekends off. We also made sure that the team and everyone around us was okay and that their families were okay and helped out where we could. We gave staff time off to go and do their own thing and look after their own communities where needed.

“My wife Pam and I just spent some quiet time at home really, absorbing the impact of it all, and trying to get past that.”

Bad as things were, Stu was well aware that it was worse for other growers who were very seriously impacted.





“In some ways we had survivor’s guilt. We believed that we had done okay and we had survived this big event but we felt very concerned for our neighbours and growers in the region. We weren’t at their threshold of damage.”

Stu has a regular business coach who helped out in the aftermath of the cyclone, running an external eye over things and helping them to keep focused.

“We’ve had a business coach for nearly 12 years and it really pays off when you go through something like this. You have someone who knows you well. I’m a sole director and we’re a family business. We don’t have a big structure with a lot of people sitting around a board table so having someone in an advisory role who knows us well has certainly been helpful.”

Dealing with challenging situations is not out of the ordinary for growers, says Stu.

“That is probably a strength of fruitgrowers and growers in general. We normally face struggles and challenges. How you respond depends on where your individual business is at and how much capacity you have to absorb the pressure.”

However Stu believes resilience among the growers has probably worn a bit thin after the last couple of years.

“We’ve done the good fight, we’ve fought on for a couple of years but you need a bit of relief with your operations and with the weather. We’ve just had three weeks of fine weather now, and it’s making a huge difference to morale. We feel like we can get somewhere.”

Once over the shock of Cyclone Gabrielle, it has been a case of “keeping on going, making short-term rather than long-term goals, and just keeping on hitting those weekly targets.”

To help keep on top of things, Stu has made it a priority for managers and staff to have weekends off.

“We organise our work around that. It’s important for us as a business that we can take the weekend off, knowing that next week is going to come round and we’re going to get on with whatever needs to be done then. That is certainly helping us deal with the stresses and pressures of the work.”

Stu also uses visualisation as a way of confronting challenges. He sees himself getting through to the other side, knowing that the business has survived numerous challenges in the past.

“I think to myself ‘we’ve got through this so many times, we can get through it again and we’ll be on the other side and how good does that feel.’ Visualisation allows you to live with the feeling of already achieving what’s



“Visualisation allows you to live with the feeling of already achieving what’s ahead of you. That’s an approach that works for me, even when we are dealing with difficult macro issues.”

ahead of you. That’s an approach that works for me, even when we are dealing with difficult macro issues. We may have to move things around and reprioritise, but we know we can get through this because we have done it before and we’ll find a way to do it again.”

Having been in the game for a long while, Stu reckons that being able to accept change and “roll with it” is a big asset. He has brought plenty of change into the company “and that probably helps me when things go pear-shaped, because we can change, we can adapt, we’ll do it differently, and that’s okay.”

When you have to deal with something as major as a cyclone, you have to refocus afterwards and look at what’s realistic, he says.

“Don’t expect it to be business as usual. Sometimes things have changed so much that you can’t do the things you had planned before. So make a new plan and move on. You have to be able to adjust. There are times you have to be more pragmatic than perfectionist.”

“Good is better than perfect at the moment. Good is actually good enough when you’re fighting uphill and you’ve got significant challenges.”

One of the home truths about surviving tough times is not trying to soldier on alone, bearing all the burden yourself, says Stu.

“You’ve got to make sure you’ve got people around you who will support you. That’s probably more important than anything because there will be times when you’ll doubt your own judgement. Then you need somebody else who can support you.”

A partner comes in handy in a crisis, he says with a smile.

“You don’t want to be going through anything like this on your own. A partner is vital in being able to talk openly and honestly about what’s going on. That’s the balance. You can’t live in a fantasy that pretends it’s all wonderful. You have to be able to say how you feel right now, and feel supported in that.” 



Tips on building resilience

KANE BRISCO

How you react to challenges has a huge impact on how well you manage the ups-and-downs of farming, says Taranaki dairy farmer Kane Brisco, author of top-selling book *Tools For The Top Paddock*. Farmstrong asked him to share his tips for staying calm under pressure.

It's been a challenging year for many farmers. How do you navigate tough times?

"Asking for help and advice is a big one. I think one of the things farmers struggle with sometimes is asking for help or seeking out knowledge to help them get through tough times. It's because that Kiwi 'number eight wire' mentality is so deeply ingrained in our mindset and how we approach farming.

But if we really want to be more resilient and tougher and better, we need to start using different tools and different skills, and a big part of being resilient is using the people around you when the going gets tough. Bringing in their knowledge and skills is a huge way to develop your own resilience.

One of the things I do now is that after I've been through a challenge on farm, I go back and make sure I take the lessons out of it. I take some time to reflect and learn from it. That way it feels like you're doing something proactive, because in farming you know there's always going to be another challenge coming."

How do you manage the day-to-day pressures and workload on farm?

"The biggest thing I do is put pen to paper, so I'm getting what's whirring round my head out onto a piece of paper. It can be as simple as listing your jobs for tomorrow or brainstorming and problem-solving something that's causing you stress.

You're much less likely to lose sleep over things when they are listed out as facts in front of you like that. It stops you getting too negative.

The other big thing is having a pressure release valve. For me, sport and exercise are huge. Getting off-farm as often as I can, getting out and doing something, whether it's coffee with a mate or a beer down the pub or playing a game of squash. Just taking that mental rest off-farm is huge."

How do you deal with a bad day?

"When I'm having a bad day I have a perspective check. I've got a few experiences that I relate back to and give myself a comparison. One of those is thinking about my nana when she was farming. She left school when she was 13 back around 1940 and I just think about what life would've been like for her on-farm and that my problem, in the grand scheme of things, probably isn't that bad!

That's a really good way for me to put a full stop on a problem or stuff-up. Let's face it when you've had a bad day it's usually about something you've stuffed up! It's a lot easier to put a full stop on it when you've got good perspective."



When life gets busy on-farm, it's easy to neglect the basics of keeping well. What's your take on that?

"If you ask a farmer what's the most important tool you've got – a lot of people would say the animals or the milkshed or the tractor or the working dogs, but how good are those without you? I reckon it's that bloody simple. You are the biggest cog in the machine and if you can look after that cog, oil it and grease it properly and pay it some love, then everything else around it is going to be working so much better.

For me, your own wellbeing on farm is absolutely fundamental and has to be a priority. You've got to be in the right space physically and mentally to farm well. Physical and mental fitness is hugely important on-farm and it's all driven by physical actions – what you eat, what you drink, your movement throughout the day and even the people you hang out with – they're all physical things that feed into that mental wellness."

What about when it all turns to custard? Any advice for navigating really challenging times?

"I think it's important to control the controllables. It's a huge amount of extra stress to take on if you're worrying about the things you can't control or have no influence over. So prioritise the things you can control and influence.

I'm a massive fan of listing out all the things that need to be done and then prioritising those so you have a plan about what you attack first. It's a bit like eating an elephant, it can feel overwhelming if you look at the elephant, but if you break down the task ahead into legs, tail and body it becomes something much more achievable. I think it's important for people in bad situations to break down the work into achievable amounts so they're not overwhelmed by the scale of everything."

How do you make sure you're in the right headspace to make good decisions on-farm?

"I think a lot of it comes down to your mindset – it's all about that 'survive versus thrive' mindset. You know, when you get stuck in the survive mindset you feel as if everything just happens to you and life passes you by. You feel as if you're just there on-farm and trying to survive each day. It's not a very positive place to be.

But I've learnt that there's always something you can do to help you thrive where you have a purpose, a plan and a process to start creating your life going forwards, rather than just letting it happen to you.

I admit, it can be a hard thing to do when you're in that survival mindset, but there's always something you can do that will make tomorrow better for you. It's really important to try and be aware of that and understand that.

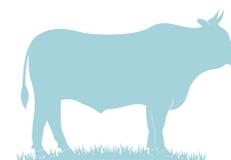
I've also learnt it's really important for me to have balance in my life and work on the business and not just on the farm. Taking time out of my week to sit down and problem-solve in a good, positive headspace has been really crucial to making good decisions."

What does being Farmstrong mean to you?

"It's about dealing with the full picture. Not just concentrating on being a good farmer, but being a great person off-farm as well. I reckon they're both intertwined. Being a good, well-rounded person generally leads to being a great farmer on-farm."

Why are you involved in Farmstrong?

"I like Farmstrong because I share the same mindset about being proactive about my mental and physical health. I think being proactive rather than reactive is hugely important to being a successful farmer. I think Farmstrong's resources and knowledge and how they're formatted is really easy to understand. I also think they've got a great set-up to really help farmers on a massive scale. To me that's super cool and that's what I like to get behind." 



"It's a huge amount of stress to take on if you're worrying about things that you can't control or have no influence over. **So prioritise the things you can control and influence.**"

'The grass always grows back'

Farmstrong ambassador Sam Whitelock paid a visit to flood-hit farmers and growers in the Counties and northern Waikato areas to check how they were going. Here's how it all went down.

First stop was the Aka Aka community hall where locals took a morning off clean-up duties and farm work to have a catch-up and hear how Sam has managed setbacks not only in his sporting career, but also during the Christchurch earthquakes.

The locals fired all sorts of questions his way about what it takes to stay mentally and physically well in the face of a significant challenge. It's a topic that's top of mind for many in the light of flood damage to the low-lying area, says local dairy farmer Jo Sands.

"It's been challenging. We've done it quite hard here. The first flood in January, we got 198mls of rain in one night and then more after that. The water couldn't get away and we had flooding all over the farm. All the drains were overflowing. The water hung round for three or four days so the grass died off and then the cows didn't want to eat the grass.



Farmstrong ambassador Sam Whitelock meets local farmers and growers in Aka Aka.

“We also had a lot of lame cows from having wet feet all the time. Then came the cyclone and then more flooding. I think we’ve only had five to seven fine days all summer, so we haven’t really had summer. We’re still waiting for it,” she laughs. “It just feels as if you’re fighting with the elements all the time.”

It’s a similar story further south in Onewhero where farmers gathered at the local rugby club rooms to meet Sam. Kate Reese, a sheep and beef farmer in Wairamarama in north Waikato, describes the impact of the floods there.

“Our community has had a tough time. The initial downpour and then Cyclone Gabrielle really affected us. We even lost a member of our community which was terrible. A lot of our dairy farmers were impacted by overflow from the Waikato River and most of their farms ended up under water.”

Kate says increased communication and connection is something her community had been working on for several years and that work is now paying off.

“I think the thing to remember mentally is that the grass always grows back. As long as your stock are contained and everyone is safe, you can put up temporary fencing and the grass will grow back. There will be a light at the end of the tunnel. So, make sure you get off-farm and talk with other farmers so you realise everyone’s in the same boat and keep trying to do your extra-curricular stuff, like kids’ sport, to try and keep things normal as much as possible.”

Sam talked about his experience of the Canterbury earthquakes and the insights it gave him on getting through a lengthy recovery process. He particularly stressed the importance of people looking after themselves after the initial adrenaline rush of dealing with a crisis subsides.



Sam shares a cuppa with Aka Aka dairy farmer Jo Sands who says, “It’s been challenging. We’ve done it quite hard here.”

“I remember after the earthquake, for the first couple of weeks, a lot of people got through purely on adrenalin but then, bang, the pressure of it all suddenly just hit them and they fell flat. The thing I noticed is that the people who took the time to connect with others and reset physically and mentally often came out better than the people who just kept on going and going. Obviously cyclones, floods and earthquakes are completely different things, but it’s still about getting through something exceptional.”

Sam intends to return to farming after his rugby career and also shared how his own farm in the Hawke’s Bay has been affected by the cyclones with damaged land and fencing. He was quick to point out the importance of sticking together as a community during a crisis.

“I’ve heard from the manager on our place that since the cyclones, they’ve actually met all the neighbours now and the community feels tighter than what it



Sam chatting with farmers outside the Aka Aka community hall.

was before. Ideally, that would happen before one of these events, but we all lead busy lives and we're all time-poor, so that's why I appreciate people coming along today. I know it's not easy to get off-farm, but it's great that you are here. It's an important part of getting through something like this."

Sam also stressed the importance of people pacing themselves for the long haul.

"I know a disaster like this affects some more than others. It could take years for some people to get up and running again, just like it was for us in Christchurch. The important thing is to pace yourself, so you don't burn out. When the earthquake happened, as a team we all went round to a team mate's place which had been badly hit by liquefaction. It took us five wheelbarrows and two days just to clean his back yard!

That was the case for thousands and thousands of others too."

"You soon learnt, it was about taking things day by day. As anyone in farming knows, there's always a to-do list that never gets completed. So it's a case of being realistic about how much you're trying to do. Decide what's the most important thing and just focus on that. That was my experience of the quakes."

Sam also advised locals not to neglect the 'basics' such as sleep, nutrition and scheduling downtime. "As well as looking after your neighbours, it's important to look after yourself – make sure you keep talking to others and take time to stop and reset mentally so you're not burning out. If you're working hard, even a ten minute break gives you a chance to 'get outside your brain'. You can't just live on adrenalin

“The thing I noticed is that **the people who took the time to connect with others and reset physically and mentally often came out better** than the people who just kept on going and going.”

– Sam Whitelock, Farmstrong Ambassador

the whole time. That’s something I learnt during the earthquakes. You can’t get by on adrenalin and no sleep.”

Kate Reese agrees. “It’s important for people to remember they’re not invincible and that everyone has a limit to their energy. As Sam said, people’s natural reaction is to get in there and fix the problem and find solutions because that’s what farmers do, but long term that can have a real impact on families and relationships when people get tired. It’s about having those conversations within families to make sure people aren’t burning themselves out.”



Sam coaching kids at the Onewhero rugby club.

Jo Sands liked what she heard as well. “It was brilliant. It makes you stop and think about what it does take to get through something like this. It was good because Sam’s obviously been through something similar. It will be a big help for anyone who’s young or new to it all. It gives you perspective.”

As if to illustrate that life must go on no matter what the elements throw at us, Sam finished his visit by running a surprise coaching session for the local kids at the Onewhero rugby club. He took time to run them through tackling and passing drills as well as posing for selfies and signing autographs. And yes, it was raining. 🌧️



Sheep and beef farmer Kate Reese: “It’s important for people to remember they’re not invincible and that everyone has a limit to their energy.”

INSIGHT STEVE KEARNEY



Surge and recover

“The mistake a lot of us make is that we assume we can just wake up each day, hit 100%, stay at 100% all day, go to bed, wake up the next day and do the same thing over and over again. When in fact what we know makes for the best performance, the most sustainable performance, is a rhythm of surge and recover, surge and recover, an oscillating approach. When you are doing your planning, it’s really important to put in there some downtime, time to recover, time to connect with friends, time to connect with those you love.

“And the important thing to remember is that your mind will tell you that you’re too tired to connect with others, that you don’t have time, that you’re not good company right now, so don’t do it. When your mind whispers those things to you, ignore it and do it anyway, because doing the things you love, connecting with the people who are important to you, all of that will build your capacity in the long term.”

Signs to look out for

“The first sign that people are not coping is they go flat. They don’t enjoy the things they used to enjoy. My own favourite thing to do is kayak fishing. If I stop

enjoying kayak fishing, my wife gets worried very quickly. And, you know, this shows up more in men. This kind of flatness, detachment, what we call the ‘thousand-yard stare’ or the ‘empty shell’ kind of thing. And the thing is, when everyone’s busy and everyone is stressed, you don’t notice that stuff. You’ll notice someone who’s crying or who’s tearful, and those are important indicators to notice. But the person who’s just flat and you feel everything is muffled, that’s the person worth paying attention to.

“Other warning signs to look out for ...Someone who’s really fatigued, because often that tags to sleep problems. Sleep problems are like the canary in a coal mine when it comes to wellbeing stuff, so always pay attention to someone who’s not sleeping well because if you aren’t sleeping well, then things are going to get harder no matter where they are already.”

Who do you want to be?

“One thing that can make a difference is having a sense of who you want to be as you go through a challenging time. In defence we talk about a command ethos – this is the kind of leader I’m going to be in difficult moments. It might be you want to be disciplined, reliable, compassionate, warm, supportive, whatever. Who is the kind of person you want to be?”



Steve Kearney is a clinical psychologist and Chief Mental Health Officer, NZ Defence Force. These reflections from Steve are taken from The Big Check-in, an online event to support rural people affected by Cyclone Gabrielle.

“And then in difficult moments when you can’t control stuff, you’re still going to be this kind of person and conduct yourself this kind of way. That makes a difference because you can find meaning in choosing who you are in small moments. That allows you to keep putting one foot in front of another and you still like who you are, even though you’re not achieving the things that you would like to achieve.”

Managing and monitoring anger

“Anger is often masking some other emotion that might be more problematic or more difficult in the long term. Anger in men is often an indicator of depression. And the trap with that is that we push people away when we need them most because we’re irritable and angry and frustrated, and that makes things harder in the long term. So if you notice that one of your mates is like that and it’s not passing, that’s a really important cue to pick up on. That’s the time to go and be intrusively friendly or roll around and drag them off the farm and get them out fishing, or whatever. Anger is really important to notice in your mates as a sign that something is not okay.”

Transition rituals after work

“I’ve got a mate who’s on a farm. Every day when he finishes work, he’s quite deliberate. He comes in, takes his work clothes off for the day, has a shower, and when he’s in the shower, if his mind goes to work stuff, he brings it back. He deliberately parks the work stuff. ‘Okay, I need to be at home with the kids’. Over time his brain and his body have learned that this is a cue to put his attention somewhere else, and that can really make a difference. Shift in priorities, shift in attention.”

“One thing that can make a difference is having a sense of **who you want to be** as you go through a challenging time.”



**'We are stronger
together'**

SARAH DONALDSON

Make the most of the strengths and experience of the farming community when disaster hits, says Sarah Donaldson, clinical psychologist and area co-ordinator for the Wairarapa Rural Support Trust.

How did the weather events affect your area?

“Much of our coastal areas and farms were badly affected by Cyclone Hale. Then, in our Tinui district in particular, we saw even more devastation with Cyclone Gabrielle which included lost homes, buildings and stock.”

How have people coped?

“People have done amazingly well considering what they’ve had to face and endure, but at times it’s really challenging. Even when people are struggling, it’s helpful to remember for the most part they’re having a normal reaction to an abnormal event. It’s different for different people – there is no one way to cope or react and some have more on their plate than others.”

What are the stages that people typically go through with a traumatic event like a cyclone?

“First there’s the pre-stage or anticipation stage, particularly for people who have been through something like a flood before.

When they hear there’s a cyclone coming, that can mean anxiety for some, especially if they have prior

experiences. They may not be sleeping well, anticipating what might be coming. Others are blissfully unaware.

Then there’s the shock and disbelief phase – the stress hormones kick in to a really elevated level as people try to process what is happening and what they are going to do next.

This is a really intense stage which is not sustainable for long periods. People are often very energised, running around doing a lot and trying to sort things out.

Then, potentially, a crash may come with the next phase – people may feel flat, lose some of their zing as physiologically their body comes down when the immediate threat is over. Some are over the worst, for others it can be a long haul and for them fatigue is common. They may feel a bit flat when they recognise the extent of the damage and the wider implications of what has happened. The realisation that there is no quick fix can be disheartening.

There might be more anxiety spikes. People are going along okay and then it rains again and their anxiety shoots up again, especially if they’ve experienced a life-threatening or stock-threatening situation. After Cyclone Gabrielle, it just kept raining and raining. That was really hard for people trying to do recovery work and was taxing mentally.

Being in a prolonged state of elevated stress can roll over into other things. If it gets to the point where it’s impacting your sleep and daily functioning, that’s a sign you’ve exhausted your normal coping strategies.

“Attack those things that **protect your mood** and help **aid your motivation.**”

Maybe it's time to see your GP or get some other practical or professional help. I'm always big on sleep being your foundation.”

What strategies do you recommend to help people get through?

“Coming out of that ‘head down, bum up’ state to do the helicopter view for planning is really key, pausing and deliberately slowing down to get out of that sped-up mode into a steady, sustainable approach. That can be quite challenging at times but it can also help people to prioritise and plan effectively.

It also helps to try and break things down into manageable chunks – where do I need to put my mental and physical energy immediately and what can I come back to later?

People find that ticking off what they have achieved, and acknowledging that as important as they go, helps keep a positive outlook. ‘I got that fence up again’ or ‘we’ve managed to clear the silt from there’. That sense of achievement makes a big difference when there’s a long list that’s easy to be daunted by.

Another thing is to adjust expectations – it’s going to take time and things might be different or temporary or less ideal for a while.”

People are often slow to ask for help, even in a crisis. What do you say to them?

“Sometimes an event exhausts your own resources so it’s practical and less daunting to have others assist.

Remember what goes around comes around. Another time you may be in a position to repay the help you have been given. It’s okay to call in extra help when you need it, whether that’s volunteers, neighbours, contractors, Taskforce Green, Rural Support or your financial, personal and professional networks.

When the brain goes into an overloaded or heightened state, problem-solving and working out next steps may not come very naturally. Sitting down and nutting it out with others can be very helpful. They may have a different perspective or ideas to navigate the challenges with you.”

How important is it to connect with others when the pressure is on?

“One of the key things that the cyclones have shown us is that people in the farming community felt really supported by one another in the months after the event. People rallied around. It’s been neat to see how conscious people are of how others in the community are doing – noticing if they are a bit flat or have a lot on their plate or are off the radar a bit. However some people will still be isolated and when we notice that in our community, we want to reach out to them and connect them with channels of support.

Trying to do some things with others can make life easier. I’ve seen that in our community – it might be doing scanning together or mustering. With that comes social interaction and banter, which is a natural stress release. We know those connections are so important. It’s easy just to keep your head

down but I can't emphasise enough how beneficial it is to connect with other people when times are tough.

Connection is probably our biggest protective factor for our well-being. But after a big event, the challenge is to keep the connection going and to be there for each other over time, not just straight after."

Any other suggestions for things that can lift the mood?

"Aside from recovery time, sleep, breaks and time for connecting, other things which help lift our mood are proactively doing small things that give you a moment of joy or calm or make you laugh out loud! Activities that lift your dopamine and serotonin levels. Feel good activities. Ask yourself, 'what did I used to do that gave me a lift?' It might be a girl or boys' night out, or a comedy show, or fishing. Often after a difficult time, those things have been put on the back burner.

Physical activities and sport give us a break away from our day-to-day environment. They physically de-stress the body and give us a mood boost. Ring-fencing time for this is a good investment to keep you going in the long run. Signing up for something different is also a good idea to break up the 'ground hog day' of ongoing recovery. Engaging in a new activity gives you something different to think about, to talk about, to look forward to. Remember 'leisure and pleasure are the antidote to stress'.

While there are things that you can't control, there are other things that are within your capabilities and influence. Put your energy into that, whether it's your team culture, your own work schedule, knowing where you are at with your own finances, looking after the basics of your own health – your nutrition, your sleep, your exercise, your social contact. These are things that you can still control. Putting energy into that is

going to keep you going in the long run.

There are always priorities on a farm but there's also what I call psychological priorities. If something is going to be a real trigger for you – that fence bordering your driveway or the silt in the garden – something which has the potential to drag your mood and your motivation down, put that up the to-do list, especially if it's stuff around home. My advice is to attack those things that protect your mood and help aid your motivation."

Taking breaks is important but is that realistic when there's so much to do?

"When there's so much to do, people can feel they've just got to keep going. But that's not sustainable for too long and performance ultimately gets compromised. You have to ring-fence some respite and breaks which not only physiologically recharge you but emotionally and socially recharge you as well.

Make sure you have time with family and friends. For instance, still make time for smoko breaks with your team or family, go to town, watch the kids' sport, go for an outing somewhere with friends who make you laugh. Have potluck dinners with neighbours and extended family get-togethers. And as a couple, make time for a break, even if it's only dinner together at the farm, or staying at the local hotel or a friend's bach.

When you have a break, your body goes into off-mode and the calming response kicks in. You have the ability to connect with whoever you're with and be present – even if it's just sitting down with your partner, family or friends to have a dinner together and have a yarn about things that are not related to the weather!" 



Love a challenge

Three weeks after Cyclone Gabrielle struck Gisborne, Vicki Crosswell began her new job as Rural Support Trust Coordinator for Tairāwhiti.

“I told the trustees I love a good challenge and they remind me of that,” she says with a laugh.

Vicki was born and bred in Gisborne and knows the people and area well. When she began visiting people on their farms, she found “a lot of tired and overwhelmed people. And lost even. They just didn’t know where to go and where to start. They had so much running through their brains.”

Just over a year later, people have come ahead by leaps and bounds, says Vicki.

“They have had an awful lot to deal with, not just the cyclones but also damage from the ongoing rains last year. With all those challenges, you have to have a level head on you and be able to look at a situation and see what the priorities are.”

A danger which Vicki has observed is that farmers become so immersed in the workload of recovery, they can lose sight of the needs of those who are helping them.

“It’s so easy to forget about the needs of your partner and kids. That’s why it’s really important to get off-farm with the family and have that family time. They are the ones supporting you through the tough times.”

And, she adds, you have to look after Number 1.

“If you are not in the right space to make the right decisions, or you don’t have much time for the wife and kids, it’s not going to work.

“You have to take time out for you. Time out is the simple things – going out for dinner, having a cup of tea in the garden, playing with the kids. Getting off the farm is even better.”

Vicki loves the job she is in and the constant connecting that goes with it. Not everyone needs the help of Rural Support but it’s amazing how even the people who say they are okay love to have a good natter. They say how grateful they are to have someone to talk to.

“It’s great to see all the community connecting that happens. There are a lot of people looking out for one another in rural areas.”

In 2024 an inaugural Shepherdess Muster was hosted in the village of Motu. The event provided rural women with the chance for a break with plenty of opportunities to socialise and participate in wellness activities.

“About 250 women attended the nearly three-day event. They walked in the gate and by the time they left they were skipping. It was amazing to see the spark back in them.”

Vicki had considerable damage to her own property. When a digger moved in to rip out an orchard and an area of native plants that had been inundated with silt, she felt the impact first-hand. It had taken 24 years to develop her gardens of natives and punga.

One day when she and her daughter Samantha were doing a radio interview, she suddenly realised she had never thought about the impact of the extreme weather on her children.

“One thing I had never done was ask my children – young adults now – how it had affected them. To hear my daughter talk about it brought tears to my eyes.”

“I think that is something that has come to the forefront for me now, how these events affect children. We know a number of them suffer from rain anxiety. It’s not all about mum and dad. It’s about the kids too. It’s so easy to overlook them.”

Vicki is encouraged by the huge progress the community has made. People are getting back on their feet but they will need to keep the focus on wellness as winter approaches.

“There’s anxiety as we come into winter because we don’t know what we are going to face. We don’t know the stability of our infrastructure and the hills are unstable. People have only just cut fresh tracks so they won’t have time to harden off.”

There will always be challenges for farmers and growers, and it’s Vicki’s job to be a ready support, especially when the going gets tough.

“I love the job. I’m very people-oriented. I love listening to people and learning and helping where I can,” she says. 🌱



**Standing on your
own two feet**

JAMIE SIMPSON

Cyclone Gabrielle wasn't supposed to hit Hawke's Bay or Gisborne.

"Civil Defence thought it was all moving up the coast. It wasn't supposed to hit us at all," says Jamie Simpson, Fire Chief at Te Karaka, a small town 30 km north-west of Gisborne.

"The biggest issue for us was the lack of accurate information. For all our modern technologies, we couldn't predict it. Once comms went down, we couldn't see that it was moving this way."

By two o'clock in the morning the river was up to ten and a half metres and the tops of the banks were eleven metres.

"We got a call-out. We knew things were happening because we had lost power, the internet, everything actually. We couldn't actually talk to anybody. We went to the school where the local Civil Defence HQ was and knew we had to do something.

"We started monitoring the river level by putting sticks in the ground because we had no other way to do it. We had to revert to 'old school' but the river was rising so fast. It was like a flash flood."

Unable to reach Civil Defence in the city, they gave the order to evacuate as the water began to seep through.

"You have no choice with the water swirling around your ankles."

The fire crew moved around the village, "knocking on doors and making as much noise as possible" to get people moving. The community gathered first at the local school and then moved to higher ground.

About half the village flooded to varying depths. There was no communication with the outside world for about five days, says Jamie. They were on their own. Search and rescue resources were focused up the coast and with slips and bridges down they got stuck up there.

The local community in Te Karaka coped well, says Jamie.

"I think small communities are actually more resilient. They weren't whinging and everybody mucked in. It's a population-based thing. We had 500 people here, they've got 30,000 in the city. The locals here are pretty resilient, they've bounced back well."

Luckily the waters receded fairly quickly and most people were able to return to their homes within a day or two. They were advised to eat what was in their fridges and freezers, and meat from the butcher's shop was available. The local store ran accounts for people to buy goods because cash was in short supply. There was no eftpos.

"We didn't starve. The shop was really good. We had to find water containers and barbecues."

Jamie has been impressed with the efforts of local iwi in helping the community get back on its feet in the months since the cyclone hit.

"They stepped in and arranged temporary housing pretty quickly. And they've arranged through government to start lifting houses to make them more flood-proof in the future.

The key learning for Jamie Simpson is that in an emergency "you have to be prepared to stand on your own two feet." 



'Get on and do'



Hawke's Bay sheep and beef farmer Patrick Crawshaw was a grand finalist in the FMG Young Farmers Competition. He shares how he's dealt with the aftermath of Cyclone Gabrielle.

PATRICK CRAWSHAW

Can you tell us a bit about your farm?

“We’re farming beef and lamb on 280 ha in Patoka, about 40 minutes west of Hastings in the Hawke’s Bay.”

What sort of damage did your farm sustain during Gabrielle?

“We were isolated from the rest of the community for five or six weeks when the bridges were out. We also lost a lot of internal access across our farm and couldn’t remedy that for a month til there was a break in the weather for the digger work. We went from 58 available paddocks down to 18 and all the challenges of dealing with that.”

What does it take to work through a disaster like that?

“There were tough moments. I’m not afraid to say there was more than one occasion when I was brought to tears over different things. The reality of it was tough. But one thing that helped me was what I had learnt through the drought of 2020 and 2021.”

What did you learn?

“That you need to take control of the things you can control. If you’ve got a plan you think you can pull off and have the capacity to do it, back yourself and do it. It could be as simple as doing a lot of little things around the farm.

The weather hasn’t always been very conducive to getting those fixes done so we’re still settling for a lot of imperfection, but I still get satisfaction from what we have been able to do – resurrecting some of the broken things. That’s what puts the light at the end of the tunnel for me.”

Any other tips?

“Another thing I learnt from the drought was to be strategic in my management and decision-making. It’s harder than it sounds when a big event like a storm happens, because all you want to do is get on and put the fences up again and get things back to normal. Like every farmer, I want to get on and do the do, but once you’ve got your essentials like water and stock containment up and running, it’s important to step back and be strategic.

As challenging as Cyclone Gabrielle has been, the rebuild is our chance to set up a new plan and try and make things better than what they were before.”

What about looking after yourself? How did the stress of the cyclone impact your health?

“When these events first happen, their impact is blurred by the adrenalin of having to respond to an emergency. One of the big challenges we had here was water for our stock so my whole focus was getting in a generator to pump water up to the top tanks and lines there. Once that was done, I could feel myself coming off this big adrenalin high and crashing down. That was my body telling me to take a breather to try and recover. That cycle happened three or four times, as we ticked off the big challenges.”

How do you sustain a long-haul recovery effort?

“Even though Cyclone Gabrielle happened a while ago, we are still living and breathing all of it. So as time has gone on, I’ve realised that workload is something that really needs to be moderated. We’re going to be

“As challenging as Cyclone Gabrielle has been, the rebuild is our chance to ... **try and make things better** than what they were before.”

dealing with these issues for two, three, five years, so it's all about being able to look out through the front windshield every day with the energy and motivation to find solutions. That means giving yourself a chance to recharge.”

What sort of mindset is helpful to get through?

“You can still ‘set high goals’, but you’ve got to be able to settle for ‘it is what it is’ at times. When you’re full of adrenaline you feel like you can conquer the world and just get on and do. But once that erodes, you’re still left with the mountain to climb.

I find it’s also important to operate in the moment rather than worrying about things that are yet to happen or have already happened. Those are things outside your control, but right there and then is where you need to be and where you can make a difference. There’s a freedom in thinking like that.”

How do you keep family life ticking over during such a pressured time?

“That was probably the hardest thing of the whole cyclone for us. We didn’t have running water at the house at first, so we flew our two little girls out to my mother-in-law’s. We were fortunate to be able to do that, but I literally broke down in tears over that.

So when the kids came back it was a breath of fresh air

for us. The difference they brought to our environment was amazing. Even though I had a mountain of problems out there with the infrastructure, once I took off the gumboots at the door, I had to stop thinking about my issues and deal with their priorities. My most pressing issue suddenly became how to get a doll dressed! Immersing myself in their world gave me that mental break from my own challenging world. That was a massive thing for me.”

What else helps you keep well?

“A big one for me is having people around that I trust who I can discuss problems with and bounce ideas off. I am deliberate about having mentors and calling them what they are so I can extract good value from them. They are often mates as well and, in reality, we all have farming mates who offer good ideas for our business.”

In the midst of it all, you entered the FMG Young Farmers competition and were a grand finalist. Why would you do that with so much on your plate?

“Yeah, it was a bit of a juggle with work and family, but we were just stoked to be there. One of the best ways to keep in a good headspace is surrounding yourself with people who are ambitious and thriving. The other competitors in the grand final were exceptional people, so I found it very motivating and energising.” 



Out the other side



Jamie and Mary Graham lost their home in Cyclone Gabrielle and a good chunk of their orchard. Just over a year later, however, it's a very different story.

Pictured: Mary and Jamie Graham with their son Patrick.



Jamie and Mary Graham have a 20-hectare citrus orchard right on the edge of the Te Arai River at Manutūkē, Gisborne. They had some damage in Cyclone Hale and so when they heard another big storm was on the way they decided to stay overnight in Gisborne.

That night the full fury of Cyclone Gabrielle hit the area.

“Our problem was the Te Arai River which blocked with logs and debris and the water backed up the valley for a kilometre or so,” says Jamie. “During the night it let go and came straight down, through the front half of the orchard and through our old kauri villa which Mary had been renovating for the last three years.”

Next morning the roads were flooded and Jamie and Mary were not able to get to the orchard. When they did make it through, Jamie says the sight that greeted them “was staggering.”

“We had silt and debris the width of the orchard and a torrent of water had come through all the windows of the house and blown out a door. We didn’t realise it was going to be that bad.

“It’s a big deal when your house has been decimated like that. It was just a horrible, horrible mess.”

A couple of guys from the Council called in shortly after and red-stickered the house. “They told us to grab what we could and go. Over the next two days we had amazing help from friends. They just backed their trailers in, no fuss, no bother, carted stuff away. That was brilliant. We were lucky we had another house in town to go to.”

With funding assistance from central government, the District Council and some other organisations, they were able to promptly get on with the clean-up, says Jamie.

It was a mad scramble for contractors. There was debris through the shelter belt and the orchard. Trees, slash and debris from the orchard were all taken down to the far end of the orchard and burnt. A lot of the younger trees had been knocked over at a 45-degree angle and had to be stood up again.

“We spent weeks in the orchard with gangs of guys, just getting into the trees, hauling out branches and scraping the silt out of the trees as best we could.”

“If you look at it now, it’s hard to tell there was a flood.”

– *Jamie Graham*



Last year’s crop was devastated, says Jamie.

“We normally pick 400-500 bins of fruit out there and we ended up with 30 bins. Ninety percent of the crop was unpickable. The silt had gone through so high up in the trees that the crop that was there was badly stained with silt.”

Fourteen months later it’s a beautiful autumn day and the orchard is well on the path to recovery. About 250 trees have been lost and replacements ordered. In the young blocks new trees have been planted so that part of the orchard is back to where it was prior to the storm. The rows have been ripped to aerate the soil and most of the silt has been cleared. The family home has been raised on piles and a major restoration is well under way. Jamie and Mary hope they will be back home in a few months.

“If you look at it now, it’s hard to tell there was a flood.”

Reflecting on what it takes to get through something like this, Jamie cites a number of factors. “A bit of age” is a big help. He’s been through Cyclone Bola, had experience hill country farming and has survived challenging economic and weather events. Friends

and family support have also made a big difference. Youngest son Patrick has returned from Australia and is helping out on the orchard.

“Family support and terrific financial help from various organisations have made it a lot easier. We’ve had great help too from soil and orchard consultants. There’s a lot of expertise out there to tap into,” says Jamie.

“But in the end, it’s happened, you have to fix it and get on with it.

“When you are in the midst of a crisis, it does seem quite overwhelming but it’s incredible now a year later we’re nearly there, so it’s not the end of the world. It’s not great to have gone through it but you will come out the other side.”

In the end it helps to keep a bigger perspective on adversity, says Mary. People have to deal with a lot more hardship in life than cyclone damage.

“You look around at the damage and it’s just stuff. It’s just a house,” she says. 



**'You can
get through it'**

DIESEL COOP

Diesel and Caroline Coop run a 1,700 acre sheep and beef farm at Hangaroa, inland from Gisborne. When the cyclone hit, the outlook was very bleak but it's amazing what a difference 12 months can make.

How did Cyclone Gabrielle unfold for you guys here?

"We woke up in the morning and looked out the window and we could see we'd been demo'd overnight.

It was a real kick in the guts. You wake up and look out the window and see how much has been damaged in a short amount of time. That was tough after everything we had done on the farm, all that work.

But the big thing we found going through it all was the amount of good buggers there are around. We had so many people that dropped things to get in here and give us a hand and give other people a hand all around the district."

So at times like that you really do rely on your neighbours, don't you?

"It's vital. Yeah, neighbours and mates. We had some really good mates that came on board straight away. They made the job so much easier for us and we just got on with it."

So what sort of damage did you have?

"We had a lot of slips, lost a lot of fences and yards and tracks, so the farm was just one big paddock. You could go right from the top of the place down to the front here. Nothing was stockproof, and it wasn't easy getting anywhere. We went out with spades on the second morning, and we only just got past the woolshed, and everything was too big from there on. So it was all machine work after that."

And what about the isolation? What were the roads like?

"The roads were a mess. There was slash all over the roads and it wasn't all forestry slash. We couldn't even get in or out of our drive.

And that's where we took our hats off to the forestry workers. They came in with all the big gear and just started clearing stuff and that's what made things so much easier. So yeah, if it wasn't for the forestry crews, it would have been pretty hard."

How long were you isolated and cut off like that?

"Well, it was probably only four days."

Where did you start? How did you prioritise stuff?

"Well we just tried to get the farm into four blocks. And so we went out and targeted one fence to cut that half of the farm off right at the start. And then we went

“You think you’re buggered but nah, you’re not.”

– Diesel Coop

from there. We ended up with four paddocks and then we got more and more paddocks stockproof, using a lot of netting and warratahs and barb.

It’s taken us 12 months to get everything semi-stockproof. We’re not there yet but I reckon in another 12 months it’ll be back to where we were.”

How have you kept yourself going mentally? Were there times when you thought it was all too much?

“Yeah, there were a couple of times, but I’d go up the top of the farm and sit back and look back on all of it. I’d have a think about it, and then it’s like, ‘ah, she’ll be right. We’ll just get stuck into it.’ And that’s what we’ve done.

We always try to see a bright side to something. No point sitting around crying about it. So we just think, let’s get on with it. And if it gets wiped out, like it did right at the start with a whole lot more rain, we just all kind of laughed about it. I thought, ‘oh well, we’ll go back and have another crack.’ There’s been good banter to go with all the hard stuff.

It makes a huge difference if you’ve got a good crew behind you. Our fencer has been awesome. And we had two fellas come in with their diggers, and they just blitzed the place. We were so lucky. They left their jobs to come and give us a hand.”

If someone was new to farming and had never struck extreme weather like this, what advice would you give them?

“I’d say, don’t think you’re going to do it overnight, and

just have little jobs that you tick off each day. If you get those done, it’s a bonus.

I find the big thing is having a good home to come home to. After a day of clambering around in the mud, coming home to everyone being happy was a real help. And in our neighbourhood here, right at the start we’d all have a few beers and a few laughs at the end of the day. And that was a real help, too.”

What’s your message to people reading this?

“I guess the message is you can get through it. That first week we thought it’s a waste of time carrying on but then we started putting things back into place. We can’t get over what has healed on the farm over the last 12 months and how everything has fallen back into place. You think you’re buggered but nah, you’re not. It’s been a kick in the guts for sure but it’s all repairable.” 🌀





Horses stuck in silt. Photo: Caroline Coop.



"We were cut off from everywhere." Photo: Caroline Coop.

CAROLINE COOP

Caroline Coop still loves farming. In the devastating aftermath of the cyclone "we would have happily walked away but I'm glad we never did."

The scale of the damage was unlike anything she had seen before.

"We knew it was really serious. I looked out the window and the white of the silt covered everything, down off the hills, straight across the driveway and down to the road. We had three horses down there and I thought they had been washed away but they were stuck in a corner. They had to be dug out. The water went right through the cattle yards and the sheep yards were lost too.

"We were cut off from everywhere. We didn't know what had happened to anyone."

In the days and weeks that followed, however, the farm became "a highway of help", says Caroline. Contractors, neighbours, volunteers – some of whom

they never knew – turned up to lend a hand. A cousin arrived with a huge carload of food and her husband brought his digger. He stayed for nearly three months.

Over the months, Caroline has been conscious of the need to support her husband Diesel, who she says carries the heaviest burden.

"I hope I'm more supportive of Diesel. He's the one who sees the damage every day and can't really get away from it. I can do stuff at home but he's out there looking at it.

"So if he's going out to do a fence-line, it's a good idea to go with him and help him, even if you're just holding a couple of staples and a hammer. It's better to be out there helping than just having him out there all day on his own."

Caroline says the family has made an effort not to miss out on some of the fun things, even though there was so much to do on the farm.

"We went away to the lake at Easter and all had an absolute blast. And catching up with friends and neighbours has also made a huge difference. We're very lucky with our community. We love it here." 



The value of experience

Hamish and Amanda Cave have been farming in Ngātapa, about half an hour west of Gisborne, for over 30 years. They farm sheep and beef cattle on 2,200 hectares, with a breeding herd of cattle and ewes.

HAMISH CAVE

Hamish and Amanda have both known from a young age the challenges of farming. When it comes to coping with extreme weather, experience really counts, says Hamish.

What impact did Cyclone Gabrielle have on the farm?

“We had two cyclones, Hale and Gabrielle, and they affected different parts of the farm in different ways. We had a lot of surface slips, broken fences, broken tracks, broken water systems, silt around one farmhouse. We had even more damage in June when the centre of the farm slumped to a different landscape and there was more damage to infrastructure.

June was incredibly tough, 25 days of rain out of 30. The guys were getting stuck on their bikes and we had to do a lot of walking. We couldn't get the material up to do the repairs so we had to use the helicopter.

In June, when the days were short and it never stopped raining, it was hard going. It was really hard going.”

What was the impact on you personally?

“Well, one minute everything is running along nicely and next thing these things get thrown at you. You get knocked over and you have to get back up again. It's really up to you to make yourself get back up again and surround yourself with a good team, stay connected with friends and family, and share the challenges.”

Where do you start?

“We started by looking after our team, making sure that their families and houses were okay. Once we got that sorted, we started on the boundary fences, secured those and then started working our way through the farm, working on the key barriers between sheep and cattle country. We started rolling out netting and blocking holes and keeping things secure. We ran a lot of paddocks together where it was going to be the same class of stock.”

What's the mindset you need to get through something overwhelming like this?

“I've had a bit of experience to draw on. I was here in the '85 flood as a teenager and I was back here after Cyclone Bola.

So I guess you've seen it all before and you know what to do. You realise very quickly that it will pass and you've just got to go day by day. You just have to work through it systematically and not try to do too much at once. You have to remind yourself that it will get better and the sun will come again.

I guess I'm very fortunate. I've got a very supportive wife and she has a farming background and so we work through things together at the kitchen table, or around the fire in the depths of winter. We talk it through and come up with a solution.”

What other supports do you need to get through something like this?

“Surround yourself with a good team, some good mates, stay in touch with your bank, your accountant, those sorts of people. Share what you are going through with your neighbours and stay connected with the wider family around the country. They've

seen what's going on and want to know how you're getting on. It's nice to share photos, tell the story."

Any strategies for dealing with the things that keep you awake at night?

"I enjoy surfing and getting in the ocean. Even during winter I try to get to the sea every two or three weeks and get rid of the stresses and strains. You've got to find ways of relaxing, deep breathing techniques, read a book, watch some TV.

It's all about your own capacity, making sure that you look after yourself and stay fit and eat the right things. Concentrate on the things that are going to be beneficial to you.

We had two short breaks either end of winter and we make sure the weekends are for family. Sure, things crop up that you've got to deal with but you can't work seven days a week. We make sure the guys on the farm have the weekends to get some rest." 🌀



AMANDA CAVE

When something like a cyclone hits, you just kick into survival mode, says Amanda Cave.

"We had no power, no communication. How was I going to feed our family and another family of eight who were with us? It's logistical planning on a day-by-day basis. Our access wasn't cut off with Gabrielle but it was with the rains in June."

Amanda was brought up on a dairy farm and, like her husband, has the benefit of experience to draw on.

"You get through something like this day by day, knowing that there is an end. You think back to previous generations and the things they have gone through. It's hugely important to fall back on that, to see that bigger picture.

"Life wasn't easy for them when they were farming. They had all their challenges but at the end of the day what mattered was family and connectedness."

"This is an inter-generational farm we are on now, where Hamish's parents and grandparents were before us and I grew up on a dairy farm in Golden Bay in the South Island so we know the demands of farming.

"If you didn't have that background and weren't aware of the history of where you are farming, it would be pretty confronting. It's summer dry here and we know we can get flooded. The valley's quite narrow with a large catchment. It's just part of the territory of farming here."

The extreme weather of last year placed so much pressure on Hamish particularly, says Amanda. The

progress they have made is “all credit to him. He is an amazing logistical planner.” The cost, however, has been an “incessant workload and a compounding tiredness, but you know it’s going to end. Nothing’s forever.”

Amanda’s way of relaxing is gardening and she enjoys yoga.

“Most weekends we try and get off the farm for one or two days. We’re close to town and it’s 20 minutes to the nearest surf-break. We’re quite religious about getting off-farm, we try and go for a surf, have a coffee.”

A big issue with farming, says Amanda, is living and working in the same place with your partner 24 hours a day and that total absorption can take a toll on relationships.

“You are trying to be everything to each other, friends, workmates, lovers. It’s not easy. It’s one of the hardest things in a farming partnership.”

Amanda’s suggestion is to find a trusted person outside the relationship who you can talk to, “a friend or confidant with whom you can share the load. Know who that person is, is what I would say.”

Farmers are so emotionally invested in the land and the livestock and the overall picture of what’s happening, it’s very hard for them to separate themselves from the farm, says Amanda. But that’s the challenge, she says. You have to learn not to take yourself so seriously.



There may even come a day when a farmer might want to try something different, says Amanda, “and there’s no shame in that.”

“I look at those people who have made a change or have perhaps handed over the farm earlier for someone else to have a go. It’s a big gulp for sure. But if it’s getting you down, there’s more to life. It may be absolutely the right thing for them.”

This time last year the rains wouldn’t stop in Gisborne and much of the North Island.

“It got people down,” says Amanda. “A year later we’ve had a beautiful summer and people’s morale has lifted quite a lot. We’ve had some rain, lovely warm days and sunshine. You’ve got to take the long view.” 

“You have to remind yourself that **it will get better** and the sun will come again.”

– Hamish Cave





'Stuck in paradise'

For Ian and Helen Burgess, the struggle to restore access to their isolated farm is far from over.



IAN BURGESS

It's hard to imagine a greater sense of isolation than what Ian and Helen Burgess experienced when Cyclone Gabrielle swept their bridge away. Their 660-hectare sheep and beef farm is in the Pehiri District, about half way between Gisborne and Waikaremoana.

The morning after Cyclone Gabrielle hit the region, they woke about 5am to the noise of the river. At first Helen thought it was the wind.

"It was a shock to hear it so loud," says Ian. "Right on daybreak I started walking down the drive and realised that all the trees were missing on the road opposite. I thought that was unusual, the river's never been that high before. I expected that the bridge was going to be pretty badly damaged but the bridge was gone. It took a couple of days for it all to sink in. The bridge had been there since 1965."

For the first few days they stayed put at home, "got the gas bottles out and the barbecue going". Comms were down and there was no access to the outside world.

"I was pretty confident that most of the stock were alright. We had decided in the first two or three days not to go off the house site because we are steep-to-medium hill country and the chances of someone getting hurt were pretty high."

At one point they could hear the land around them slipping.

"My wife Helen was standing out on the deck and she heard a massive rumble. It was a big slip opposite us that came down here across the road, pushing the road into the river. We decided not to go out for another couple of days because the land was still moving."

When they did venture out, they headed up over the hill to their neighbour's farm, hoping they had a bridge but that was gone too.

"That's when it really hit home that we were really, really isolated. Not only did we not have a bridge, but our access downstream was gone. And we were thinking just how isolated are we?"

Using his ingenuity and arborist skills that he had developed from a previous job, Ian constructed a very impressive flying fox across the river.



From his previous work as an arborist, Ian had the knowledge and gear to be able to construct a flying fox across the river. For most of the year, the flying fox is their only point of access to the outside world.

“We are the most isolated farm on the East Coast as far as I am aware.”

No mean achievement. When the weather is fine and the river is down, there is a level crossing where a vehicle can get through but when it rains they are back on the flying fox.

“Without that flying fox we are snookered. We are the most isolated farm on the East Coast as far as I am aware.”

Ian is the fourth generation to live on the farm. The family’s been there since 1904 and as he sees it, “it is a privilege to be still here.”

“The way we see it is we live in paradise. Now we’re just stuck in paradise. That’s been our saying all the way through. We go into town and everyone asks us the same questions and sometimes telling the whole story can make you a bit upset. So a happy response is the easiest way. Just give everyone a smile and let them know you’re alright. We’ve had a huge amount of feedback from that actually.”

Ian and Helen are committed to doing whatever’s required to get their bridge rebuilt. Indications from Council are that the rebuild could be some years away.

“I’m not going to give up. If I thought it was a completely useless case and we were never going to get a bridge again, we’d have to think seriously about doing something else but I won’t let that enter my head.”



“I’m a firm believer that the impossible just takes a bit longer! If you’ve got any real challenges out there, talk to people about it, be as tenacious as farmers generally are anyway, be the squeaky wheel and surround yourself with the type of people that are going to help you through it. That’s probably one of the best bits of advice I can give.”

Ian knows from experience that Bola took years to recover from and the damage this time round is worse.

“Don’t think you’ll get it done in the first 12 months because 12 months on we are still opening tracks, still fixing fences. We decided early on just to patch fences and not try and totally repair them which turned out to be the right thing to do. The June flood came along and wiped everything out again. So do what’s easiest, don’t go the whole hog.”

By any reckoning the Burgesses face a formidable challenge. The biggest thing that has got them through has been the support they get from one another, as well as their families, friends and neighbours.

“Helen and I have been together for 30 years and we are the best of mates. We talk a lot and help each other through an awful lot. And talk to your mates, even if it’s just running something past them that they don’t understand. We have chat groups on Messenger, I’ve lost count of how many.”

HELEN BURGESS

When access to their property was completely cut off, it was like being plunged back into the Victorian age, says Helen Burgess.

Looking back, Helen can see they had a whole marriage and a lifetime of developing skills to prepare for an event of this scale.

“We were tailor-made for it. Communication is the big thing,” she says. “We’re well matched, we work well together.

“Ian has all the skills to do the practical stuff, and I work the farm as well. I’m probably the calmer one who says ‘let’s just think this through’ whereas Ian is the action man. He gets things done.

“The thing is we have experience now. If we had to deal with this in the early days, it would have been more testing. We’ve had our challenges over the years and we have learned how to deal with them.”

Helen is English and was a stock-broker in a previous life working in the heart of London. Then she went travelling in Australia and New Zealand where she met Ian. She has lived on the farm for the last 30 years and loves the farming life.

“I have such gratitude for being here. I love the beauty around me. I think I have a quiet mind. I probably spent the first 26 years of my life quite stressed and didn’t realise it. It was only coming here and finding this peace that I realised what I had been missing.”

“My happy place is out on the hills with my dogs shifting stock. I feel I’m a natural stock person.

“I just focus on the next job and if I’m upset about

something I’m able to push it to one side and carry on.”

When anxieties build up and things are whirling around in her head, Helen has found making a list and ticking things off makes a big difference.

“It’s the classic, ‘I’ve got so much to do. How am I going to do it?’ I start spinning and then I just sit down and write a list. And when I’m writing the list, suddenly it doesn’t seem so bad.”

Helen is grateful for all the people who have helped them through these tough times. Supplies were dropped in by helicopter in the early days after Gabrielle, neighbours have let them use their land and stockyards to get their stock off, they were loaned a generator, people have left supplies on the other side of the flying fox. Chat groups have kept communication alive.

“The support has been just amazing. We have so much to be grateful for.”

One of the hardest things early on was letting family and friends know they were all right. Their 15-year-old-son was with them on the farm but their daughters had no idea how they were faring. When the first helicopter made it in, they were able to give them a list of numbers to contact, which was a huge relief, says Helen.

The experience of the last year has made them stronger, says Helen. She feels she is more assertive now, more ready to speak up. But she is under no illusion about the size of the challenge ahead.

They have made great progress over the summer but when the rains come they will lose their river access by vehicle once again.

“It’s not over for us,” she says. 



‘One day we’ll look back’

Gisborne was one of the regions worst hit by Cyclone Gabrielle and the rains that followed. Sheep and beef farmers Hamish and Becs Thatcher know what it takes to weather a storm.

HAMISH AND BECS THATCHER

The night before Cyclone Gabrielle hit, there was heavy rain in Gisborne but pretty typical east coast stuff, says Hamish Thatcher. “To be honest, I just went to bed.”

In the morning, however, it was a different story. Hamish made himself a cup of tea at 6am and looked out the window: “The whole plateau across the valley was just water.”

He went out to investigate and ran into his neighbour Matt who thought the bridge might be under water. During Cyclone Bola the water had lapped the bottom of the bridge but had risen no further.

“We got down there and we walked a bit further and I said to Matt, ‘I actually don’t think there’s a bridge there’,” recalls Hamish.

Hamish and Becs Thatcher have a 1400-hectare sheep and beef farm just out of Gisborne. The farm is in two blocks, one of which was completely cut off by Cyclone Gabrielle. Hamish was on his own at the time. Becs was recuperating at her parents following an operation and their three girls were with her.

It was not just their bridge that had gone. Neighbouring farmers had lost their bridges as well so no-one was able to get their stock in or out. They were completely cut off for five or so days. Neighbours supported each other “with a few generators and a few beers” and a helicopter dropped off supplies too.

After about five days, kiwi ingenuity kicked in.

“We hooked up a couple of bits of number 8 wire and using a kayak, pulled ourselves across the river,” says Hamish. “The water didn’t look real swift but once you

got into the boat, it was another matter. We had to use that boat for about nine weeks. There was a little caravan on the other side. If the water was above the wheel, you didn’t cross.”

Hamish and Becs have been on the farm for 14 years and the way Hamish describes it, all the improvements they had done, the tracks and fences, the laneways, “everything we’d done was undone.”

But the toughest thing in the immediate aftermath of the cyclone was the loss of the bridge. The implications for Hamish and Becs and their neighbours was huge. When you run a farm, says Hamish, “it’s about money coming in and out, meeting the demands of a massive mortgage. I still had a couple of thousand lambs in there that needed to be got out, half a million bucks of stock.”

“My main thing was to look after my stock because that’s our business. If I make money there, I can fix all this stuff.”

One thing that Hamish and Becs had to deal with in the midst of everything was the human tendency to catastrophise.

“Everybody was saying ‘it’ll take two years to get a bridge’, and I was like ‘oh shit, this is going to get friggin’ interesting’”.

The lesson they take from this is go to the source, go to someone who actually knows and find out the facts.

“In farming you work with what you’ve got.”

– Hamish Thatcher

Don't deal in rumours because they cause so much anxiety.

As it turned out, a small bridge was re-established in nine weeks and Becs and the girls were able to get home by Easter. Stock was able to be transported in and out once again and with the help of "awesome contractors", work could begin on the enormous task of clearing tracks and getting some fencing up.

The months that followed were, if anything, even more demanding as the rain continued. The rains in June actually caused more damage than the cyclone, says Hamish. There was mud everywhere. Just getting round the farm was hard yakka.

Looking back at the whole ordeal, Hamish is clear that one thing you want to have in a crisis is good neighbours.

"Matt and Jess were great. You don't realise until you get in a situation like that, just how great it is having someone to talk to. Matt's just a good, level-headed fella. They are such nice people."

Becs is grateful for the awesome community, people helping one another out and keeping the spirits high. That aspect of things was huge, she says.

"People do care. Food was dropped in by helicopter to begin with. We felt very supported."

For Hamish the key to getting through a big ordeal like this is to get a plan in place. Don't panic and work out the main things you can do. You can only do what you can control.

"A priority was to get a digger in. He came across the river and came in here. I thought if I can get those tracks open, that's half the battle. I can go around the farm and check the stock and that's what gives you income. And then I can get some fencing gear

out there. But I wouldn't rush on fixing fences. A lot of people find the fences they put up just don't last. They can all wash away again."

Becs and Hamish have come a long way since the heavy rains of last year. Becs has been on some self-care courses run by Rural Support which has been a big help.

"The stand-out thing for me is resilience," says Becs. "You've got to get your mind around it and carry on. To begin with it was all overwhelming, I couldn't think straight. It was very hard for eight months but then you realise things are changing. You take it a day at a time. You make a list and tick things off."

Hamish is grateful that the weather has finally turned in their favour.

"If we'd got into a drought this year, it would have been a very different situation. But it's been quite a cracker year, feed-wise. My stock have been coming out good and the prices have been good which helps with the very high R&M bills."

Hamish has been passionate about farming "since I was five years old". That passion is now enhanced by experience.

"In farming, you work with what you've got."

"And one day in 10 years' time we'll look back and see that it wasn't fun but it was quite an adventure. We'll be able to talk about that time when the abutments went and the bridge got washed away and we'd go and jump in this little boat and pull ourselves across with the bloody ropes. And it gave you a wobble like this!" 



'The land can heal'

Rob and Marie Burke know from experience that getting over a natural disaster is not a job to be tackled on your own.

ROB BURKE

"Like everything," says Rob Burke, "farming's enjoyable when you are making good money and things are going well but not so good when things hit the fan."

Rob and Marie's farm is on 360 hectares of hill country and flats in Ormond, Gisborne. It's a sheep and beef farm and includes some cropping as well.

“You might have been feeling sorry for yourself and then you realise there are others who are worse off.”

– Rob Burke

The lead-up to Cyclone Gabrielle was wet weather and more wet weather. The previous winter had been wet, followed by a wet summer, followed by Cyclone Hale and then Gabrielle. And that was not the worst of it, says Rob.

“We got what seemed like 100 mls of rain every week after Gabrielle and in a weather event in June we got 380 mls, which for us was 100 mls more than Gabrielle. That was when everything fell to bits.”

In Gabrielle the farm suffered a lot of surface slips, the kind of damage they had with Cyclone Bola back in 1988. But this time round there was greater damage. “By June the land was sodden. The rolling country just started to drop. We had massive slumps. You’d go around and fix all the tracks and a week and a half later you’d be trying to fix them again. It was a bit chaotic.”

During Gabrielle, because the rivers were still in full flood, Rob and his neighbour, who were involved in civil defence, were scouting out the area.

“We shot up this hill to have a look and found an elderly couple in a tiny home with a river flowing around them. That was pretty freaky. We shot home, got the boat and were able to get them out. That was pretty cool, coordinating with others and feeling like you could do something to help people.”

Being hit with extreme weather events involves a mind-shift for farmers, says Rob.

“As a farmer you’re in control of your livestock and your paddocks and everything. Suddenly it’s all out of control and your business is being wrecked around you. That’s your first thought.”

But, as Rob learned from Cyclone Bola many years ago, you have to take a longer view. If you give it time, the land can heal, he says.

“The erosion and flooding from Bola has always been in my mind. After Bola I watched and, within two or three years, a lot of the slips had grown over and seeded themselves and it just looked completely different. Give it time and nature heals itself. You learn that it does get better.”

Rob considers himself very lucky to have had “a succession of good people” working for him. He’s had a lot of help in trying to get things back in order and the community side of things “has been cool. We’re lucky we live in a great community. So many people have supported us.”

A couple of months after the June rains, Rob and Marie hosted an afternoon barbecue for local farmers and invited the Rural Support Trust, service industry reps and other speakers who would be good for the local community to hear from. It was such a good thing to do.

“You don’t realise that everyone’s got the same stories because you’re in your own little bubble,” says Rob. “Getting everyone together and having a few beers was great.”

“You might have been feeling sorry for yourself and then you talk to someone down the road or across the valley and you realise there are others who are worse off.”

The road to recovery involves “chipping away at things”, says Rob, getting a paddock stock-proof, repairing a track.

“If you go to bed at night feeling like you have achieved something, that’s fantastic. Of course, you are fairly limited in how far you can go and you’re getting stuck every second minute but it’s pretty cool to get some stuff done.”

More than a year on from all the rain, the picture is brighter. The forecast drought did not eventuate and the stock are all looking pretty good.

When you are up against it “you’ve just got to lean into it. It’s what farmers do, isn’t it? You can’t throw your toys out of the cot and walk away. You pick up and get going again.”

And you can’t do it on your own. Reach out to the specialist help that’s out there.

“You may feel pretty down but there are a lot of people who want to help you,” says Rob. “I’ve had fantastic bank managers the whole way through and we talk to them regularly. Budgets are good because you can work out a way forward, hatch a plan for the future. Sometimes I come home a bit grumpy and flick up the budget and I feel a lot better. Having facts and figures in front of you is a big help.”

Another thing which lifts the mood is getting off-farm. The family has a bach in the Bay of Plenty where they do a fair bit of socialising and make the most of the sunny weather.

“It’s pretty therapeutic. It gives you a fresh perspective. So my advice is take the family and go somewhere and treat yourself. It’s great for your mental health. You probably think you can’t afford it, but you can’t afford not to as well.” 

MARIE BURKE

When the pressure is piled on, you have to look out for one another, says Marie Burke.

Marie Burke has been farming “forever”. Apart from three years in Teachers College she’s been involved in farming her whole life. All that experience has taught Marie that you need to look at farming over a 10-year period.

“Over 10 years the good and the bad years generally even out. If you have a couple of bad years, you know there will be good years to come. You keep chugging along because that’s generally the way it works.

“Having said that, it’s really tough when you are in the thick of it. And to keep that long-term perspective isn’t easy. It’s got easier as we’ve spent more time in the game.”



“I like to connect with people to make sure others get the support they need. It gives me a sense of self-worth.”

– Marie Burke

The storms and ongoing rains last year were particularly challenging. When Gabrielle hit, communications went down and people were on their own.

“The biggest challenge for a lot of people was being cut off. They weren’t able to get in touch with family and friends to check on others. There’s a multitude of things happening at a time like that. First and foremost is personal safety and animal safety. We’re on the Civil Defence team here so as soon as we could, we got on with our civil defence job, making sure that the village and other people were okay.”

On their farm, Rob focused on the repair and fixing stuff while her focus was more outward – getting hold of the bank, the insurance company, all sorts of people – to find out what support was available.

“Between the two of us we came up with a game plan going forward. It’s all about figuring out what you need to do first and what can wait. If you try and fix everything at once, you’ll end up down a rabbit hole.”

When you’re under sustained pressure, you really need to look out for one another, says Marie.

“You need to spend time checking in with family and staff and look for signs that things may not be going so well. What matters most is looking after those nearest and dearest to you. Properties, farms, businesses can

be repaired or moved on from but the people around you are far more important.”

Marie says that being connected with the community is another key to wellbeing and indispensable in a crisis. When the chips were down, the local farming community was very supportive of one another.

Marie has found that one of the best coping strategies for her personally is helping other people. She’s involved with Farmer Time for Schools, an educational programme that connects farmers with school children virtually and she co-founded Farming Women Tairāwhiti to enable rural women in the region to connect and thrive. [🌱](#)





— 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'

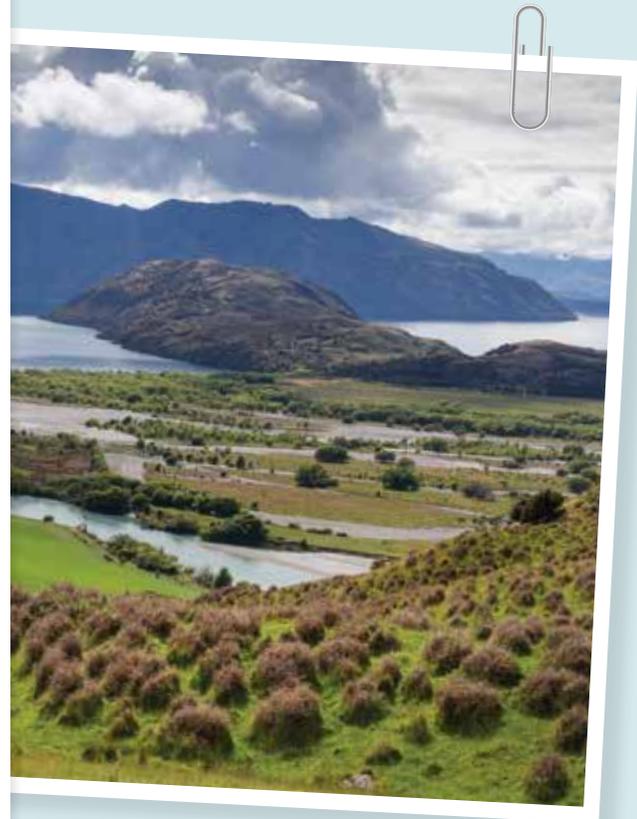
One thing that's really helpful when you're feeling 'under the pump' is having a sense of purpose.

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'

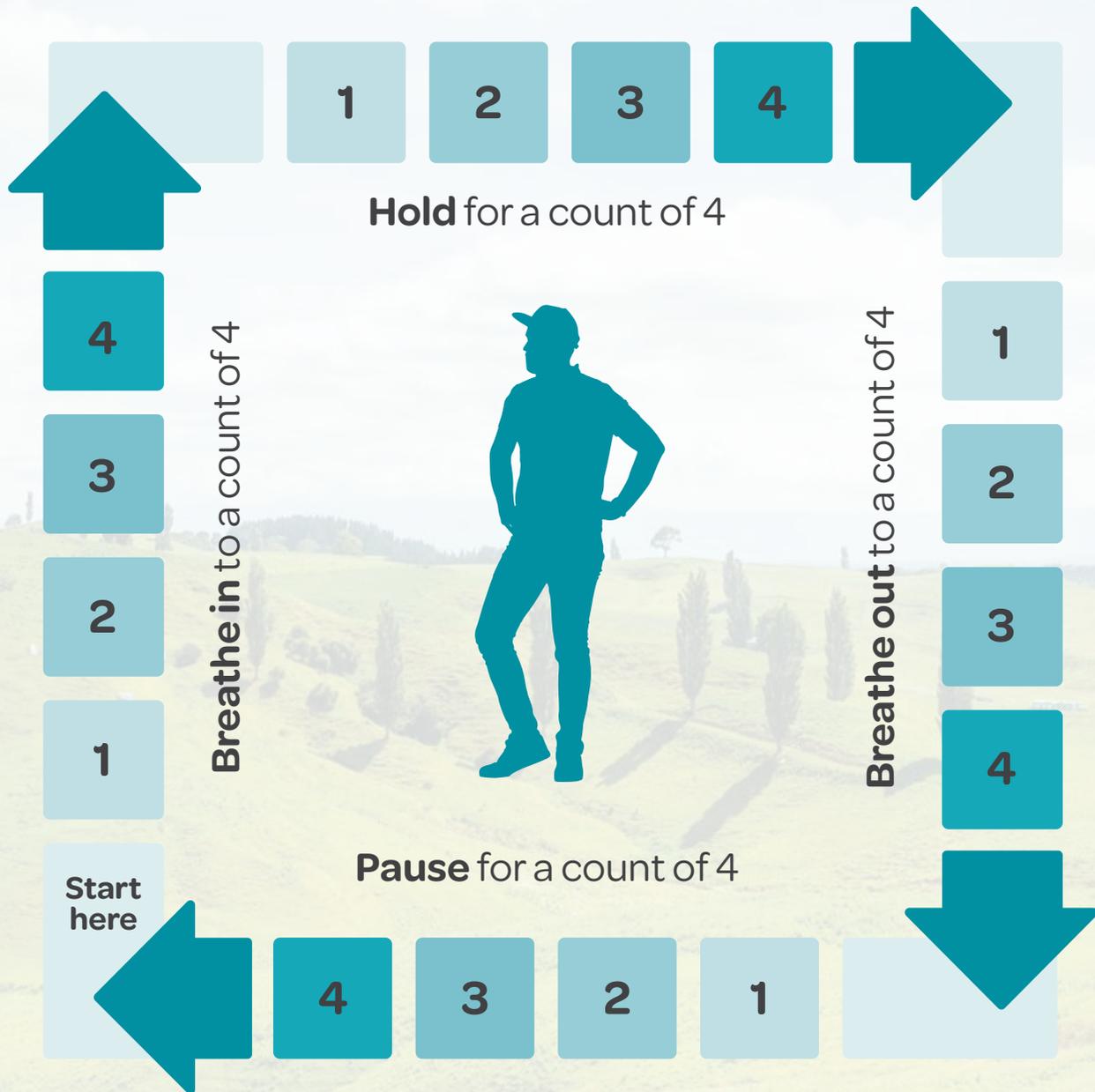
When we are feeling stressed out, our breathing patterns can become short and shallow, keeping our nervous system stuck in a high state of alert and starving our brain of the oxygen we need to think clearly and stay calm.

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?



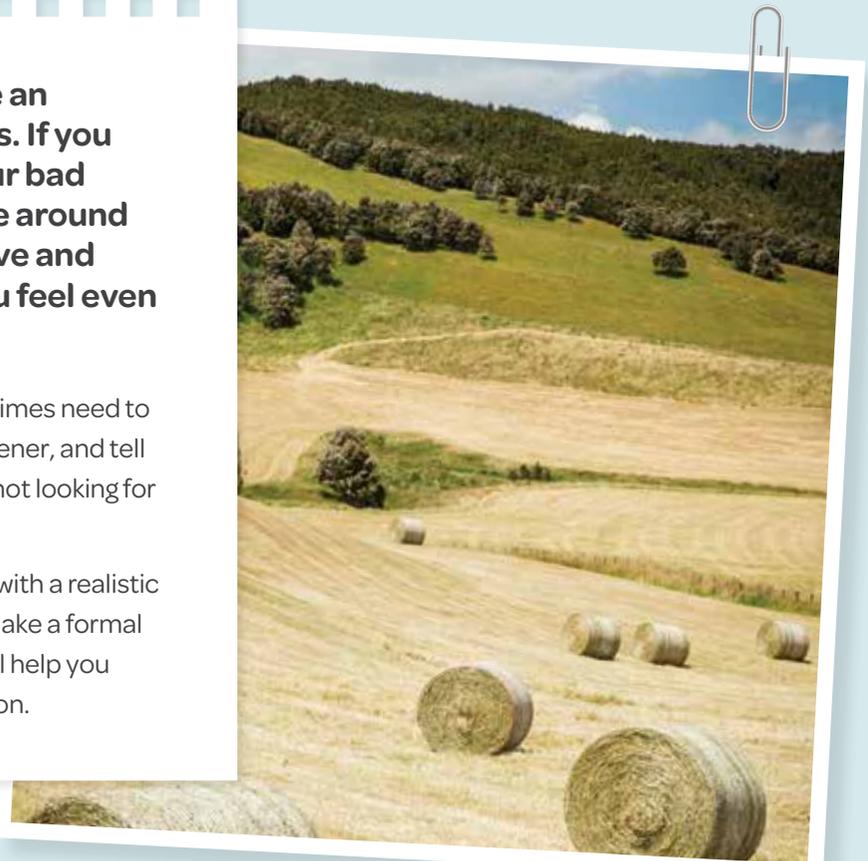
Resist the urge to complain

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.

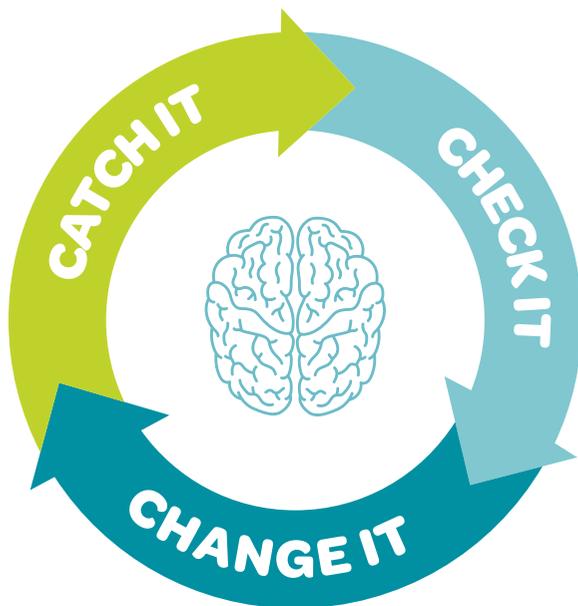
(For wellbeing boost conversations, it's best to steer clear of politics and complaining.)

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

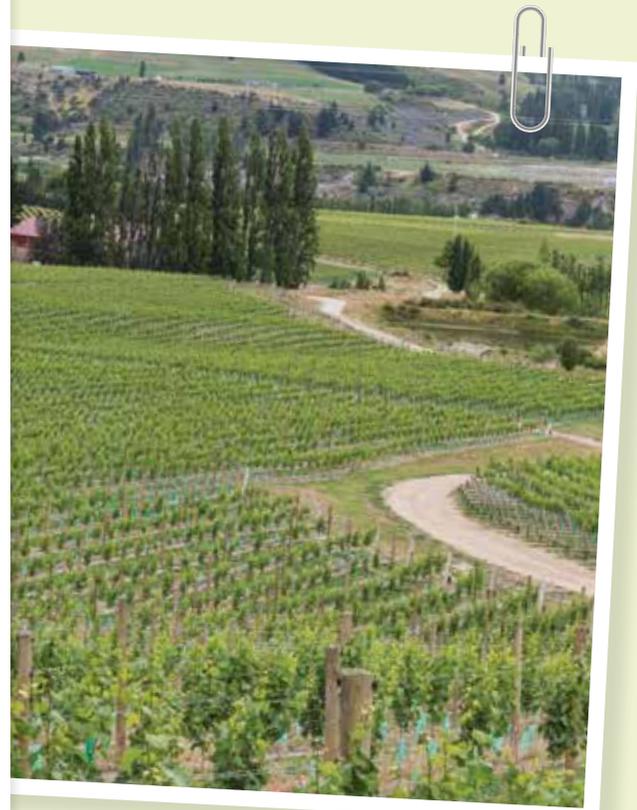
Mindsets are the way we choose to view the world. They reflect our core ideas, attitudes and explanations about how the world is.

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

Getting Through shares the stories of farmers and growers who experienced the devastating cyclones and floods of 2023. The result is a collection of hard-won wisdom designed to help others facing future weather events.

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