



Live well grow well

GROWERS ON BEING FARMSTRONG



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Published by



www.farmstrong.co.nz

Dedication

We'd like to thank all the growers and their families who have taken the time to share their insights and experience to help others in the future.

We really appreciate your generosity and support. Big thanks are also due to everyone who supplied photos to bring these stories to life.

We acknowledge that these stories are just a 'snapshot' in time and would like to wish all our interviewees and their families the very best for the future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Founding Partners:



Strategic Partner:



Ministry for Primary Industries
Manatū Ahu Matua



Special thanks to the Ministry for Primary Industries for funding support for the production and distribution of this book.

Brought to you by the team at Farmstrong with the help of:

Mike Fitzsimons (editing, production) and Joanne Duff / Line Tamers (design), Andy Shaw (illustrations) and Blue Star (printing). Thanks to FMG for use of its image library and FMG's regional offices and the Rural Support Trust for assistance setting up interviews.

Cover image (Jackson Orchards Cromwell)

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Being Farmstrong

Since its launch in 2015, Farmstrong has positively impacted the lives of thousands of growers, farmers and their families in our country's number one industry. Last year more than 20,000 farmers and growers attributed an increase in their wellbeing to the programme.



It's an exciting time to be involved with Farmstrong and I'm delighted to see that our work is reaching even more sectors and people with the publication of *Live well grow well*.

What I like about Farmstrong is that it's so practical and down-to-earth. It's about farmers and growers sharing what works for them to deal with busy and demanding working lives.

As this book demonstrates, there's a lot of wisdom among growers that people can tap into. Farmstrong gets farmers and growers talking about things like managing pressure, recognising when people are 'under the pump' and doing something about it.

The logic is simple. People are the most important asset on any orchard, farm or vineyard and anything that boosts their wellbeing and ability to perform under pressure is going to be good for the business.

Farmstrong encourages farmers and growers to invest regularly in their 'wellbeing bank account' so they have plenty to draw on during tough times. They can do this by adopting simple, daily habits such as the 5 Ways to Wellbeing that are proven to build resilience and provide essential recovery time for mind and body.

They can also 'train their brain' to lean into pressure and maintain a clear headspace for decision-making by adding some mental fitness skills to their toolbox. These skills are common in professional sport and very relevant to a results-driven, team environment like horticulture.

What the science tells us is that just like you can get physically fit, you can also become mentally fitter and stronger. That's why we've added a mental skills toolkit at the end of this book.

We're lucky that Farmstrong has so many supporters around the country who are passionate about what they do and keen to pass on what they've learnt. I'd like to thank all the growers who have taken the time to share their insights in this publication to help others. That's how we're going to 'shift the dial' in this space.

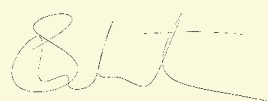
As Farmstrong Ambassador, I've swapped stories with farmers and growers at gatherings all over the country. I know that conversations like this are powerful and can really change lives for the better.

I think as an industry, we need to be open about the pressures we face. Let's start having that conversation, because our wellbeing should be an absolute priority, whether we're out on the orchard amongst the trees or vines, busy in the packhouse or hard at work in the office.

The lesson of the last ten years for me is that even small changes in daily habits and thinking patterns can make a huge difference to how people feel at the end of each week. So, dive into this resource, find out what works for you and 'lock it in'.

Samuel Whitelock

Farmstrong Ambassador



The 5 Ways to Wellbeing

The power of daily habits

The science of wellbeing tell us that people with a strong sense of wellbeing share five simple habits – staying connected with others, keeping the body moving whether it's gardening, going for a run or bike ride or playing sport, taking time every day to enjoy the simple pleasures, learning new things to stay fresh and giving back to their friends and community. These are the basics of wellbeing. Make these habits part of your daily life and you'll be in a lot better shape to deal with life's challenges when they come. Regular habits have a positive, cumulative effect over time and keep you in a good frame of mind.

Connect

Developing friendships and spending time with your mates makes a big difference to how you feel. Even in a busy life, you should try and make it a priority. When you do, the rewards are huge. Having a good circle of friends has lots of benefits and can really help reduce the stresses of daily life. Friends provide a friendly ear and support. They lighten the load.

Take notice

Taking notice of the small things in life that boost your mood makes a big difference. When we get busy our minds get cluttered with all kinds of stuff. Paying attention to the world around you, even for a few moments, can make you feel more calm and relaxed. Each day take a few moments to be more aware of what's important to you, and what you have that you really appreciate.

Give to others

When you give to others, not only do they benefit but it makes you feel happier too. There are lots of ways you can give. It may be spending time with your kids, or supporting an employee who is having a tough time. It may be helping out at the school fair or offering to feed your neighbours' dogs so they can have a break.

A man with dark hair, wearing a bright green high-visibility polo shirt, is looking down at a plant in a greenhouse. The greenhouse has a transparent plastic covering with visible support structures. Large green leaves are in the foreground, partially obscuring the man. The background shows more plants and the sky through the greenhouse roof.

Keep learning

No matter what age you are, learning new things is good for your brain. It keeps your thinking flexible and makes life more interesting. Being curious and learning new things about your business or other interests will help you be a better grower.

Be active

Keeping active is a proven way to feel good. Working up a sweat releases endorphins in your system that make you feel fresher and better able to deal with challenges when they arise. Make physical activity a habit – at least 30 minutes of movement a day. Regular exercise is not just for professional athletes. It really is a game-changer for lifting your mood and making you work-fit.

Invest in your **Wellbeing Bank Account**

As we experience stressful situations and knock-backs in life, our natural supply of wellbeing gets depleted. These are like withdrawals from our wellbeing account.

The goal is not to get into an overdraft situation with continual withdrawals. If that continues too long, we lose our energy and sense of purpose, and head towards feelings of depression and hopelessness.

Instead, we need to make small, regular wellbeing 'investments' so that we'll have something to draw on when the going gets tough.

Farmstrong's 5 Ways to Wellbeing are a great place to start. Over time these daily habits make a huge difference to how we cope with the tough times that inevitably crop up.



One way of thinking about wellbeing is like investments in a bank account. If we invest wisely and often, even with little amounts, **we get big dividends over time.**

Investing in wellbeing

So how can we offset inevitable wellbeing withdrawals with wellbeing investments?

The first step is to do what we can to reduce any unnecessary stress from our business and personal life.



We can do this by:

- identifying risks and planning for them
- prioritising work tasks
- not over-committing
- minimising contact with very negative people
- being well-organised.

In addition to the *5 Ways to Wellbeing*, which are like your five-a-day fruit and vegetables but for the mind, there are also other wellbeing fundamentals which are discussed in this book – for example, making sure you get a good night's sleep, good nutrition, and countering negative thoughts. Topping up your wellbeing bank account is a definite win-win situation. It reduces risks of mental ill health and brings business and social benefits at the same time. In a busy industry like horticulture, it's easy to put off your own wellbeing because so much needs to be done. But this is a false economy in the long run as you are neglecting the most important asset in your business - you.

Common withdrawals

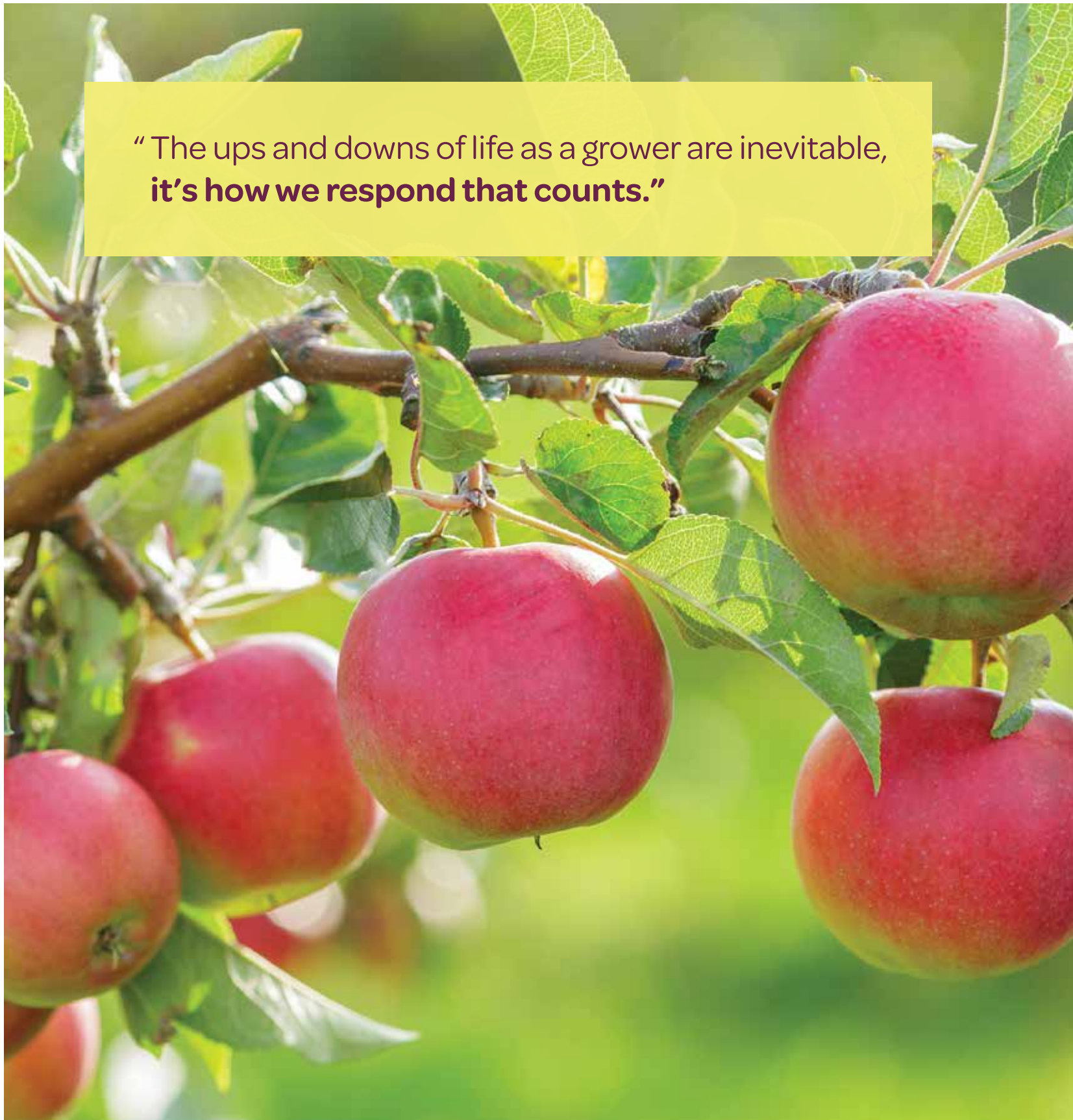
Growers have told us that the following situations make a dent in their wellbeing, that is a withdrawal from their wellbeing bank account:

- having too much to do all of the time
- lack of sleep
- anxiety about the weather
- relentless compliance obligations
- not getting time away from the business
- staffing problems
- financial uncertainty.

These situations lead to negative emotions like frustration, anxiety, anger, guilt and feeling overwhelmed, which after a while puts a strain on our wellbeing.

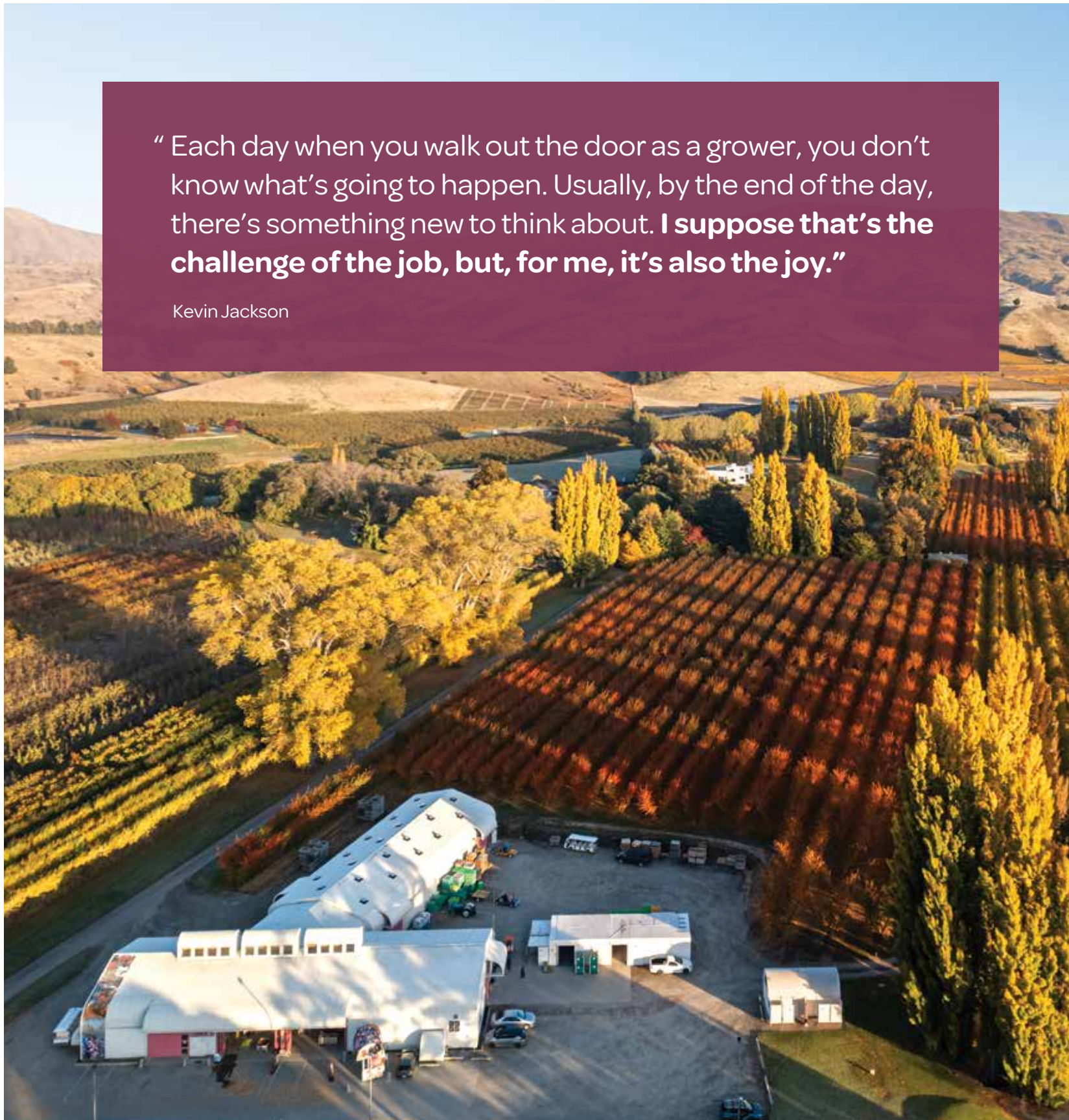


“The ups and downs of life as a grower are inevitable,
it's how we respond that counts.”



“ Each day when you walk out the door as a grower, you don’t know what’s going to happen. Usually, by the end of the day, there’s something new to think about. **I suppose that’s the challenge of the job, but, for me, it’s also the joy.**”

Kevin Jackson



Stronger together



PATRICK AND REBECCA MALLEY

Patrick and Rebecca Malley are part of a family-run kiwifruit and hydroponic berry orchard nestled beside Maungatapere mountain, near Whangarei.

Patrick's the general manager and Rebecca looks after the administration side of the business. The Malley family has been growing kiwifruit there since 2011 and founded Maungatapere Berries in 2015.

Patrick's parents are still heavily involved in the business, but these days the couple are handling more of its day-to-day running. Patrick's responsibilities include overseeing a kiwifruit growing operation, berry harvesting, a berry packhouse and berry sales and marketing.

He's well prepared for the challenge having previously worked in the pipfruit industry and won Young Horticulturalist of the Year in 2014.

Life's moved on since then. The couple have two children and enjoy raising them on the orchard.

"It's like the kiwi dream in many respects, living on the orchard and having all this space and fresh air to grow up in. We feel very lucky," says Rebecca.

But it hasn't been all plain sailing. The property was badly affected by Cyclone Gabrielle in 2023.

"That was a tough time," recalls Patrick. "We lost almost our entire kiwifruit crop and about three hectares of tunnel structures for our berries. They were completely flattened and we lost a lot

of the crop underneath. That meant we had to start again from scratch. It's probably going to take us another three years to fully recover."

The couple reflect on what it takes to get through an event of that magnitude.

"We tried to look at it with a bit of a 'glass half-full' mindset. Our family was okay, our house was okay. We knew of people in other regions like Hawke's Bay where that wasn't the case. So we leaned into our strength as a family and supported each other," says Patrick.

The mix of emotions involved can be hard to juggle at first, says Rebecca. "You're telling yourself to be strong and be resilient so you can keep working but at the same time, you also have to acknowledge that it's okay to be vulnerable. But when the problem's so big that you can't really comprehend the whole thing, you've just got to get stuck in and make a start. As soon as you can see the difference you're making you begin to feel better. You realise things can be fixed and it's not the end of the world."

These days the pressures are more financial – rising costs and squeezed margins.

"Cash is the main pressure," says Patrick. "I think since COVID, everything has just gotten so much more volatile and costs keep rising. Some industries can instantly adjust their prices to protect their margin. Unfortunately, our industry doesn't have the ability to do that. That's the pressure of being a business that supplies food."

Since the pressures aren't disappearing any time soon, the family is proactive about maintaining their own wellbeing to keep a clear head and navigate



the way forward. The business logic of doing so is straightforward.

"We're a family operation, the business wouldn't exist without us. As one of its key assets, we have to look after ourselves," says Patrick.

Time out with family tops the list.

"Taking time to do things with our kids really helps us to switch off from work," says Rebecca. "They're 8 and 11 now, so we're going to sports on the weekends and things like that."

Patrick says family life helps put work worries into perspective.

"If you get out of your own head and listen to your kids, it's really good for your mental health. Kids are the ultimate antidepressant because they don't have the same cares about the world that you have. They help you to focus on the small but important things that bring a lot of joy."

Patrick's other stress-buster is playing squash.

"It's great because it's so intensive. You can't worry about anything at work when you're running around bouncing off the walls. There's also something therapeutic about hitting an inanimate rubber ball as hard as you can against a concrete wall. If that doesn't make you feel better afterwards, I don't know what will," he laughs.

"We really enjoy our business but I think if you didn't take breaks you could easily lose your love of what you do."

Rebecca Malley

Rebecca's an active-relaxer too and loves getting out in nature. She fits in a morning walk and schedules longer outdoor excursions such as the Kepler Track.

The couple say they are fortunate to be supported by a great team and have built the business to the point where they feel comfortable leaving the orchard and heading away for the odd break.

Rebecca summarises the benefits of getting off-orchard every now and then. "We really enjoy our business but I think if you didn't take breaks you could easily lose your love of what you do. It's good to have other things to look forward to, so you can enjoy the day-to-day work."

Patrick says there have been times when the pressures of the job have got to him and he's been forced to stop and take stock. He offers the following advice for anyone feeling similarly 'under the pump'.

"I think the main thing is standing up for yourself and doing something about it rather than ignoring it or bottling things up. It's about awareness – realising you're just not behaving the same way that you normally would. It took me a while to get to a point where I asked for help, but I'm in a much better place now because I did."

He says one thing that's really helped since is joining a local business mentoring group. He finds it a great source of support and advice.

"It's open to managers from any kind of business. We get together once a month and talk about anything and everything. It's easy to get stuck in your own industry echo chamber sometimes. Being part of a group like that shows you that every industry has its ups and downs. I think every business owner there has been through the same things as us at some point."

We've covered the challenges. What's the best part of the job?

"It's probably harvest," says Patrick. "Although it's the busiest time of year and we're flat out working long hours, just getting to the point where you can harvest the crop feels great. We know we've done a good job to get there and everyone will benefit."

Rebecca adds: "One of the best things about working in this industry is that the fruits of your labour are easy to see. Kiwifruit harvest in particular is cathartic because you can really see the work that you've done when you look behind you and the crop's been harvested. There's a real sense of purpose."

Patrick says horticulture offers good career paths to people of all ages and abilities.

"We've had an amazing number of people come and work with us from a very wide range of ages. For people who apply themselves, there's definitely an opportunity to move up into better positions."



Not every couple are suited to working together in a business. These two are. Rebecca jokes that their working styles are 'different but complementary'.

"I think we work together well and keep each other honest. We support each other and also support each other's way of working. Patrick's a night owl, so there'll be times where he'll just work until 11 o'clock every night for a week."

Patrick completes the picture. "Yes, sometimes I just need to keep working until the specific task is done, otherwise I find it hard to move on. Rebecca's much better at chunking out her time and being really efficient and focused getting stuff done. If we both work to our strengths, we're just that much stronger together."

What's the mindset you need when you are starting out in the industry?

"I think curiosity is probably the biggest thing," says Patrick. "When you look at where horticulture has been and how my parents used to grow fruit compared to where it is now and where it might be in the next five years, it's such a dramatic change."

"It's good to stay curious and keep asking why things are done the way they are so we can keep improving the way we grow things in New Zealand. It's our innovation, our environment and our quality that's really going to make sure we continue to succeed as an industry." ●

"It's good to stay curious and keep asking why things are done the way they are so we can keep improving the way we grow things in New Zealand."

Patrick Malley



**It's good to do
something different**

JACK GILCHRIST

Roxburgh apricot grower Jack Gilchrist was one of a number of growers who entered *Gravel In Paradise*, a series of cycling events sponsored by Farmstrong in Otago to encourage rural communities to leap on a bike and catch up with friends and neighbours.

Tell us a little about your business.

I grow 10 hectares of stone fruit, mainly apricots but also some cherries, peaches, nectarines and plums. I've grown up on the orchard and the family's been fruit-growing here for five generations now. At the moment I've got six employees working short-term for me as we're in the midst of apricot thinning. In fruit season that increases to around ten.

How's the season going?

This season is looking good so far, but still very early days. We had great pollination weather here in the valley during the apricot blossom and I've ended up with a good fruit set. Now I'm employing staff to go through and pull the excess fruit off! Plums are looking light, but that is district-wide. Overall, I'm happy with how it's looking.

Last year was a very challenging season. The whole district had a very heavy fruit set – this causes increased labour costs during thinning and it's often

hard to get good fruit size. The heavy supply caused poor local market prices and there were some apricots I had to decide not to pick due to having no markets.

What are the other pressures you face?

The weather's the biggest one. Our aim is to grow perfect fruit, as this is what the market demands. If there's a storm or frost coming you just have to drop everything – it's all about saving the crop and looking after the orchard.

Why have you taken time off to get on the bike and enter Gravel in Paradise?

Fruit-growing can be isolating at times, especially when you're on a smaller scale like me and I'm the only one working during the off-season. It is easy to skip things and get bogged down with orchard work. With labour being so expensive, you often end up trying to do everything possible yourself. It's easy to get too busy and not take time out for yourself. That's why I try and head out on the bike whenever I can. I'm also part of the local ambulance service, where I volunteer as an Emergency Medical Technician.

What are the benefits of taking breaks like that?

It's just good to get out and do something different, and to be involved with people outside your industry. It is my "me" time when I head out on the bike after a day's work. I take my phone with me when I'm on my bike, but that is only for emergencies like having a mechanical break-down or if someone needs to

urgently contact me. So, if it does ring or a text comes in, I look at it and filter whether I really need to answer there and then. Majority of the time these things can wait. With technology, we've ended up living in a society where we feel like everything needs to be done "now". Mentally it feels so freeing just getting out and away from work and interruptions.

How do you find time for cycling?

It's all about planning ahead. In the middle of the fruit season, I'd love to take some time off but actually, there just isn't the time. The reality is it's a couple of months of constant work. The staff may get some days off if we are up with the picking, but as a grower you've got spraying, administration and trying to keep some type of plan in place for the staff as you negotiate the harvest. But one of the benefits I enjoy about being self-employed is that you can manage your own time to a degree. You've got your busy times, and you've got your quieter times.

What's your advice to other growers who might be worried about taking time off to enter events like Gravel in Paradise?

You often think to yourself, 'I can't go away, I've got too much work to do', but the reality is there is always work to do when you work on the land, and you need to consider if it is really that urgent or if it can wait a couple of days. Take some time out to enjoy yourself. Don't get so bogged down with work that your own health suffers. The business is no good without you.

What else do you do to manage workload?

I'm a Christian so I try and make sure I have Sundays off and the staff have a day off a week, even in the middle of the fruit season. In the height of the season this isn't always possible because the fruit can ripen

overnight during hot weather, and I haven't spent a year preparing the fruit for harvest for it to then drop on the ground. Although if I can avoid working on Sunday, I will.

I'm also careful to try and make sure I'm only working around eight-ish hours a day. In the fruit season, we end up working maybe 12-hour days sometimes. But during the winter and quieter times, it's a matter of telling yourself, 'actually, I don't need to do this now. It can wait an extra day.'

One thing growers have mentioned is managing stress by enjoying the little wins along the way, rather than always focusing on the big goal. What's your take on that?

You certainly need to have a lot of faith in fruit-growing. Sometimes it's looking like a perfect crop and then the weather turns, and it feels like it's going to be a disaster. But it's amazing how it always seems to work out in the end. It feels like that every year to be honest but I think that's just the joys of growing and farming.

What about days when nothing goes right? What do you do to maintain a good headspace?

I find just stopping and having a period of reflection helps. Just take a moment to pause, slow your mind down and think about the best way to work your way through the situation. It's all about slowing down. Getting wound up just makes everything worse and makes it unpleasant for those around you. Although it can be difficult to slow yourself down when dealing with stress, especially when it's to do with a decision that's time-critical.

You're constantly making decisions in growing so maintaining a good headspace is important. In the fruit season you might have days of rain where you

**“It’s just good to get out and do something different,
and to be involved with people outside your industry.”**



can't pick the fruit, but on the other hand if you're having hot days and hot nights you can get behind very quickly. Once it's ripe you've only got a day or two to pick it. So, you need to be in the right frame of mind to make these calls.

How do you enjoy life despite these pressures and challenges? Any advice for people starting out?

During those hard patches you just put your head down and plough your way through it. But make sure you make a conscious effort to enjoy the time with your family and get out and spend time doing the things you love when you can. The amazing thing about cycling is you've got people of all ages and abilities doing it and we're all able to hop on a bike and race together.

I do a mixture of road-racing and gravel-racing and last winter I went over to France and actually spent six weeks away cycling the French Alps. I was only meant to be in France for two and a half weeks but while I was over there a spot became available on a cycle tour of the French Alps. And I was like, 'Should I do it? I can't afford to because I'm behind with my pruning!' but then I thought 'well, I'm over here and it's such an amazing opportunity.' So, I did it. 2,500 km later and a mere 59,000 m of total elevation, I thought that it was time to return to the orchard.

Yes, I was behind with pruning, but it's the best trip I've ever had and the business didn't fall over because I was away longer than planned. I was way behind with work, but I managed to catch up again eventually. And isn't that always the way? So, you can't let these opportunities go by. 🍷



The sun always rises

LIAM SYKES

Liam Sykes was born to grow apples. His family's been orcharding since 1927 and Liam's a fourth-generation grower. He shares how he stays Farmstrong.

For the past four years, Liam's been the apples manager for Ngāi Tukairangi Orchards in Hawke's Bay, managing 60 hectares. Last year he added 60 hectares of kiwifruit gold to his responsibilities.

"We've got seven different orchards spread across Hawke's Bay from Havelock North to Puketapu. We have 27 full-time staff, 20 RSEs who come from Fiji every year and obviously many contractors as well. At any one time we can have up to 250 people on orchard, so it's a big operation," he says.

The apple orchard Farmstrong visited near Havelock is state of the art. There are trees as far as the eye can see, configured in a 2-D growing system for ease of access and harvest. Their concrete supports come from Italy as does a vast mesh canopy which protects them from insects such as the brown marmorated stink bug. The health of each tree is carefully scanned, mapped and monitored. The aim of all this infrastructure is to maximise yield. The average apple orchard in New Zealand harvests 55 tonnes per hectare. This orchard is aiming for 115 tonnes by growing smarter.

But today we're not just here to chat about the trees, but also about the people who look after them. How do you keep well in such a busy, booming industry?

It's late spring and the pressure's on to get work completed.

"We've got a big group of people here. The way that I run an orchard, it's all about teamwork. I never use the words 'I' or 'me', it's always 'we'. The only thing that counts is what we can achieve as a team, because it takes an army of people to run these orchards."

The pressure to perform is constant. "Everything in our industry is weather-related and every part of the year is important. Most people have the idea that we just pick the fruit and close the gate, but winter for us is a massive operation, because we've got a very limited time to get our winter pruning done. Then in spring we put on our bud-breaking sprays and wake up the trees. So all our work is time-critical."

Liam outlines the spraying, thinning and pruning that lie ahead as 'make or break times'. "Every part of the year is just as important as the last one in the lead-up to harvest."

How does he handle the pressure of an industry that is always 'on'?

"I'm lucky I've got an amazing team. We all share the load and I can delegate tasks because I work with people who take ownership. A problem shared is definitely a problem halved."

"If you've got 160 people working on your orchard and you're dealing with a biological asset that's growing, **there are going to be issues every day.**"

Liam's also flexible in the way he approaches orchard management.

"In this industry everyone has a different perception of how to prune, how to thin, how to pick, how to do everything, and no one's right or wrong, it's just a matter of the way you've been taught. So, my main job is to get behind people and uplift them. Anyone that steps foot on my orchard is part of my team and I will back them to the hilt."

Even the most committed orchardist needs time to decompress each day.

"I'm lucky, I've got a lifestyle property about half an hour out of town," says Liam. "There's a roundabout that heads onto the main motorway, and the moment I hit that, I know in my head it's time to wind down."

"I'll assess how the day's gone, go over things I need to get organised for tomorrow and slowly start winding my brain down. By the time I hit my own road, I've shut right off and I'm just thinking home. It also helps that I live in ag country, nowhere near an apple orchard," he laughs. "There's nothing out there that reminds me of work."

Liam and his partner have recently had their first child so achieving a decent work-life balance is a priority.

"I'm a big believer that if I don't get something done at work today, the sun will rise tomorrow and there's always another day when I can come to work and I give my all, because that's what this job more or less requires. As long as I'm giving my all, and I can see my team are trying their best, there's nothing more you can ask."

Liam's favourite way to zone out is to leap on his ride-on mower. "I just love mowing my lawns and I've got a nice big lawn so that's my escape when I'm home."

He feels well supported in his role. "I've got a big support network around me that I can lean on. I don't

have to pretend to know everything. I can also get on the phone to my boss Andrew Wood in Tauranga who is very level-headed."

Some days the challenges come thick and fast.

"If you've got 160 people working on your orchard and you're dealing with a biological asset that's growing and you can't stop, there are going to be issues every day. It's easy to over-react and start thinking worst-case scenario in your brain sometimes. But as long as everyone is safe and accounted for, every other issue on an orchard can be addressed by surrounding it with good people. So, I think the answer to dealing with day-to-day stress is to stay connected to other people and bring your thinking back to facts and evidence."

Liam describes himself as a 'lifelong optimist'.

"I don't know where my positivity comes from, but I've always been a glass half-full person. I reckon I can fill the other half pretty quick too," he quips.

"My big thing is gratitude. I'm very grateful for my life. We live in a beautiful part of the world, we're connected to the land, we're growing this beautiful fruit that's consumed by people across the world. Every day I get to walk around orchards and make



decisions with my managers about how we're going to grow these crops. Even on the hard days, there's nothing else I would rather be doing."

But sometimes even a born optimist reaches his limit. As we wrap up, Liam shares a time he found genuinely challenging.

"Last year in our Tukituki orchard, we had a beautiful crop of fruit, and as we were picking one of the varieties we saw it had a marking on the skin. In my head, the alarm bells were going off, and I'm thinking, okay, something's not right here. We'd got all the way to the end of the season to deliver this crop, and there was marking on the fruit. Anyway, the marketing company came in and said, 'look, we can't harvest that fruit.'"

"That was game over for me. I'm very proud of what we do and I was like, 'oh no, my life's over'. I spent all night crying about it. That doesn't normally happen."

"How did I get through? Again, a problem shared is a problem halved. I shared the problem with a lot of people and within a few days it became clear that there's a lot of people out there who have gone through similar things. I'm not the only one. That really helped me to move on."

"Yes, at that moment it's the worst thing in the world, but you get through it. You might have a few calluses at the end of it on your heart or your brain, but you can get through these things, learn and grow stronger."

"I learned a very valuable lesson that day, not only about where the issue came from, but how to deal with a really challenging situation. Time's a great equaliser. It sorts out everything and the sun will rise tomorrow."

There are plenty of good times too. We head up to a stop-bank where the view takes in the whole orchard and land beyond.

"My main job is to get behind people and uplift them."

Anyone that steps foot on my orchard is part of my team and I will back them to the hilt."



"Every year before harvest I like to come up where I'm standing now, have a beer and celebrate what we've achieved," Liam says. "It takes a whole year to grow a crop and we put our heart and souls into what we do. Every now and then, it's important to slow down, recognise the wins and celebrate our people." 🍷



**Stay curious,
stay keen**

KEVIN JACKSON

Over a lifetime, Kevin Jackson has witnessed the steady evolution and growth of Central Otago's orchard industry. He's still out there on the grass today, encouraging the next generation of growers, pruners, pickers and packers.

Orcharding is in the Jackson family DNA. Kevin was raised on an orchard and, four generations on, he's still heavily involved. He says he was a 'slow learner' at school, not because of aptitude, but because he was far too busy working on his Dad's orchard to do any homework. The teachers cut him some slack and let him sit down the back of the class with the 'bright' students anyway. They saw potential. They weren't wrong.

Kevin is full of colourful stories describing how the local hort industry transformed into its current state – the innovations in technology, land use and labour that propelled it forward. Across various properties and locations, his family has been at the forefront of it all. These days, Jackson Orchards, just outside Cromwell, is renowned for its stonefruits and is one of NZ's largest apricot exporters.

There's a bigger picture too. Growing and selling fruit is just one of Kevin's business interests. He's also a successful entrepreneur who's been heavily involved in the region's commercial development and growth. Farmstrong asked Kevin to shed some light on the mindset that has enabled him to constantly pursue opportunities whilst managing risk, challenge and change.

Tell us about your operation.

The property we have here in Cromwell is very similar to the orchard I was brought up on in Alexandra. We've ended up planting an orchard with 105 different varieties of fruit.

Why did you do that?

Because it's so much easier to manage. We're harvesting fruit for six months of the year. I'm told that it's the largest, longest harvest season of any orchard in New Zealand. We start mid-November with cherries and we're still harvesting pip fruit in mid-May. If we count our roadside business, which is very strong, we have 26 permanent staff. This approach has spread our risk and boosted our capacity. So we're busier than ever and our staff enjoy a real variety of jobs.

Are you still involved in the running of the business?

Yes, but these days I have head people running each department and deal directly with them. But I do still get out. Sometimes I'll go out and pick fruit for an hour or work in the packhouse for an hour or work in the shop.

What's changed the most?

The technology involved these days is incredible. We put a computerised grader into the packhouse about six years ago. It takes 70 photographs of each piece of fruit so you can programme the packing to suit where the fruit's going to be marketed, here or overseas. Just upgrading the computer software costs \$380,000. It took me a few minutes to absorb that, but you've just got to keep moving with the times, don't you? You're either in the game or you're not.

So, if I'm feeling under pressure during harvest, working all hours, what should I do to look after myself?

What worked best for me is just keep your head down for those couple of busy months, concentrate on your harvest and your orchard and leave everything else in limbo. Then make sure you catch up properly with your social life and your family and your friends once the fruit season's finished.

A lot of the growers have mentioned that they worry about the weather. How do you handle that uncertainty?

I've been in the business long enough that I don't lose any sleep over the weather. My attitude now is 'you win a few and lose a few' and at the end of the day, it all averages out. So you've got to be in there for the long haul. This industry is swings and roundabouts. If you're going through a bad patch, you have to realise that it's only temporary. There'll be a good turn which will make up for the shortfalls. Nature is out of our control, but nature will also make up for it.

What about days when nothing seems to go right? Any advice?

Reach out to other fruit growers and don't turn your back on your problems. Other growers will often suggest a remedy. It's a really good industry like that. So don't bottle things up, compare notes and share experiences.

If I'm getting into the horticulture industry now, what should I bear in mind?

You've got to work hard at things and have a vision. You've also got to be a learner – stay curious, stay keen. Try and mix with a wide variety of people, so you're picking up on new ideas.

Can you give us an example of a new idea?

When I was growing up, there was a research orchard at Earnscliffe, near Alexandra. That's where most of the orchards were. They were doing trials and introduced the idea of grassing down the orchards. It was a new system being used in Europe. Back in the 50s, the orchards here were all cleanly cultivated. When the harvest was finished, they would plant a short crop and then in wintertime, they'd rotary hoe it in.

The research orchard was trialling grassing down as an alternative but the fruit growers said that would never work. But my father was curious and he let them grass down an acre of his orchard. We'd just bought the first rotary mower in the district and so we mowed the grass over summer every seven to 14 days. I was only seven but I was mowing too. When my father went out with the fork and turned the soil, he could see it was full of worms because of the nutrients. In the cleanly cultivated areas there were no worms. So my father was the first in the whole district to grass down his orchard, which is now standard practice. That's the power of being open to new ideas.

What does it mean to be a resilient grower? How do you sail through all the various ups and downs of a career?

I think it's all about keeping life in perspective and how you've been brought up. My parents drove to Dunedin once a year to do their Xmas shopping. That was their big trip. My mother would take a cut lunch and we'd stop halfway at Lawrence with a flask of hot water and she'd make a cup of tea.

We'd stay with relatives and dine out at a restaurant that night. That was their only treat all year. Sometimes, if they could afford it, they might buy a bunch of bananas because we never got them in Central Otago. It was a treat to bring some home.



I think the world's changed to the point where life's become much easier in many respects. We live in a world where everyone expects everything. It's almost like we've got too much of a good thing. I think that can make people vulnerable.

So what's your advice?

Try and face the day with a smile on your face and remember there's always someone worse off or less fortunate than you. Be grateful for what you have. And let's face it, if you didn't have a few lows, you wouldn't appreciate the good turns as much.

What's the biggest mental pressure facing an orchardist?

I think it's the fact that no two years are the same in growing. You can make a lot of money one year and then, through various circumstances, next year you might make a loss. So you've always got to focus on the future and have a guarantee of finance to keep you on the job for the next year.

You also learn along the way that luck plays a big part in growing, so you can't take things too personally.

Can you think of an example?

I was actually very lucky the first year I was orcharding in the Cromwell Gorge. It was 1969 and I'd just bought the orchard and that year the district had the most severe spring frost that had ever been recorded. Back then, the Cromwell Gorge was regarded as being frost-free. But having been brought up on a normal orchard in Alexandra, I couldn't quite get my head around that. So when I bought the orchard the first thing I did was I put in frost protection – in those days we used oil pots. And that turned out to be the first year ever that frost hit the Cromwell Gorge! So, when it hit, I had frost protection on.

Every apricot crop in the area was wiped out. In those days, fruit was sold at auction and apricots were so scarce that the price just went off. That year was the best year I've ever had!

What's the lesson - expect the unexpected?

Exactly. Each day when you walk out the door as a grower, you don't know what's going to happen. Usually, by the end of the day, there's something new to think about. I suppose that's the challenge of the job, but, for me, it's also the joy. 🌞



**Keep looking
forward**

PAUL OLSEN

Paul Olsen oversees a range of farming enterprises including a potato growing business. He shares how he manages the pressures.

Paul farms just out of Opiki, 30 minutes south of Palmerston North. He grew up on the family farm and has been running it since 2003. His involvement in farming is extensive and spans growing potatoes, dairy farming and dry stock.

Paul is the chairperson of the Potatoes NZ board. His business exports table potatoes to Fiji and also supplies local markets and supermarkets. He says the industry is very weather-dependent.

"You can have a cyclone or flood and lose your crop. A few years ago, I pretty much lost 80 percent of my crop through flooding. I try and mitigate things a little. I do grow in a couple of different sites to spread the risk, but there's not a lot you can do to stop it."

Market dynamics bring financial pressures too, says Paul.

"You can't control what the market's doing, especially when you're trying to service an international market. There are also local supply and demand issues. You only need someone to have a good growing season and they might get an extra 20 tonne per hectare to supply, which lowers the price."

Throw in a few more factors such as fertiliser and fuel costs and it's clear that Paul has plenty to juggle each week. In the old days, his approach was to 'put his head down and just go for it'.

"We're a family business and I'd like to offer my children the opportunity to carry on the tradition."

"I was pretty old school and used to try and do everything, putting in 100 hours a week and all the rest of the dramas," he admits. However, over the last couple of years Paul's changed tack.

"These days I head to the gym six out of seven days a week. I leave home at quarter past five every morning and I go to the gym before work."

He's also running regularly, notching up to 100 - 120Ks a month. Why would such a busy person bother?

"It puts life into perspective. It's a whole different network of people too. Sometimes you think you're the only one who's got problems. Then you listen to other people's problems and you realise every industry has them."

I put it to Paul that many people reading this would say, 'oh look, I'm already doing physical work on farm, the last thing I need is to go to a gym.'

"A few years ago I was one of those people," he laughs. "I probably couldn't have run 5Ks, but I've got a couple of good mates and we do it together. Why do I do it? When you're physically stronger and fitter, it just makes the whole day so much easier."

"It puts you in a much better headspace and I find I naturally eat better too when I go to the gym."

Meeting people from other walks of life brings other benefits. "I've always lived by that saying that you're the

average of the people you surround yourself with. I think that's very true. It's really healthy associating with people doing different jobs."

Paul's worked hard on achieving better work-life balance.

"We're a family business and I'd like to offer my children the opportunity to carry on the tradition. So I make the conscious effort now when it gets to five or six o'clock at night to start packing up and get home for dinner."

"I don't take any work home at the end of the day either because I don't think that sets a very good example. I don't want my kids to think that's what farming is."



"They're only young and at the moment they think farming is brilliant. They absolutely love helping to shift stock on a motorbike or getting up on a tractor. I think that's the opportunity we have in farming to really encourage the next generation."

Paul's become more philosophical about the inevitable setbacks that crop up in farming.

"When something goes wrong, especially if it's something I've done, I always have a laugh about it."

He's got a technique which works in multiples of ten, that he uses to distance himself from the drama.

"These days – no matter what the issue is – I'm very much driven by three questions: 'What will this look like in 10 minutes' time? What will it look like in 10 months' time and what will it look like in 10 years' time? The short answer for most things is that in 10 years it won't matter."

"No matter how negative the outcome is going to be, you've got to put things in perspective. When you lose your potato crop, yes, you do get pretty disappointed and disengaged for a little bit, but at the end of the day, if it's a flooding event, it wasn't your own doing."

"There's no point losing your rag over things you can't control. You've always got to take a step back and actually look at an issue for what it is. Often you'll see people lose their rag about something, but if they were to address that same issue in 10 minutes' time their way of dealing with it would be totally different. The big thing is to actually step back."

Paul agrees it's the sort of wisdom that comes with maturity and experience.

"When I was younger, I probably did get uptight and all the rest of it, but over time you learn that working on something with so many variables,

if you lose your rag over every small thing, you'll never get anywhere." He gives an example.

"When I started digging potatoes last year, the main web on the harvester broke in half. I had to park up the machine and order a new one and that was three days away. It was frustrating but at the end of the day I couldn't do anything about it. All you can do is calmly address the situation and order a new one."

What about major weather events like flooding?

"When serious events happen like that, it's about tapping into the wider network around you, especially those who've been through similar situations. It's about reaching out and communicating with people about the best solutions."

"When I had my flood, it was halfway through the growing season, so I just let it go and came back a few weeks later so I could properly assess how bad the damage was and make some clear decisions and look forward. We stopped spraying some of the crop because obviously it was a write-off. But there were still areas of the crop that were going to be successful so we concentrated on what we could harvest out of that."

"In farming, you've got to keep looking forward, concentrate on the stuff in front of you rather than look back and dwell on what's happened. What positive thing can you do next? What can you control? And just tell yourself hopefully it won't happen again next season."

Paul says he's thankful for the support he receives from his wife and friends.

"My wife works off-farm and she's normally pretty grounding if I'm worried about something. She's keen to offer her perspective and I think that's important because she's seeing these issues through a different lens. It's the same with my mates. When you're so invested in a business or industry, it's easy to get blinkered in your thinking. You can't see the wood for the trees sometimes. Talking to other people makes you realise there are other ways of looking at things and other solutions."

What advice would Paul offer to someone just starting out?

"Build a good network of people around you and make sure you've got that support. Make sure that includes people outside the industry so you get that balance. And if you're feeling under the pump or vulnerable ask for help, people are only too willing to help."

"For me being Farmstrong starts with looking after yourself. There's actually nothing to stop any of us from getting out there and doing some sort of fitness activity or past-time to keep ourselves balanced and well. Whether it's going to the gym, running, biking or jet boating. These are the things that put life into perspective."

"This is where you can chew the fat with others and de-stress. Enjoying farming is about prioritising your own wellbeing as well as looking after your produce and machinery. Getting off-farm to do these things gives you that extra shot of stimulation so you come back refreshed." ●

"Sometimes you think you're the only one who's got problems.

Then you listen to other people's problems and you realise every industry has them."

Getting through tough times



MURRAY ELWOOD

Murray Elwood has navigated the ups and downs of the beekeeping industry for over 30 years. He talks about how he manages the pressures of an uncertain business.

Tell us about your background.

We're based in Nelson and our business is in the top of the south. I've been in the industry about 35 years.

What do you enjoy about the job?

I think it's the fact that bees are such an intriguing insect. Sometimes I'll just hold a frame and look at what they're doing. They're all busy and they've all got their roles. They really are an incredible insect. There's also the satisfaction in harvest season when you come to a hive with four or five honey boxes on it, knowing that you and the team have done what it takes to make it a successful unit.

What are the main pressures?

Over the years, we've had some major challenges. Beekeeping is a rollercoaster industry dictated by three things – the weather, hive strength and flowering. If you haven't got your hive right or haven't got a flowering or you've got poor weather, then you get a very limited crop. A number of years ago even when prices were good, we had a very poor season. It was fifty-fifty whether our business could continue.

What impact did that have on you personally?

I had a year where I barely left the house and was very withdrawn. I felt mentally drained. We were facing the collapse of our business and the fear of failure and what people might think of me was very real. So, I withdrew.

Can you share how you got through?

What kept me going? My wife and my kids were an amazing source of support for me. The kids were teenagers and just having them round put a smile on my face.

I guess the other thing I learnt during that time was that who I was as a person was far more important than what I achieved. That was a massive lesson. I learnt to accept that even if the business failed, it wasn't going to be the end of the world for me. I'd just do something else with my life. I'd go and work for wages for someone else if need be.

What else helped?

I had to learn to be more open. I was selective about who I confided in, but I realised I had to be more open, especially with close friends, to deal with how I was feeling. So, my family and friends really helped me through that time and I did come through.

What do you do now to keep well?

There's an old saying – the best things in life are free. When you're under financial pressure, the last thing you want to do is spend money. Luckily, I'm a hunting, fishing, outdoors man and you can do all of those things on an absolute shoestring. I just love getting out

“The other thing I learnt during that time was that **who I was as a person was far more important** than what I achieved. That was a massive lesson.”

there in nature with mates and taking a couple of days off. It does me the world of good and it doesn't cost anything. That's big for me.

What's the benefit of taking time out like that?

Sometimes when you've got a massive list of things to do and you're losing money while you're doing it, it's tempting to think you've got to work seven days a week. But that's the worst thing you can do. You've got to take that time out to recharge so you can be more effective in the time you are at work.

How do you make sure you enjoy the job nowadays, despite all the uncertainty?

We're beekeeping in some absolutely stunning areas. For me, it's about standing up from the beehive and just appreciating the moment that you're in. The view from the top of the hill. The cicadas singing away. It's just spending a moment to enjoy it.

Where are things at now in the industry?

The prices we're getting for the honey is less than what it costs to produce it. Financially and mentally that's very stressful. The prices are low and if you put that on top of a poor season like it was last season, sadly that has already tipped over quite a few beekeepers.

What's your advice to someone new to the industry and worried?

If you're new to the industry, then don't expect to get wealthy. Just do your best to break even or a bit better. Do the simple things right. Make sure your hive health is good but visit your hives as little as you can to limit your spending.

The other thing is stay connected. You can't work out every single problem yourself. Beekeepers are often loners. They like to do their own thing their own way. That's why they got into the business. But when you get tough times, it's important to have Apiculture NZ behind you. Sometimes advice from another beekeeper is like gold. Having that collective input gives you a new way of looking at things.

Any advice for people who feel stuck?

If things are too tough, seek advice on an exit strategy. You might not get a lot for your business as it is now, but you'll save the other assets you've built up. If you can't see a way forward, you've got to be willing to let it go.

It's about realising that there's always something else for you around the corner. If you've had a successful business, you can have one again. It's just that the current pricing is very hard. Even if you love beekeeping, you've got to work out a way where you're not losing money.

Any final advice?

I think it's great that Farmstrong is advocating about mental health. In the past, it was a taboo subject. We were all good Kiwi men who never had a weak moment. But that was never true. Everyone needs a hand and everyone needs support at some stage. ●

“Everyone needs a hand and **everyone**
needs support at some stage.”





**Learning
to carry
the load**

ALLAN FONG

Allan Fong is an award-winning leader and innovator in the horticulture industry. His family have been growing vegetables commercially in Pukekohe since 1956. He shares what it takes to stay Farmstrong no matter what the seasons send your way.

Allan featured in Farmstrong's first book *Live Well Farm Well* and still quotes its title to people he meets when he travels overseas to sum up his approach to work and life.

Time's moved on and these days Allan and his brother Colin have handed over the day-to-day running of the operation to the third generation of Fongs – Allan's son and daughter-in-law and Colin's three sons.

"So we're still a family business, two families with five children and the children all have equal shareholdings. My daughter-in-law is the CFO and one of my nephews is the CEO, so in theory I'm no longer CEO, I'm just the mascot," laughs Allan. "I've got all the young ones pretty much running it and I'm trying not to be as active as I used to be, but I'm still there."

He certainly is. Before we begin our catch-up, Allan hops off a tractor. He's been helping out with the spraying. The 500-acre vegetable growing operation in Pukekohe is a sizeable undertaking, trading under the Fresh Grower brand. It grows and supplies green vegetables, salad greens, spinach, bok choy and coriander.

Where are things at this season?

"It's been a bit tough out there in recent years. We thought this year might be better, but the fuel crisis has put a damper on things. Everybody's shut their wallets. It's been really tough and I think it's not just us, it's across the board. So there've been some casualties in our sector. It's not easy-going out there."

We discuss the sort of mindset that's required to ride out these downturns in the market.

"I think you just have to battle through it. We've been lucky that our young generation are really passionate and smart about what they do. Our generation was always very hands-on. You planted yourself, harvested it, fertilised it, sprayed it, cut it, loaded it, packed it, drove it to market. You did everything!"

"Our young team has got a much more varied skill set, with different strengths and weaknesses. So, as a team, I think they're in a much better position than we were to adapt and do things differently."

"For example, there's a lot more hoops to jump through these days in terms of compliance. More dots on the Is and more Ts to cross, otherwise you can't sell your produce. It's very strict but our young team are really focused and make it all work well."

They don't lack for motivation either, says Allan.

"It really helps that we have our own branded product. It's motivating to see the results of your efforts out there in supermarkets. That recognition and pride goes a long way to keep people going."

Since the challenges aren't going to disappear any time soon, we discuss what people can do to stay in good health and headspace to navigate them.

Allan admits time off can be in short supply.

“Unfortunately, this type of business is not an eight to five job. My boys have to work really hard. We’re also governed by the weather, so, even if it’s a public holiday or a weekend, if something has to be done, it has to be done. In a big corporate you might have multiple shifts that can come in and take over, but not in a family-run operation. You’ve got to learn to carry the load.”

Is burnout a risk?

“It definitely is. Look, we had some issues with one of our team a few years ago. They had a massive breakdown and that was from burnout. They’ve come right now, but we went through a rough patch.”

Allan says the experience made him reconsider his business model.

“It made me realise I don’t do enough team-building – taking the team out for a fun half-day of something like go-kart racing or car racing. Something different. I’m going to try and set aside time every couple of months for those sorts of activities from now on, because I don’t want anyone else having a meltdown.”

This is an industry that’s very much at the mercy of the elements, explains Allan.

“We’ve just come off a month of bad weather. So, we’ve lost four consecutive weeks of spinach and about three consecutive weeks of coriander, which are both very big crops for us. So we’ve got no product out there and it’s already impacting our cash flow.”

His advice?

“When I was their age, I couldn’t sleep, I was so worried about it. I’d think ‘My God, the weather’s come across and absolutely wiped us. We’re just buggered.’ But now I say to them, ‘look, that’s just the

nature of the business we’re in. These are the risks we take when we’re involved in outdoors production. There are going to be crop losses, so we need to develop a thicker skin. You just have to gather yourself up and go again. And hopefully the next couple of months will be better and you’ll mitigate the losses.”

“It is difficult. I don’t say to them ‘you can’t worry about it.’ But I do say to them, ‘look, it’s happened. You can’t do anything about it. It’s spilt milk. We have to move on.’”

“I realise now looking back that I didn’t have that sort of mentoring to help me, but this team are very well-educated and understand these ideas. So they are already showing more resilience. The reality in any business is that sometimes the going is tough. That’s when you have to dig deep and support each other.”

I ask Allan to share any tips for managing days when things feel like they’re going backwards, despite your best efforts.

“Shit, it happens all the time!” he laughs. “I’ve learned to just park the tough days to one side. You’ve just got to tell yourself, it’s not the end of the world, right?”

“The other thing you learn is that there’s always someone worse off than you. So you’ve got to keep things in perspective. I look at what we’ve got in the life that we have, and yes, it may be tough sometimes, but then you compare your life with the lives of people overseas. They couldn’t even dream of a life like we have here, you know? I might be worrying about paying a bill, they don’t even know where the next meal is coming from! If you try and put things in perspective like that, you soon realise how lucky you are.”

What makes for a top-performing team? If I’ve just been made the manager of a growing business like Allan’s, what should I bear in mind?

"We have over 100 people working here at times. The range of people is incredible – young backpackers, local people who've retired from other jobs and careers, so you've got to have really good people skills."

Drawing on more than five decades' worth of experience, Allan lists the following 'essential' skills.

"You've got to give people responsibility, you've got to give them focus and you've got to give them a lot of encouragement. They need to know that what they're doing means something. Even if you're on the packing line bagging produce or stacking things on a pallet, you're contributing to something important. You're feeding people and that's a really great thing to do." ●

**" The reality in any business is that sometimes the going is tough.
That's when you have to dig deep and support each other."**



Sleep

the performance wonder-drug

Growers want to perform well so they can be successful in their business, provide for their family and contribute to their community. Quality sleep should be a big part of the picture to get there, as effective as any performance drug, and without the side effects.

Over the last couple of decades there have been huge advances in sleep science. While you will be mostly fine (at least in the short term) if you are not getting enough sleep, the benefits of having quality sleep are huge. It helps you make better decisions, feel great and be psychologically and physically stronger. It also improves relationships significantly. All of these benefits make it worth prioritising.

The narrative has been that sleep is for wusses and the hard-drivers in business thrive by cutting back on it. The new evidence doesn't support this; sleep is not a waste of time but crucial to clean out toxins, build memory, focus on learning and leave your brain in top shape for performance demands.

It's tempting to take short-cuts with sleep, especially when the list is as long as your arm of things to do. The cumulative effects of this strategy, however, are very damaging for your health.

DID YOU KNOW

- Nearly everyone needs between 7-9 hours sleep a night.
- Not getting enough sleep can increase your risk of heart attacks, strokes, depression, weight gain and lower your immune system.
- Not getting enough sleep puts you at a higher risk of having an accident.

“Sleep is crucial to clean out toxins, build memory, focus on learning and leave your brain in top shape.”

TIPS FOR GETTING OFF TO SLEEP

If you're having trouble getting off to sleep, sleep experts recommend:

- **end screen time early in the evening** if possible
- **cool your core body temperature down.** Having a hot shower can do this as it draws heat from your core and actually cools you
- **dim the lights** as you get close to bed-time
- **avoid caffeine** from the afternoon
- **keep alcohol intake moderate**
- **go to bed at a regular time**
- **fill your mind with what you are grateful for.**

If it's hard to sleep because you are going through a stressful time, don't be tough on yourself. That's just one extra stressor you don't need. Getting to sleep can't happen by force of will, only by letting go.

When life is really stressful, you may need to look at other strategies to get some better sleep, such as sharing your worries with someone you trust, asking for help, getting more exercise, having relaxation routines and healthy thinking practices to get some perspective.

USE MEDICATIONS SPARINGLY

Sleeping meds can be useful if you are desperate for some good nights' sleep. But don't become reliant on them. You should not be on sleeping meds for too long. Some are sedative in nature to relieve anxiety and over time can become addictive. If you continue to struggle with sleep, consider seeing a sleep specialist. Investing in this type of expertise is money very well spent.

WAKING AND WORRYING? FIVE GREAT SOLUTIONS

A very common reason for not being able to get back to sleep is lying awake worrying. Typical things growers tell us trigger sleeplessness are: the weather, problems with staff or contractors, an endless to-do list, financial pressures. Here are some things that you can do to trick the worrying brain into calmness:

- **Slowly count backwards from 30 in time with your breathing.** Why backwards? Because you have to concentrate a little bit to count this way, it means the mind can't think about other things. If your mind wanders from the counting, stop and start back at 30. This stops you slipping back into worrying again. Counting in time with your breathing relaxes your body.
- **Write a to-do list late in the day** and make an agreement with yourself that you will tackle these tasks in the morning. This tells your worrying brain that you have things under control.
- If you're feeling riled up and tense, with a racing mind, **get up and do some stretching.** It's worth learning proper techniques in advance, e.g. from the gym or a yoga course.
- **Don't turn the light on** if possible as this disrupts the sleep cycle. If you decide to get up, keep a small torch on hand to avoid tripping over things.
- **Learn some relaxation techniques** like meditation, a body scan, visualisation or breathing techniques. If you wake and can't get back to sleep, practice these relaxation techniques in bed.



“Just like you can become physically fitter, you can also build your mental strength and fitness to deal with the tough times. **That’s what being Farmstrong is all about.**”



**“I let my team know
when I’m under pressure
so we can support each
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Striking a balance

LYDIA GOODMAN

Lydia Goodman is an assistant orchard manager at Central Orchard Management and Packing Manager at CentralPac. Last year, she was a finalist in Hort NZ's Young Grower of the Year competition. She shares the challenges and rewards of a working life on a busy Cromwell cherry tree orchard.

How did you get into the industry?

Very much by accident. I was raised on a beef and dairy farm in England and came here to visit eight years ago. One of my visa options was to work in horticulture. I fell into the industry, moved from a small orchard to a larger company and I'm loving it.

What do you enjoy about growing?

You get to turn your hand to everything. There's never a dull moment. I assist in managing our growers' orchards year-round, and during harvest, I move into the packhouse where I coordinate staff and production.

What I love most of all are the people. In my leadership role, I enjoy seeing the spark in people's eyes when they start to fall in love with the job and understand how the biology of a tree works. That is just so rewarding.

How many people do you manage?

Over the last few months I've been working with a team of 120. If you include the packhouse staff and pickers, I can be working with up to 400 people at peak season. So it's like a small community.

Your people skills must be next level! Had you done anything similar before?

I'd worked in hospitality when I was younger but this has been a big learning curve.

What does your role entail?

My role's to make sure that everything's operating as smoothly as possible. In the off-season it's very much about getting trees pruned and sprays on. In summer, it's making sure we're meeting our production goals, fulfilling our commitments to customers and making sure that our growers are making money. In a season like this one, that's meant making hard calls quickly – adjusting labour and packhouse flow to protect quality and returns.

What's the key to achieving those goals?

Clarity and buy-in. When you're making quick decisions under pressure, people need to understand why you're doing it. Making sure the team is motivated, engaged and proud of the quality of their work is what allows those decisions to land well – especially when the weeks are long, and the pace is high.

Do you find your job stressful at all?

Oh, absolutely, yeah. You wouldn't be human if you didn't feel some pressure.

Can you give us an example of a challenging time?

This year's been the toughest season we've had in over a decade. Rain and cold weather over summer damaged crops, slowed ripening and delayed the harvest throughout the whole area. The hardest thing in growing is that you get very attached to the crop and work all year towards harvest, but things can just change overnight, which is really tough.

How do you handle those sort of setbacks?

Communication is key. I'm very fortunate to have a great team around me. I let my team know when I'm under pressure so we can support each other, which is a huge help in itself. Surrounding yourself with good people can really help lift you out of a dark spot.

At the end of the day, you also have to be able to step back and accept, 'what will be will be', and just focus on controlling the controllables.

Do you schedule rest and recovery time?

In the winter, we're more like a standard business and can take weekends off, so we do get the chance to go out and see friends and do some exercise and things outside of work that keep your happy chemicals up and your dopamine going.

What are your go-tos?

I'm creative. I like to paint and do the sort of things that enable my mind to drift away from the stressful things. Something completely different.

What about days when nothing goes to plan? Any advice?

When things go wrong at work, it's tempting to go into that 'toughen up, get over it, don't wallow' frame of mind, but I think part of getting through is actually allowing yourself to just feel how you feel. If the weather is driving you up the wall, it's best to acknowledge it. The quicker you acknowledge those feelings, the quicker you can bounce back.

Is harvest time the most stressful time of the year for you?

To be honest I think the toughest time is afterwards when things quieten down. At peak season, when you're waking up at four and going to bed at nine o'clock at night and your phone's constantly ringing, your nervous system is firing on all cylinders. You're 'on' and you can cope. It's when you switch off that you confront the realities of the last few months, the way you looked after yourself, how you did your job and performed. When life goes quiet, I find that's often when your brain gets a bit 'loud'.

"You want to be a team player, you want to be a hard worker but **sometimes you just need to top up your wellbeing account** – prioritise life outside work – because you've simply made too many 'withdrawals'."

What advice would you offer someone stepping into your role?

Sometimes it's fine to achieve 80 percent rather than 100 percent. Obviously you want to give 100 percent, but I think trying to do everything, all the time, to the point of perfection is going to take a toll. Yes, you can stay till eight o'clock at night and make sure that the wire work is as beautiful as it can possibly be, but at the end of the day no one's going to stop to stare at a slightly uglier fencing knot.

It's easy to get caught up in making sure everything's perfect and actually you're only really doing yourself and the business a disservice. It's important to have pride in your work, but it's also important to strike a balance, especially if you're missing out on time at home with your family.



Farmstrong talks about mental fitness – strengthening the mind. What do you think about that?

I love it. I think our generation is really focused on that self-development and there is an understanding that actually you can build the mind like a muscle. Some of us younger growers did a Farmstrong workshop a while ago and I really liked the idea of the wellbeing bank account. I think that's such a great way to phrase it.

You want to be a team player, you want to be a hard worker and to progress your career, but sometimes you just need to top up your wellbeing account – prioritise life outside work – because you've simply made too many 'withdrawals'. You've got to find a balance, don't you? Even if it's just going for a walk with your dog after work, it's better than nothing.

What's the benefit of doing these things?

The stress falls away, doesn't it? It doesn't benefit anyone when you're in a bad headspace or relying on caffeine to do an 18-hour day or a seven-day week. It's not helpful for the team and it also stunts other people's progress. There's always someone on an orchard who could benefit from a chance to step up every now and then.

On a positive note, tell me about a time when you stopped and thought to yourself, 'I'm in the right job here'.

That's easy. It's the classic, 'fruits of your labour' moment when you harvest that really big, juicy, red, gorgeous cherry. You feel proud. It's a feeling like no other. 🍒



On a roll

SHANE MADDISON

Shane Maddison and his wife Christine run a successful lawn turf business in Omanawa in the Bay of Plenty.

Tell us about your business Shane.

We grow ready lawn or roll-out grass. We've been doing it for 18 years. When we tallied up the years the other day I just about fell over. The time's flown by.

How did you get into the game?

It was a total change for me. I'd been in the dairy industry for 10 years pumping out oxidation ponds. We initially went into the turf business with another partner, then after a couple of years we bought them out and took over the operation.

How did that go?

It was a leap of faith! We were a bit nervous. We started off with just two hectares then went to conferences in Australia where they talked about scale in terms of 100 hectares! So over time we leased more land off the neighbours and now we've got about 13 hectares.

What's the most popular turf you sell?

People reading this are going to think I'm mad, but it's kikuyu! It's a really good grass for the Bay of Plenty and coastal areas. We've been promoting it for a long time and reaped the benefits. It's really taken off.

What's the key to producing quality turf?

You always have to work with the seasons. With seeded varieties, we work up the ground in spring and autumn, then we plant the seed, watch it grow and feed it and spray it to keep the weeds out. After 10 months of mowing a couple of times a week, it gets to a stage where the roots are holding the turf together as a structure and we can start selling that piece of grass.

The kikuyu's a little different. Once it's in the ground, it spreads by itself and once it reaches a certain consistency you can sell it. Another great thing about it is that what's left in the ground regrows.

What are the main challenges?

The weather's the biggest pressure. If you plant a lot of grass seed and then have 100 mls of rain, the results can be very annoying. And getting your weed control right is always fun and games. We tend to get a bit dry in the summer here too, so access to water is incredibly important.

What do you enjoy about being in business?

We're lucky we've always been able to grow and keep investing in our business. That's been really motivating. When we first started I used a small, walk-behind turf cutter and rolled up the turf by hand, picked it up and took it to where I unloaded it. I was handling everything three or four times. Then we bought our first tractor-style turf cutter from America which hugely reduced my physical workload and meant we could grow more turf. Then we bought a better harvester from Australia which also made the job easier and then a new truck. We've always had the sales to support that growth and improvement.

“Don’t sweat the small stuff and don’t be afraid to give things a go and make mistakes, because you will make mistakes.”

How have you handled the risks and uncertainty that go with running a business?

I don’t mind taking risks. I suppose that’s why I am in business. And I don’t mind doing more hours either. I used to worry a lot about where the next dollar came from or where the next job was coming from, but I didn’t mind losing sleep either. But it’s been a real team effort. Chris and I have run this together.

What about dealing with customers? That can be tricky.

Years ago I did a stint learning to be a glazier with a dude called Bunny, learning how to fix windows. He was real old school and taught me customer service.

What did you learn?

Always be open and honest and do the right thing by people. That’s been my motto ever since. Even if you don’t buy a roll of grass off me, I’ll still give you all the advice and the help you want.

Do you take much time off for breaks from the business?

To be honest with you, no. I’ve always been reasonably driven to do the next thing. You know, if somebody wanted something on a Sunday, I’d happily do it on a Sunday. I’ve definitely been driven to succeed.

Did that take much of a toll?

When I used to knock off at Christmas time, I reckon it would take me four or five days to come down off all that work and pressure. I’d often work right up to five o’clock before going on holiday. I wasn’t much fun to be around. It took me 10 years to realise that that was what I was doing. But I’m a lot better now at managing that and getting away off-farm a bit more.

Can you give me an example?

When I turned 50, Chris and I took a trip over to England to visit family for a month. The trip was fantastic and I probably hadn’t had a proper holiday for 10 years. Then when I came back I had a double hip operation and more time off.

A medical holiday?

Yeah, my worker was managing the place so brilliantly I had another six weeks off. I started to see that other people can do things for you without having to do it yourself.

How busy does it get here?

Some days the phone doesn’t stop ringing. But we’ve set the business up well. It’s very efficient. You can get a lot done quickly. If I didn’t love what I was doing, it might be difficult, but I really enjoy it.

Sounds like big breaks aren't realistic. Do you socialise much?

Yes we do, we play social tennis on our grass tennis court with friends and neighbours every Wednesday night. We try to invite everybody in the area and put on some food and drinks. Then we have a finals day at the end of the season and the winner gets a paper mache cup. There's maybe a dozen of us playing every Wednesday and 30 people on finals day.

What's the value of nights like that?

It's good for you. I love that community spirit. The people round here are like us, working hard to make things happen. You get to know each other and share that sense of community. Everybody's quite happy to talk and share the journey.

Can you share a challenging time or setback you've been through?

Sure, I have had my share of cock-ups. A couple of years ago, we were having a very wet summer and the winter weeds weren't dying off, so I used a chemical, which is fine in the winter, but you can't use it in the summer. It killed off most of my tall fescue grass. Worse still, it takes several weeks to start seeing what you've done, so I was selling this grass and the customers were ringing up saying my grass isn't growing.

Sounds stressful. What did you do?

We had to stop selling our grass, buy grass off others and replace all the lawns. It was probably our worst year for sales. It was a shocker.

How did you deal with that mentally?

You've just got to cut yourself some slack. If you don't dwell on your mistakes, you can move on. We just



Shane and Christine Maddison

fronted it and got on with it. As long as you look after people properly, everybody's happy.

Yeah, it cost us quite a bit, but I just told myself, 'Well, you'll get it right next time. Nobody's perfect.' It's about maintaining perspective too. If a lawn dies, it's not the end of the world.

What's your advice for someone starting out?

Enjoy what you do. That's the biggest thing. Don't sweat the small stuff and don't be afraid to give things a go and make mistakes, because you will make mistakes.

People always used to ask me if I had a passion in life, like hunting or fishing, but I never had a passion for anything like that, which at the time I found a little bit annoying. It's taken me a while, but I've finally realised I have a real passion for doing what I do. I love being outside. I love physical work. I love coming home reasonably tired. It's a nice feeling. 🌟

“ I’m not a doctor, I’m not a counsellor
but I’ve learnt that **I’ve just got to be
a good mate.** Someone who listens.
That’s the biggest thing.”

A man with a beard and a grey baseball cap stands in a cluttered garage. He is wearing a grey t-shirt with a red heart and the word 'FOX' on it, and grey shorts. He has his hands in his pockets and is smiling. In the background, there is a red and black quad bike, a dartboard, and various tools and equipment. A motorcycle is visible on the right side of the frame.

The go-to guy

CARL WILLIAMS

Katikati farmer and kiwifruit grower Carl Williams shares how he stays Farmstrong.

Carl enjoyed a classic rural upbringing. Born and raised on a dairy farm, 'always on the tractor mudguard or the dairy tray trailer.'

"The work ethic was drummed into us at a fairly young age," recalls Carl, "helping Dad hose out the yard in the morning, weaning calves, learning to drive in the hay paddock, just hanging around on the farm with Mum and Dad. You just did everything."

It was the perfect preparation for Carl's own varied career in farming and growing. A family legacy that's now stretching into its third generation.

"A lot of people say the third generation bugger it up," laughs Carl, "but I just see myself as a caretaker for the next generation."

He's not doing a bad job. Carl runs an operation that spans 500 cows and two dairy units, as well as 15 hectares of avocados and 42 hectares of kiwifruit – 13.6 ha in gold, the remainder in the green variety.

What does a working week look like for Carl? It's a bit of a mix there too. As well as being chief organiser and planner across the various operations (working with up to 16 people), Carl attends to anything that needs fixing. It's the sort of self-reliance that brings peace of mind.

"I'm the go-to guy. We're pretty lucky in our set-up. We're self-contained and run all our own gear, sprayers, tractors, you name it."

A visit to Carl's giant workshop soon confirms this is his happy place. Sitting amongst the various machinery and implements, there's even a collection of vintage Post Office delivery motorbikes!

"I get a fair bit of grief for having so much machinery, but like I say, we do all the development work ourselves. Having to wait two or three days for a contractor can really cost you. Sometimes you only have a window of 40 hours spray time, so you've got to get onto things as soon as possible. This way I can get things done when I want."

Carl enjoys all aspects of growing kiwifruit.

"I love working outside, watching your vines go from looking pretty dead to seeing those little buds come through to seeing them harvested, packed on the trucks, and into the packhouse, all within a 12-month period. It's cool. It's a bit like having a kid and seeing it grow up in 12 months."

The downsides? Well actually, not a lot bothers Carl. In fact, you'd have to say he's got the perfect temperament for the vagaries of farming and growing.

"We can control a lot of the things we do, but Mother Nature is one thing we can't control. There's no point worrying about it. Just make the best of what you've got and **deal with the cards you're dealt.**"

"I'm pretty easy-going. Dad always says I've got Mum's nature. I don't panic and if something goes wrong, it's like, right, how do we deal with it? No point flying off the handle or losing your rag, that doesn't solve anything. I guess I'm lucky I've got that sort of nature. I'm also fairly hands-on, so I can fix 90 percent of things."

Carl says Zespri's 'single desk' model is a good source of stability and support. "They do all the marketing. All we've got to focus on is producing the best product we can. So you're not competing with your neighbour or other businesses. The only competition is with yourself to do the best job you can. It feels like we're all in it together and that's a good thing."

As busy as Carl is, he still makes time to get off-orchard and recharge mentally. He's done a lot of hunting, fishing and jetboating with mates over

the years. Trips away to go deer-hunting during 'the roar' were a staple of his calendar, but harvesting season has cut into that. So Carl has pivoted into something closer to home – competitive handgun shooting. He's been doing it for six years and has amassed an impressive set of belts and trophies.

Carl admits the move into kiwifruit has been freeing. "Cows are seven days a week, day in, day out. I find the orchard side of things more flexible. You don't have those daily deadlines. Kiwifruit growing is also more weather dependent. You need good weather conditions to carry out most of your jobs. If I'm fixing something on a block of kiwifruit and it's wet, I can be flexible and wait until the sun comes out. I'll head to the workshop instead or catch up on office work or go to town and pick up parts."

What about those days when nothing seems to go right?



"You definitely get those! We put a new bladder on one of the farms a couple of years back, and kept having sediment problems. So we put in a second sand trap but the water still wasn't flowing. We all stood there scratching our brains. It was frustrating but there's no point losing your cool. You've got to just try and figure it out. It's not working for a reason, so try and find that reason. When shit happens like that, I'm pretty good, I can just block it out."

Not everyone is blessed with that ability. Carl mentions he lost a mate to depression a few years back. It still bugs him that he might have missed something in their conversations or could've done more. So, these days, no matter how busy life gets on orchard, he'll always take a call from a mate and is actively involved in his local Rural Support Trust.

"I'll always answer those calls or get back to people as soon as I can because they might be ringing for a reason. I'm not a doctor, I'm not a counsellor but I've learnt that I've just got to be a good mate. Someone who listens. That's the biggest thing. I have a pretty positive spin on life myself. So if I can spin a bit of that to other people, good."

Carl's had his share of farming challenges too.

"When I bought the other dairy farm, I went from being a rich share-milker to a poor farmer! The payout had dropped to \$4. We pulled the whole place to bits, every fence, the cow shed, water lines. We had nothing. We had a boundary fence around the outside. It was one big paddock and the hedges hadn't been trimmed in 30 years. We had Barberry hedges as wide as the house! It had to all come apart to go back together. But in our dairy discussion group now people say 'what a beautiful looking farm'. That means a lot to me ... then they come to my house and say, oh man, what a bloody mess," he laughs sitting at his kitchen table.



His move into kiwifruit growing was another big shift. He and his sister have set up their own company to run the orchard on a rolling three-year lease arrangement with their Dad.

"Now I'm the young buck again. The whipper snapper. Dad tried us out for a year initially just to make sure we wouldn't stuff things up," he smiles.

Looking back on his career, Carl says many work pressures can be mitigated with good preparation and planning.

"Thinking ahead is vital. People always say 'think one or two steps ahead' but I try to think four or five steps ahead when I'm planning and doing things."

But sometimes even the Plan Bs and Cs count for little.

"We can control a lot of the things we do, but Mother Nature is one thing we can't control. If it's going to rain, it's going to rain. If we're going to get hit by hail, you've just got to shrug and say 'Shit happens. It's out of our control.' There's no point worrying about it. Just make the best of what you've got and deal with the cards you're dealt." 🍷

“It’s important to look for the good in your day. Even on tough days, something’s always going right.”



Hitting the curve ball out of the park

ANDREW WOOD

Andrew Wood, General Manager of *Ngāi Tūkairangi Orchards*, talks about the challenges and rewards of running a major horticultural business.

Tell us a little about your job.

I'm the General Manager at Ngāi Tūkairangi Orchards, which is a significant Māori Trust orchard. We've got about 240 hectares of horticulture, predominantly kiwifruit, but also apples, persimmons and citrus. We're spread between Northland, Gisborne, Heretaunga, and Tauranga and the operation is based in Matapihi, Mount Maunganui.



How did you get into the industry?

I've been in horticulture, mainly kiwifruit, for over 40 years. Started off in my later teenage years as a cadet here in the Bay of Plenty. I've held various roles within the industry. I've been a contractor, packhouse manager, cold store manager, industry representative, and worked in various governance roles. I've also been an orchardist and still am.

What do you enjoy about the industry?

I enjoy the diversity. I'm very proud of the role I've got now. We're a leading grower within the kiwifruit industry. We're big, we're diverse and every day is super-interesting, which is cool.

You would've seen your fair share of challenges too?

You're right, I've seen a lot. I was up to my neck in the PSA crisis when it happened. I was a grower representative at the time, so I was dealing with a lot of growers who were going through hell. Then there was Gabrielle in 2023 that had a huge impact on our business. I still remember seeing Gabrielle coming across on a weather app, thinking this doesn't look very flash. I had no idea that in three days' time, we were going to get smacked like we did.

Basically, in growing you just don't know what you're going to be dealing with next week. It definitely keeps you on your toes.

Apart from exceptional events like Gabrielle, what are the other pressures?

Managing staff is probably one of the biggest things. The scale of the industry has changed a lot over the last 20 years. We employ staff from many sources and it is a complex side of our business and the industry.

What's the key there?

I've built a good team. My management team, consisting of area and regional managers are all very skilled and extremely passionate about what they do. I've helped them to develop themselves and continue to do that. I'm on the road most weeks visiting one of the regions, just keeping everyone tight and working closely together. A tight team that supports each other and celebrates success is a winning combination.

What does a top-performing team look like?

It shares a common focus. Our focus is "Exceptional crops grown by Exceptional people".

It sounds like a sports team in terms of motivation and performance.

Totally and we often refer to it like that. We've got to work as a team – forwards and backs. If we don't all work together and the result is we drop the ball, well, everyone suffers.

So as the coach what's your role?

It's about taking time to get to know people and making them realise that they're appreciated. I chat to

them, talk about their kids, their families. We hold lots of work barbecues and things like that and do our best to keep everyone informed.

How important is this people focus to the business?

It's essential. Our industry is extremely labour-intensive. Broadly speaking, you need one person per hectare. So, we've got 80 permanents, 50 RSE Pacific staff, topped up with seasonal workers and contractors. We can have 300 people working at times. Success is very much about working as a team and keeping the goals in focus.

That's a lot of responsibility. You're looking after all these people, who looks after you?

I've got a close family and a strong exec team who are very supportive.

It still sounds a demanding role. How do you keep well and stay energised and focused?

I exercise. I've got Mount Maunganui nearby, so I climb that pretty regularly. That's a good walk. I'll be doing that this afternoon, about four o'clock, just to drop some stress on the track.



Anything else?

Yeah, I've got good mates. I don't hesitate to talk about things, if I'm having a challenging week. We all have stress in this industry. It helps to talk about your stresses. I also get great support from my wife and kids.

What about the days when things go backwards. How do you maintain your cool?

You do get under a lot of stress at times, there's no question about that. I guess it's an age thing. Over time you learn nothing's as bad as it first seems and it's important not to over-react. If you just pause, sift through things carefully, you usually discover it's never as bad as you think. It's about asking yourself what's really important and what's not.

It's also important to look for the good in your day. Even on tough days, something's always going right.

How do you stop yourself taking work worries home at night? Do you have a wind-down routine?

Not so much now, but I used to have. Where I used to live there was a railway line I had to go across on a bridge. When I drove across it, in my head, I'd tell myself, 'work stays on this side.'

What about rest and recovery time?

My wife and I don't get a lot of spare time together so family time is really precious. We live at the Mount so we can just relax around the beach. I'm not shy to say I'm always working, but work doesn't rule my life. I put my family first.

What mindset is required to perform in your role?

It's a major industry and the world's spinning faster than ever. I used to be able to run a business across

a region without a cellphone. Imagine that now!

You've got to accept that some stress is just a normal part of your day and learn to lean into it. I like the saying, 'hit the curve ball out of the park'. I consciously use that.

If you're struggling, reach out to people and use your support networks. When you open up, you soon realise everyone's got stuff going on and people actually do understand.

When you're walking up the Mount is there a point where you notice the mental benefits kick in?

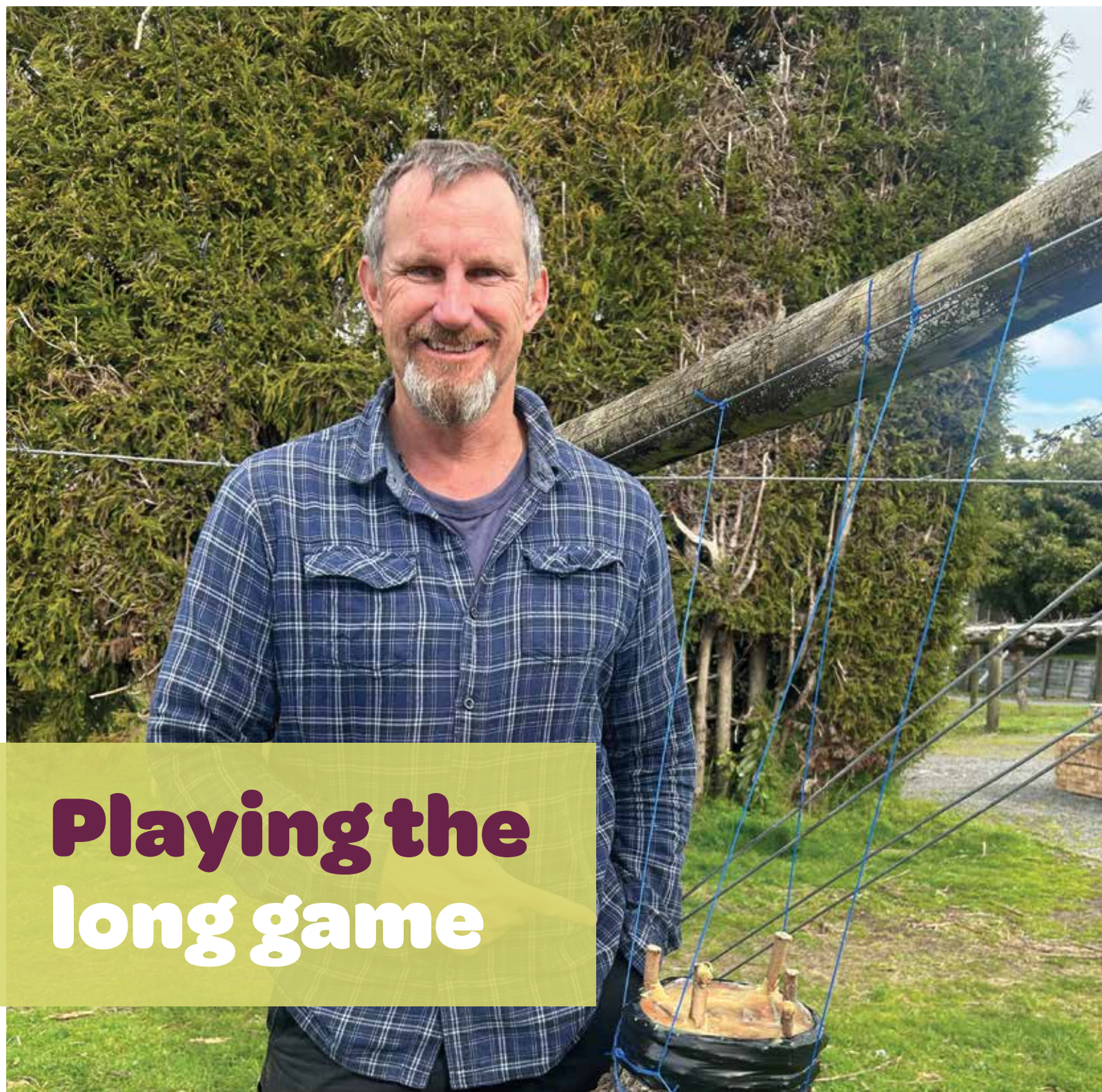
Good question. Yes, I can show you the spot. It's about ten minutes into the walk where I feel like I've just stepped out of it all and the pressures of the day are gone. I look around and realise how lucky I am to be where I am.

I don't go up there because I'm feeling depressed, but I'll get to a certain point up there where I think, 'I'll sort that stuff tomorrow ... and that's all right.'

Looking back on your career, what advice would you offer your younger self?

Probably don't sweat the small stuff – you can only control so much. A little humour doesn't go amiss either. You've got to realise that sometimes it'll go well for you and sometimes it won't and it's not the end of the world if it doesn't. Being lighthearted sometimes helps you get through.

We have a saying in our game that we do 30 percent of the work and the weather does the rest. In a bad year, it's all the weather's fault and in a good year, it's because we're all so bloody good at what we do! 🍷



Playing the long game

STEVE SHIRLEY

Like many in horticulture, Kiwifruit grower Steve Shirley combines orcharding with other paid work. He takes us through the twists and turns of a colourful working life.

Steve's working life began in aircraft engineering.

"I did eight years with Air New Zealand and then I decided to spread my wings and took different jobs overseas. Firstly with Boeing commercial aircraft doing design. That was too 'back office' for my liking so after a couple of years I jumped across to another American company, General Electric – Aircraft Engines, then tripped around supporting various airlines around the world for a decade."

Eventually Steve came back to NZ to live and ended up in the highlands of Papua New Guinea working on a power station design project. He was living in Auckland and flying back and forth to the job. When that project came to a halt, he decided city life was no longer for him and it was time to head back to his roots.

"I grew up on a farm. The first 17 years of my life were on a sheep and beef farm in the Waikato. Then I went to Auckland and started an engineering career. Dad came over to Tauranga and worked in kiwifruit as a manager for a dozen or more years."

Steve decided to follow his Dad into the kiwifruit business. It was 2015 and his timing was good. The industry was just lifting out of the PSA crisis and orchard land was still affordable.

"You could either buy something fantastic and small or something slightly bigger but a bit run down," he recalls. Steve chose the latter. "I thought I could add more value to something that was a bit more weathered. I'm still deciding whether I got that right," he smiles.

Like in any new venture, there was a learning curve.

"You don't know what you don't know when you start and for the first five years I guess I was certainly learning plenty. I talked to local packhouse managers, consultants and service providers. I took on a local service provider called GroPlus to help me, and learned a lot from them.

"Eventually it got to the point where I felt that I'd done my apprenticeship and wanted to take the reins myself. So I did and I've been in full control over the last four years now, which has been good."

Those early years were tinged with sadness too. Steve and his Dad had always dreamed of working together. "He was going to teach me how to grow kiwifruit. But he ended up getting cancer. He literally died a month before I shifted onto this property. So I sort of plugged away best as I could without him."

One of his biggest insights is that growing can be a rollercoaster ride.

"Generally speaking in kiwifruit, over five years, you might have one really good year and two average years and two poor years. The challenge is to flat line this ride to constant improvement."

"You're also up against Mother Nature. Things that aren't under your control. And that's where the importance of mental resilience really comes in," he notes.



“For example, in October 2022, this whole area got hit with a frost. It came at a bad time for Kiwifruiters because the new crop was just budding.”

The impact was profound. “I’m a 10,000 trays per hectare orchardist – that year I went down to 5,000 trays, which meant a 40 percent hit to my revenue. It puts you below the cost line, but you can’t just shut the gate and do nothing in orcharding. You still have to maintain your vines, keep applying fertiliser, keep pruning when you’ve got to prune, and doing everything in a timely manner because otherwise the vines will die.”

To stay afloat financially, Steve got back into his engineering, working part-time for First Gas.

“I’m very lucky and grateful that they’re so flexible and accommodating to my needs here on the orchard.”

Ironically, he says his return to engineering has also given him a better appreciation of the dynamics of horticulture.

“As an engineer I’ve been used to finding solutions and fixes quickly. That doesn’t happen in orcharding. That’s probably one of the biggest things I’ve learnt in the nine years. The actions that you take in growing today might have consequences in five years’ time. You’ve got to be in it for the long game.”

“We often talk about sustainability in agriculture – the nitrogen in the soil, how much water we take from the ground – but keeping the people going is important too.”

It’s also confirmed what he loves about orcharding.

“Tuesday was a lovely sunny day, so at eight o’clock, I put in a leave pass with First Gas, took a day off and worked out on the orchard all day. Just being outside, sleeves rolled up, getting on with it. That’s a good day for me.”

“My happy space is driving my tractor, spraying or fertilising or something like that. You know you’re adding value, doing good things. To me that’s really important and that’s why I do it.”

Steve’s in the midst of his business’ next evolution. He’s purchased a Kiwifruit Gold licence and is investing in hail cloth to protect his crop and curb wind exposure.

Even after all these years, sleep can be in short supply at times. “You get woken up at 2am, the wind is howling, and the first thing you think is, ‘oh my God, what’s that doing to my canopy, to my crop?’ When you are so invested in something, all those external factors that you can’t control still weigh heavily upon you, without a doubt. That hasn’t changed much from day one to nine years down the track. I suspect if you came back in 10 years’ time, I’d still be thinking the same. It’s just the way it goes.”

Which is where being Farmstrong comes in handy. Steve’s a fan and tunes into the Farmstrong segments on Jamie MacKay’s Country show.

“We definitely need to do more to improve wellbeing in the rural sector. We often talk about sustainability in agriculture – the nitrogen in the soil, how much

water we take from the ground – but keeping the people going is important too. I’m spending a lot of time thinking about the next generation at the moment. I’d like my 16-year-old son to start wanting a farming future.”

How does Steve keep himself well with so much on his plate?

“I think the power of positive thinking is important. It’s easy for your mind to start spiralling into, ‘Oh, God, I can’t change this or I can’t do that.’ The list of can’t do’s can be pretty long, but I’ve learnt you only need one or two items on the can-do list to get you past that. The other thing is to have time out. Whether it’s fishing, playing golf, motorcycle riding or whatever.”

Steve circles back to his main theme – the need for perseverance in a rewarding but often fickle business.

“You live a different life in farming. You’re asset rich but cash poor. So it’s about hanging in there. Putting back into the land to make it better. Building up a legacy. The great thing is that you’re in control of your own destiny.”

“I’ve got a very good friend nearby. He’s just turned 70 and is looking at selling his block. He’s been growing kiwifruit for over 30 years and for the last two years, he’s produced fruit like he’s never produced. So, the previous 30 years have been all about the last two years for him, and now he’s really cranking it.”

“So I’ve got a few years ahead of me yet,” laughs Steve. “Come back in 10 and see if I’m still as bright and cheerful.” 🍷



Talking it through

FARMSTRONG

SAM WHITELOCK

The restorative power of a chat over a cuppa was evident when Farmstrong Ambassador Sam Whitelock visited hail-affected growers in Motueka and Riwaka.

Severe weather events can strike anytime. Five years ago a freak Boxing Day hail storm ruined millions of dollars worth of fruit with some growers losing their entire crop. Lessons learned for getting through are as relevant now as they were then.

The storm that day came on top of an already challenging year for apple, kiwifruit and hop growers who had been struggling to find labour.

Motueka Fruit Growers Association president Richard Clarkson estimated a cost of \$100 million through loss of income and damage.

Sam's first port of call was Golden Bay Fruit in Motueka, the biggest apple business in the district. The company employs up to 500 people and has over 750 hectares of apple orchards and 100 hectares of kiwifruit as well as a state-of-the-art pack house, where fruit is sorted and graded using the latest computerised technology. The company, which exports to 25 countries, lost 90 percent of its kiwifruit and 40 percent of its apples in the storm.

Managing Director Heath Wilkins described the impact the storm had on the business and wider community in terms of stress and dealing with uncertainty.

"This hailstorm hurt us in the orchards and it hurt us in the pack house. We were doing 80,000 bins before the hail. That dropped to 40,000 bins so we lost just over half of the fruit."

Keep talking

Sam, who comes from a farming background and is dairy farming in the Manawatu, shared some of the pressures his own family had faced in farming, including an outbreak of Salmonella in the dairy herd some years back. He highlighted how important it was to keep talking and check on those who might have 'dropped off the radar and stopped communicating' during challenging times.

"I know the hail storm has brought massive stress and pressure for this community. Hopefully us being here today can help start a conversation so people feel able to open up and talk about these things and support one another."

"I know from my own experience in the rural industry, and also in professional sport, that just listening can be a huge help to someone who is feeling 'under the pump'. So if you see someone struggling, start that conversation, ask them how they're going and make time for a proper catch-up, whether it's over a coffee or at the pub."

After touring Golden Bay's pack house and meeting staff, Sam headed to the Riwaka Rugby clubrooms to meet more local growers. Here he spoke about how he handles pressure.

"One of the best things I've learned is to ask questions and listen to people who have been through similar experiences before. There'll be a lot of knowledge in this community about how to get through events like this, so make sure you tap into that wisdom and advice."

Don't let a setback define you

Sam stressed the importance of retaining perspective when reversals happen and spoke about how he handled unexpected losses in his career.

"It's important when you have a setback that you don't let it define you. I know you guys only know me as a rugby player and rugby is a big part of my life, but the reality is I also have other things going on in my life so it doesn't define who I am as a person."

"The expectation is always there that we will win every game, but that's not the reality. So yes, losing a rugby game still hurts but I tell myself, I'm still a father, a husband, a son with a great family. That's the most important thing. Sometimes you've just got to accept your setbacks and move on."

Sam encouraged the audience to give themselves some recovery time. "Pressure is pressure, whether you're a grower or a rugby player. How do I deal with it? I travel towards it, embrace it as part of my job and then, when I get the opportunity, I step away from it and make sure I recharge."

"I've learnt you can't just go hammer-down the whole time. You need to step away. For me, I can head home into a different world after rugby, so I make sure I'm not just focussing on one thing only. If you're only thinking about hail storms all day, every day, of course it will start to get on top of you. So it's important to do something else, whether it's with your family or a hobby or catching up with mates outside the industry. Something different."

Sam also spoke of the importance of retaining a sense of humour in the face of adversity. "I know from my own experience that just getting together with friends over a cup of tea after a tough event can work wonders. When you're having a good time, it relieves the pressure and you start thinking, 'maybe I can do this, maybe there is a solution to my problem.'"

Keep things simple

Sam explained how he likes to 'keep things simple' when the pressure's on. "I think the best players I've seen at handling pressure are the ones who can just focus on doing the basics really well game after game, irrespective of the weather or the ref or pressure on the scoreboard. So I try and keep it simple and just concentrate on the things I'm good at. Yes, the country won't be happy if we lose, but the reality is all I can do is my job to the best of my ability."

The meeting ended on an optimistic note with one veteran grower sharing his confidence that the community would recover: "I've been through a hell of a lot of hail storms, even worse ones, and one thing I've learnt is that we always come out the other side. And the good thing about growing is that we have a 12-month cycle, so we know our hops will grow again next year," he said.

Sam wrapped up his visit with a coaching session for the Riwaka under 10s and under 11s on ball skills and tackling. 🍌

This story was originally published in 2021 and has been included to illustrate the impact of extreme weather events on rural communities.

"If you see someone struggling, start that conversation, ask them how they're going and **make time for a proper catch-up.**"

You have to pace yourself



STEWART PAULSON

Stewart Paulson is a citrus consultant and orchardist in Gisborne. A lifetime in the industry has taught him that recovery from extreme weather events is a long-term process.

Tell us a little about your operation.

I have a four-hectare citrus block in Gisborne. We have Navel Oranges and I lease another six small blocks spread over quite a reasonable area. So there's a total of roughly 12 hectares of citrus and a few feijoas as well.

The Navel Orange market is challenging. We compete with a lot of imported Australian oranges but I've managed to find private markets. I sell probably 150 tonnes of Navel Oranges privately to fruit and vege shops around the North Island which adds more value to the crop. You get more satisfaction when you pick the fruit, pack it and send it away directly to the retailers.

And you are also a citrus consultant to other growers?

Yes. About 15 years ago I started up my own citrus consultancy crop advisory business. I am an independent working for myself with no attachment to a pack-house or marketing companies. I look after about 500 hectares of citrus around the Gisborne Tolaga Bay area. I do a regular crop-monitoring programme. I go and see growers every two weeks

and monitor for pest diseases and provide any other advisory work that's required.

How long have you been in the industry?

About 40 years. I left school at 16, did a horticultural cadetship in citrus subtropical fruit production. I started out working in the fields and then worked for a grower who had a large pack-house. I became manager, running a pack-house with 30 staff and multiple crops. I carried on working for different companies and when an opportunity arose about 15 years ago to go out on my own, I decided to go for it. I've never looked back to be honest.

In 2023 Gisborne was hit hard by Cyclone Hale and Cyclone Gabrielle. Have you seen anything on that scale before?

Probably not. I grew up on a farm and an orchard and my parents were hit extremely hard by Cyclone Bola. They lost all their crops and their cropping paddocks were all underwater. I saw that as a young person and that was probably the last time I saw anything on the scale of what we got in the last couple of years.

It was not just Cyclone Gabrielle and Hale that did the damage. We had a year of rain leading up to the cyclones and it has never stopped raining since Gabrielle. We were already saturated when Gabrielle hit. The rivers came up so quick and went over the banks and many orchards were demolished. It was much the same in Gisborne as it was in Hastings.

I was lucky I didn't have silt to deal with but some of the guys had a big dumping of silt in their orchards. It takes a lot to come back from that situation. In a lot of cases it took months before we could actually get out in the fields and do anything.

How does wet weather affect your crops?

I had an issue in 2022 with soft wax scale. It started as a little patch in the orchard but as anyone in the industry knows it is a nightmare to get rid of. It hatches from December through to March so at the end of 2022 I thought I'd get in and make sure it didn't spread. But then in December the rain poured down, and then Hale came along and Gabrielle came along. I sprayed on December 18 and couldn't get back into my own orchard until the middle of April. By that time all those insects had hatched through the entire orchard. All the trees were covered with soft wax scales which makes your fruit go black. If you can't do any spraying for five months, there are consequences.

Is that fruit salvageable?

It's been quite a mission. I have a very basic machine in my shed which I polish the fruit up with, but I can't



work miracles. What used to take me 10-15 minutes to do a bin, now takes me 40 minutes to get them into a sellable condition. It adds to the stress and pressure because I'm spending so much time in the shed and all the other work is stacking up.

How do you weather these storms mentally?

One thing we do is we make a point of getting away the last weekend of every month. We pack the caravan and head off by Friday lunchtime. If you live on an orchard and look out the window and see yellow trees for too long, it does get on top of you a bit. You've got to have time out, make some time for a break.

What kind of outlook do you need to develop to last the distance?

You've got to have the attitude that I'll do as much as I can but if I can't get it done today, it's going to be there tomorrow.

For a long time, for example, I couldn't drive down some of the rows in the orchard because the ruts and holes from the tractor generated over the last two years were so deep I was getting stuck. I would love to have sorted that out months ago but we kept getting rain and were back in water again. Only two weeks ago I finally got the ruts in my orchard filled in. It's been a struggle.

You have to accept you can only do your best. You have to pace yourself and try to not let it get on top of you. You can only do so much at a time.

How long does it take to recover from severe weather events like what you have experienced?

You drive around the flats now and there are orchards that were once covered in silt. The grass is growing through and from the road you think it's all recovered. It's not until you get behind the scenes, even with my own block, that you see all these trees that are yellow and

“You’ve got to have the attitude that **I’ll do as much as I can** but if I can’t get it done today, it’s going to be there tomorrow.”



have lost their leaves and full recovery is still a long way down the track to be honest. There are trees that are still dying. The after-effects of the devastation are still showing. We had a massive flowering on our trees last year and then we had a lot of wet weather in December and the fruit fell off. So people have got very, very light crops now as well. There’s a combination of things going on. We still have another year or so of recovery yet.

Citrus is a long-term crop. If your tree dies and you replant, it’s going to be years before you are getting anything off it. We’ll get there in the end but it’s a long process.

You split your time between your own orchards and your consulting work?

The consultancy business takes the lead and I work on my orchard in-between. I’ve been working with these guys for a long time. They actually become friends more than clients. It’s not good seeing other people struggle as well.

I’m trying to help them move forward and hopefully my advice makes things a bit easier for them when they are struggling to get on top of everything. You have to keep a positive mindset and I hope what I am doing is helping them with that too. ●



Always look forward

NICK FRASER

Nick Fraser has been growing apples for more than 35 years at Bronte Orchards in Tasman. Here's his take on managing the challenges of the job.

Like all growers, Nick likes nothing better than a successful harvest.

"There's a lot of work that goes into getting a crop on the trees and the risk involved is massive. When you've finally got it all in and got a good product at the end of it, you feel a real sense of satisfaction and can relax. It's like: 'you've got there.'"

The 'getting there' can be a 'rocket ride' at times. Nick says a big part of being a grower is learning to live with risk. He's not exaggerating. A few years back a tornado took a sizeable chunk out of his house and then cut a swathe through his orchard in Redwood Valley, 16 kilometres away – a double whammy.

"It was a weather bomb that came out nowhere," recalls Nick. "Our roof is rated to 220-kilometre-an-hour winds and this just tore it off like it wasn't even fixed down. There was a big boom when it hit the house and then it made a track up the middle of the orchard and laid out the apple trees and snapped off

all the posts. It probably flattened a hectare and a half of the orchard and destroyed the shed in my yard. The amount of rain that came with it was just unreal too."

Nick got stuck into the clean-up as quickly as possible.

"We went down there and chopped the trees off that were gone and stood the ones up that were still rooted. We knew if we did that straight away they'd be all right. I'm lucky that being a farmer, I'm pretty practical at most things. So I just fixed it up and got on with it and within a year, we were back to normal again."

What's the mindset required to bounce back from these types of events?

"There's always something going down on an orchard," laughs Nick. "We're simply in a business where your investment carries a lot of risk. So your attitude to risk is important. You have to learn to live with it until it becomes normal."

"When you've been growing for as long as I have, you resign yourself to the fact that you can't do anything about the weather. You can't get hung up on what might happen. You just have to deal with issues when they do happen. Over time, you become a bit of an optimist. If you hit a rough patch, just tell yourself, 'it's going to be better next year.' You learn to always look forward."

Hanging in there for the long haul is a theme that recurs in conversation with Nick.

"Growing is a long-term game. The real pay-off comes when you sell a property with all the capital gained. So the challenge is to make the best living you can in the meantime and enjoy the lifestyle you want."

"If you're having a tough patch sometimes the best thing is to get away and do something that you enjoy."



Easier said than done at times. Running any business comes with demands and responsibilities. Nick shares the sorts of things he does to keep well and stay in a good headspace. Having a supportive bunch of mates tops the list.

"I have a great support crew. We're all growers, we're all good mates and we always know when someone's having a bit of a downer," he says.

"There are definitely things in this industry that can get you down. Sometimes it can feel like they're only happening to you because everything you're trying isn't working. That's why you've got to talk about things. When you do, someone will always tell you: 'it's all right, mate, we all had that'. That's what keeps you going."

The wellbeing science tells us that the antidote to stress and pressure is rest and leisure. Nick agrees.

"If you're having a tough patch sometimes the best thing is to get away and do something that you enjoy."

Nick says he's got better at that lately. When you live where you work, it's not always straightforward.

"My house is right in the middle of my business. I look out the window and my work's in my face 24-7. The only way you can get away from it is to go somewhere completely different. My advice is book your holidays and go on them so you can zone out for a bit. It takes me at least a week to wind down and stop thinking about the business but then I come back in a different frame of mind. Giving yourself that sort of breathing space is essential. It's everything."

“On a family orchard, **one person’s wellbeing is everyone’s wellbeing.**”

Nick points out that growers have an advantage over farmers when it comes to achieving a work-life balance.

“With orcharding, we can walk away and leave stuff. It’s still going to be there in a month’s time. We don’t have livestock to look after so we do get that opportunity. Once we finish the fruit season we can go on holiday.”

Nick says the industry has changed a lot over the years.

“When I first started, it was more of a lifestyle, now it’s a very involved business with a lot of compliance and variables. We probably don’t have any control over 70 percent of the chain and that’s probably the worst part. You’re a price taker and that can make life really difficult.”

He shares his advice for coping with days when you feel ‘under the pump’.

“I think the best thing is to go out and do something you enjoy. Something that you have to focus on when you’re doing it so you can take your mind off things. I enjoy mountain-biking. That works well for me because when you’re mountain-biking downhill you’ve got to concentrate. You actually clear your mind and don’t think about what else is going on. You come back to work feeling mentally refreshed and reset which is good for the business.”

Nick admits carving out time for other activities requires planning and determination.

“There’s always too much to do running a business, but sometimes you just have to make time to do these things, otherwise it doesn’t happen.”

Nick’s also big on family time.

“The kids grow up pretty quickly and then they leave home before you know it. You’ve got to get out there with them and take those moments because you don’t get them back. Kids are also a great tonic, aren’t they, because the way they think is completely different to adults. It’s really important to feed off their happiness and positivity and not bring your worries home and drag others down.”

Next up for Nick and his wife? They’re heading to Slovenia to do an intrepid mountain bike tour. Nick says he has a sense of the clock ticking.

“I’m 54 now and feel like work’s dominated my life. I want to start enjoying my life more. I’ve done the hard yards and it’s time to step back and actually start doing these ‘bucket list’ things while I’m in good health.”

Reflecting on his career Nick concludes, “On a family orchard, one person’s wellbeing is everyone’s wellbeing. That’s why you’ve got to learn to manage the pressure and not let things get to you. That’s what I like about Farmstrong. It’s making people more aware of different ways to make life better.” 🍌

“I have a great support crew.

We’re all growers, we’re all good mates and we always know when someone’s having a bit of a downer.”

Putting the right 'fuel in the tank'

Eating well gives your body the energy and nutrients it needs to perform at its best. The many demands of daily work as a grower however can mean that it's easy to lose sight of the importance of a good diet.

When we are busy or stressed, eating well is even more important to stop us getting sick and provide the energy and nutrients we need for our physical and emotional health. Wairarapa-based nutritionist Sarah Percy has worked with Farmstrong to create resources for our website. We asked her to share some practical tips about how to eat well and maintain energy levels when you're going hard-out during the busy season.



“ Whether you're growing or farming or playing sport, **you need the right 'fuel in the tank' to perform at your best.** Eat more unprocessed, natural foods, avoid skipping meals, carry snacks for an energy boost, and don't forget to stay hydrated.”

Sam Whitelock | Farmstrong Ambassador



Create your own food bank

When you cook a casserole, bolognaise, curry or soup, cook a double or triple batch and freeze half. In no time you will have a freezer 'food bank' to use in the future when work is flat out and time is precious.



Cook once, eat twice

Do a double batch of your meal and use the leftovers in a different dish the next day. Have shepherd pie one night, the next use the leftover mince, mix in chilli beans and serve as Mexican wraps with salad and avocado.



Keep the fridge and pantry well-stocked

Have plenty of quick options handy in the fridge and store cupboard, such as tinned fish, tinned tomatoes, veggies, rice and potatoes so that a balanced meal can be whipped up from what you have on hand.



Grab a break

Taking a break also creates the opportunity to have a nourishing snack. Along with a cuppa, grab a hardboiled egg, or a cold chicken drumstick, fruit muffin, fresh fruit and/or pottle of yoghurt. Remember to try and have nutritional snacks, so rather than grabbing noodles, chips or a chocolate bar when you are hungry, go for a nutritional option instead. It'll make you more productive.



Hydrate and snack

You need to prioritise drinking water. Keep a water bottle handy. Water is definitely best because coffee, tea, caffeinated soft drinks and energy drinks all contain caffeine which is a diuretic so they actually have a dehydrating effect on your body. If you are a tea or coffee drinker, have a drink of water while you're waiting for the kettle to boil. Regular snacks are also important to maintain your energy levels.



Look after yourself

Remember, the number one asset in your business is yourself and the people who work for you. Establishing a habit of eating well brings many benefits. A nutritious, well-balanced diet means that you'll feel fitter, stronger and have improved energy levels. You'll boost your immune system and stay healthier and you'll also think more clearly and handle stress better.

You matter, let's natter

Real-life connections with people close to us, or even casual acquaintances, help make us feel good and make us aware that we are not alone in facing life's challenges.

A key part of a satisfying conversation is being a good listener. Listening is one of the best ways to help someone who is 'doing it tough'.

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.

A good wellbeing boost is to have a conversation with a mate or even a stranger. It might be a staff member or a contractor, or just someone at the supermarket. Try it out and see if it works for you.

"I know myself, whenever there's been a challenging time, **it's nice to be able talk about it and share the load.** So just listening can be a huge help to someone who is feeling 'under the pump'."

Sam Whitelock | Farmstrong Ambassador



How to be a good listener

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

The 5 Ss

Getting the most out of your day

The research into wellbeing is very clear – there are some fundamentals you have to get right to thrive.



Sleep

Make sure you have the right quality and quantity of sleep before you start work. Most of us need seven to nine hours of sleep each day to give our bodies a chance to repair and re-energise for the next day. Without the right amount of sleep, you won't function at your best.



Start

Our brains love certainty so plan out each day with clear intentions of what lies ahead and what's needed to be at your best. Prioritise the things you can control. List out what needs to be done, make a plan about what to attack first and break down the work into achievable amounts so you're not overwhelmed.



Sustain

Manage your energy levels carefully throughout the day.

Make sure you eat properly and hydrate to keep the body 'fueled up'. Schedule breaks and micropauses during the day to recharge physically and mentally and maintain a good headspace. Taking time to slow down like this re-focuses your thinking and makes you more productive. Think in ways that keep things in perspective and help boost your mood.



Stop

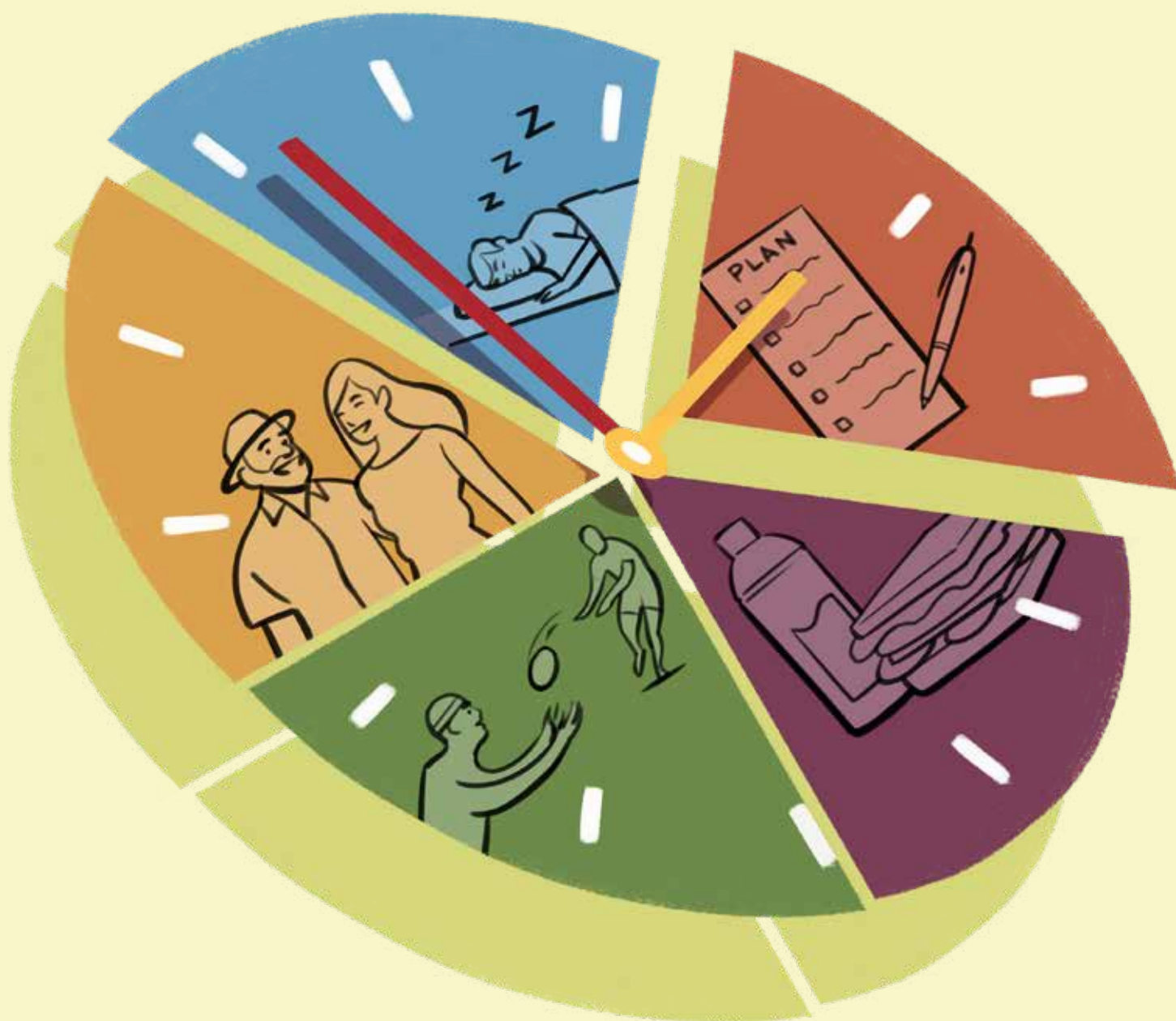
Switch off from work at the end of the day and maximise your recovery time. Make sure you set aside some quality time each weekend to do other things you enjoy such as sport, hobbies or catching up with friends. You'll come back to work feeling fresher and more motivated.

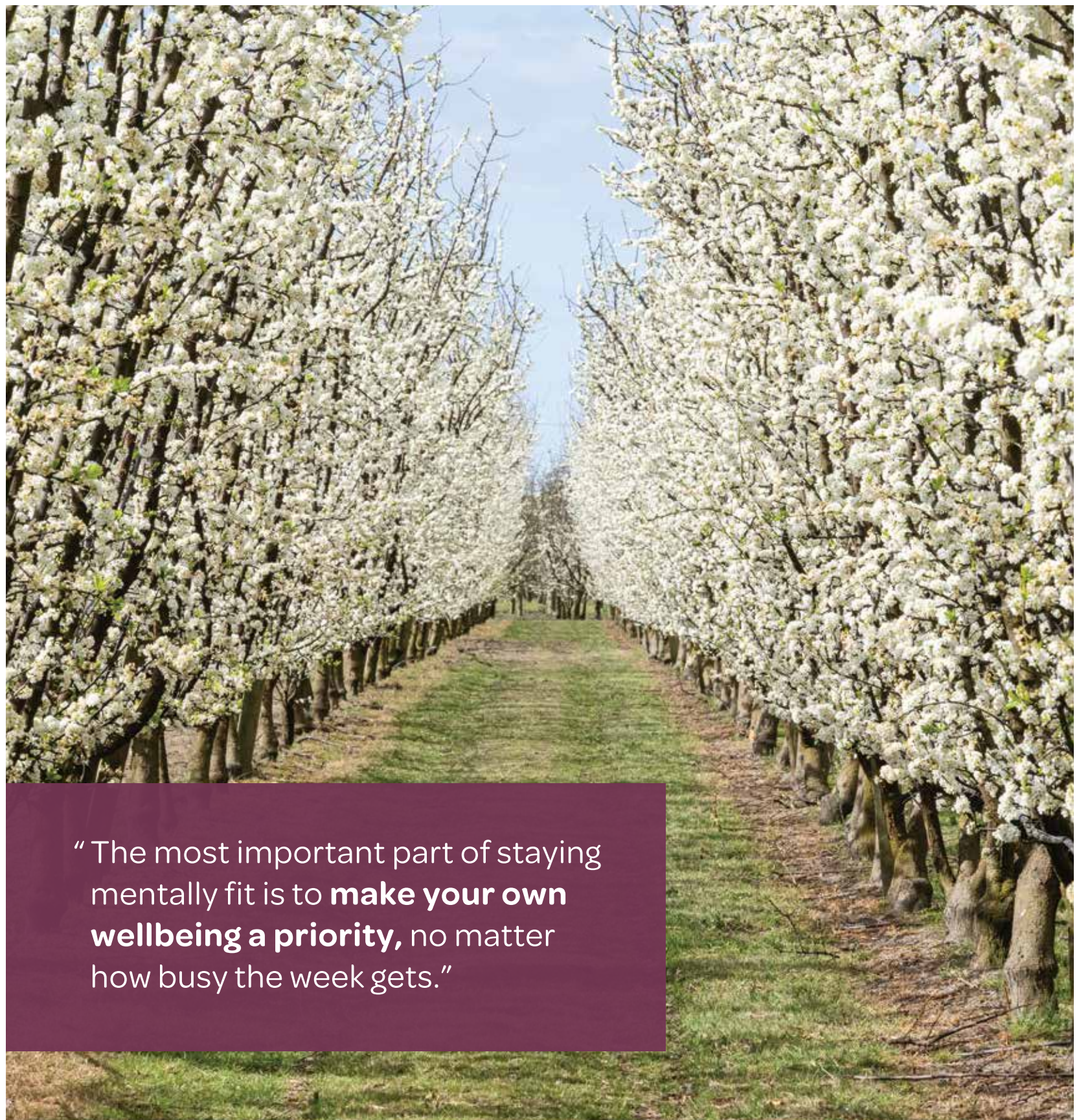


Socialise

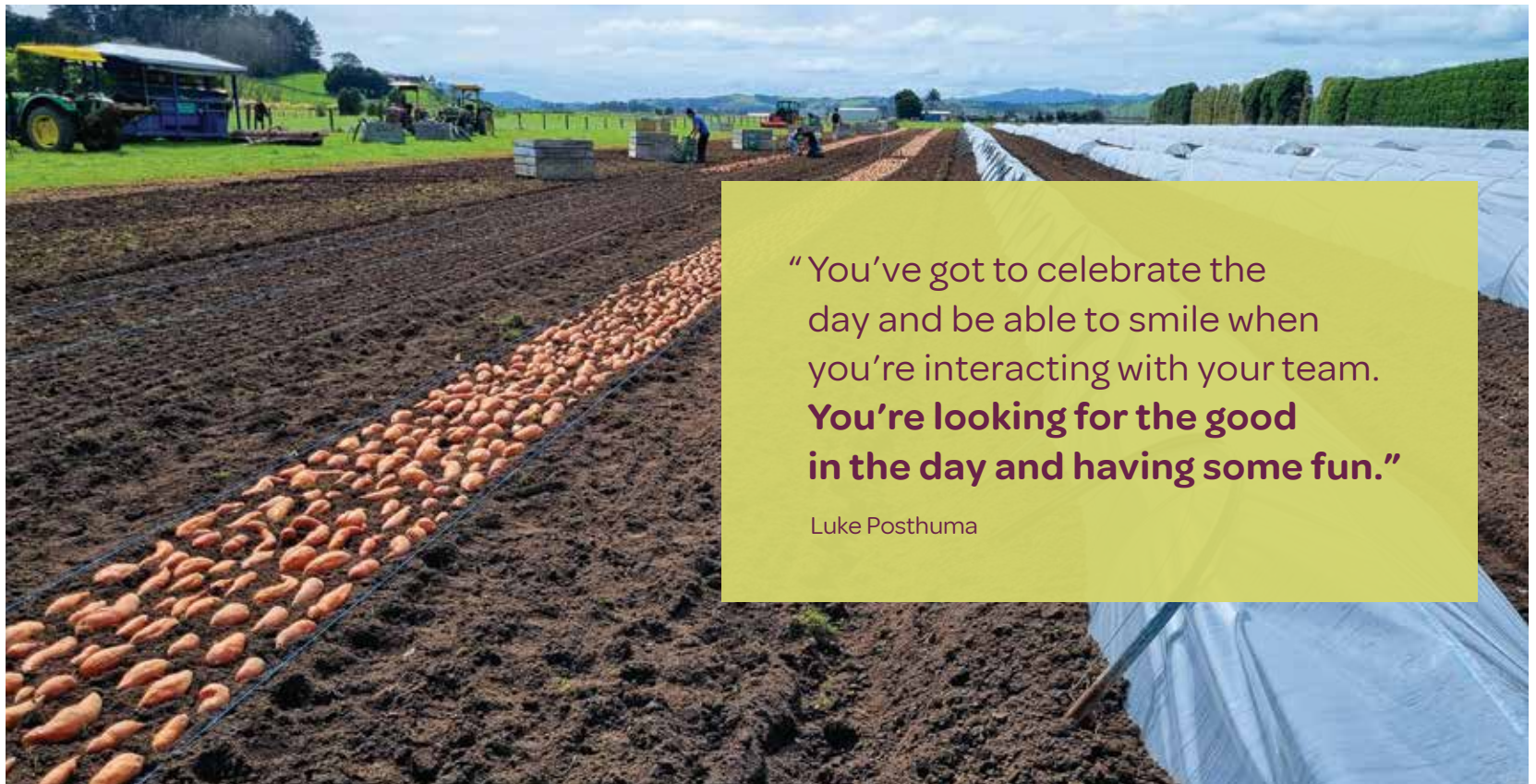
Tap into your wider social networks and have an enjoyable life outside of work.

Make sure you have a good support crew to help you unpack your day. If you keep every work challenge inside your own head, life soon becomes overwhelming, so don't bottle things up. Getting things off your chest with family and friends relieves stress. You can also help others doing it tough, simply by being a good listener.





“The most important part of staying mentally fit is to **make your own wellbeing a priority**, no matter how busy the week gets.”



“You’ve got to celebrate the day and be able to smile when you’re interacting with your team. **You’re looking for the good in the day and having some fun.”**

Luke Posthuma



**Realistic
optimism**

LOGAN WHENUAROA

The avocado industry is experiencing a downturn. Farmstrong caught up with Apata avocado manager Logan Whenuaroa about managing the challenges ahead.

Tell us about your job.

I manage the avocado business unit for Apata in the Bay of Plenty. My team and I deal with around 150 growers. We're part of their fruit-growing journey from pollination right through to harvest and packing.

Where are things at in the industry?

It's been a tough couple of years. The returns haven't been great – in two of the last four years, not even break-even.

How do you keep people going in such difficult market conditions?

It's a combination of being realistic, but also optimistic enough to keep the lights turned on. The fortunate part is that most people aren't solely relying on their avocados. Many of our current clientele are semi-retired or retired so there are different levels of exposure to the market.

There must still be some tough conversations.

We're fortunate we've got a really supportive grower network. They realise we're trying to get the best returns we can for them. But yes, it's hard having a conversation with a grower when their business isn't performing well for them.

How do you approach those conversations?

As openly and honestly as possible. It's also about spending time with people. I've learnt that people don't need to be fixed, they just want to be heard and felt. Sometimes they might not like the answer you give them, but that doesn't mean it's the wrong answer.

You sound skilled at having what Farmstrong calls a listening conversation – a chat that helps others manage stress and pressure.

That's how I try to operate. The other big thing is showing some emotion and vulnerability yourself so people feel able to reciprocate. When you're building trusted relationships like that, it's important to talk about more than just avocados.

How else do you support growers during tough times?

We look for opportunities to get people together. We've got a great grower committee. They host coffee mornings where growers talk about growing issues. And those chats can be about anything. People often discover that the problems that they're having are similar to what others are experiencing. Like they say, a problem shared is a problem halved.

You're supporting all these people, who supports you?

Funnily enough I've got a couple of growers who regularly call in and check on me. They'll call and say, 'how are you Logan?' and that's quite humbling. They recognise that I do have a lot of decisions and weight on my shoulders and that it's important to support me as well. I can't ask for any more than that.

I also have a very supportive family. They know the horticulture industry is seasonal and they really support me in my role.

What do you do to recharge mentally?

I play a little bit of golf here and there. It's good exercise, it's social and it gives you that mental space. I also enjoy reading. It's a good way to unwind and you usually come away with a useful idea or a fresh perspective. And obviously spending time with my family. We make an effort to go out at least one day a week to a park, a beach or a café.

How do you prevent taking work pressures home?

I've got a slowdown ritual. From the time I get home till 7pm, that's my family time. I don't pick up work emails or phone calls during that period and the people I deal with know that. It's a bit different during harvest, but the rest of the time I'm creating that space for recovery.

What about managing work hours?

Because horticulture is a seven-day-a-week industry, we rotate the weekend work so that my team and I only work every third weekend.

What about days when the challenges are coming from all directions?

I practice mindfulness – taking the time to stop and notice my thoughts and reset. That really helps. If I'm feeling overwhelmed, I'll just go for a walk to clear my head.

Anything else?

Yes, I have a list of two-minute jobs to dial down the pressure. Small tasks that don't take a lot of brain power. A two-minute job might be respond to an email or schedule an appointment.

What's the benefit of doing that?

If you're feeling stuck mentally, it just gets the ball moving. Essentially, they're cycle-breakers that get you out of that negative head space. Two-minute jobs also tend to be low consequence. If you get them wrong, it's not the end of the world. It might not work for everyone but that's what works for me.

What's your advice to growers feeling 'under the pump' at the moment?

When you work in agriculture and horticulture a lot of the pressures like the weather or market prices just go with the territory. A grower has a saying I like that captures that – 'some days you're the pigeon and some days you're the statue'.

There's no doubt, it's going to be a challenging few years ahead, but that's ok, it's allowed to be challenging. The question is how do we get through and what are we going to do differently? If the current system isn't working for you, do you need to change your operating model? If so, what are your options? Are you open to new opportunities? If people are feeling a bit down, that sort of thinking can help them find the spark again.

The reality is we're still growing something that people love and there are plenty of people who really care about the industry, so let's help each other through. 🍷

“ When you work in agriculture and horticulture, a lot of the pressures like the weather or market prices just go with the territory. A grower has a saying I like that captures that – **‘some days you’re the pigeon and some days you’re the statue’.**”





**'I wouldn't swap this
for anything'**

Mike Parker, Toby Parker and Ben Sarginson

BROADLANDS PRODUCE

The Parker family has been running a successful cropping and farming operation in Tolaga Bay for well over 60 years. Several family members talk to Farmstrong about how they cope with tough times.

Mike Parker - lots of support

The Parker's business, Broadlands Produce, is on the East Coast of the North Island, about an hour's drive north of Gisborne.

It's a diverse arable farming operation, including seven hectares of organic golden kiwifruit, sheep and beef fattening, and maize cropping.

Farming and growing always has its ups and downs but the last few years have been particularly hard-going for the second and third generations of the family. They've had to contend with severe weather events culminating in Cyclones Hale and Gabrielle in 2023 which tested their resilience to the max.

"We were badly knocked around by the cyclones. It was very difficult financially and mentally," say Mike Parker, who with his wife Bridget purchased the family farm in 1992. "We'd heavily invested in kiwifruit and we were exposed like lots of people were who were also hit hard. Thankfully the kiwifruit survived their first harvest but the hangover effect has ongoing challenges.

"We had lots of support at the time which was great. Our staff were incredible – digging deep, along with our amazing friends, family and community."

"After three years, the physical recovery of the farm is

almost there but the financial impact will take a lot longer to recover from," he says.

Looking back, Mike says that it was doing the simple things that helped him to get through, drawing up a plan on the whiteboard each evening and setting small achievable goals.

"We've had extremely hard times, like many others. You have your pages of lists and you go out and knock off a few easy jobs to motivate yourself. You see some ticks appear and that felt really good.

"Three years on, so much has been achieved through hard work, perseverance and support from our village. We employed seven locals, all with great skills, who adapted tremendously to get us back to business.

"We had a brilliant season in 2025 when we got the maize off early and grass and livestock in for the shoulder season over autumn and winter. That has been a huge reprieve as the 2024 season yields were nearly as bad as 2023, due to the hangover of bi-products like soil health and lack of fencing," says Mike. "There are always new challenges – recently with the kiwifruit it's pest and disease management within the boundaries of organics, balancing keeping the baddies out whilst promoting the good and biodiversity."

Despite the headwinds they face, which include the rising costs of fuel and fertiliser as well as the vagaries of the market, Mike is still very glad to be in the industry.

"I wouldn't swap my vocation for anything. We've been out this morning moving stock around and it feels like the farm has its heart-beat back again. We love being part of the kiwifruit industry – it's very friendly and transparent and the fruit itself is highly nutritious.

"I was born and bred here. I've always enjoyed working on the land and raising a family here. Now we've got more grandchildren around us which is exceptional,

and they constantly bring a lot of laughter to our home.

“Family time is very important, we encourage staff to make time to attend their kids’ school events. During the slower seasons we encourage staff to finish earlier and spend quality time with their family.”

Toby Parker – ‘Happy to be alive’

Mike’s son, Toby, is part of the family business but also runs his own Broadlands Contracting company. He has an engineering background and his heavy machinery provides planting, harvesting, spraying and groundwork services for the family business and other growers in the area.

“My passion is drainage, making a really unproductive paddock highly productive. Getting high-yield base crops is my goal.”

The impact of the cyclones was “soul-destroying”, says Toby. “It was very hard to see half your crop flattened or severely damaged. There’s that little man in the back of your head, saying ‘is it really worth it?’ You’re expecting 15-20 ton crops and you’re getting six. You can be losing hundreds of thousands of dollars.

“It’s been a tough few years, cleaning up non-stop, digging silt out of drains, pulling out fences, just seeing crops not growing the way they should.”

A silver lining for Toby was being called in by the biggest cropping companies in Gisborne to help harvest post-cyclones, as he was the only one in the district with gear robust enough to work in the dramatic soil conditions.

“We just about doubled the fertiliser applications in 2024 and had some good crops the season after the cyclones. It was very rewarding to see our hard work pay off.”

Three years on the paddocks have been re-levelled, the soil replenished. This year they’re getting up to 18 tons to the hectare maize crops.

Toby says what got him out of bed in the tough times was determination, resilience and wanting to keep building something for the future.

He reads motivational books and knows in his heart he doesn’t want to work for anyone else. He relaxes with the usual things – hunting, watching rugby games, playing cricket or going away and doing things with family and friends. He also has quite a following on TikTok (@Parker&Son) where he shares the adrenaline side of his contracting business.

“I’ve always known I wanted to work for myself and create something long-term. Farming and contracting can be tough, but there’s a lot of satisfaction in seeing progress.”

He works long hours at times but is also clear about the importance of balance if you want to last the distance.

“Working hard is good but running a business has extra stresses of maintaining quality machinery, paying the bills and making sure you’ve got enough work. Having good people around you to share the load is key.”

For Toby, all the hardships have not dimmed his love of what he does.

“I’ve learned to be happy in the moment. When I’m driving, I just look at the ocean out the window and I’m happy to be alive. It sounds cheesy but I’m grateful to have my health, my incredible fiancé Amy, our daughter Freya and now baby son Tommy. Family gives you perspective and something bigger to work towards. I’m genuinely excited for the future.

“My approach is just be happy with whatever you’re doing and do your best. I make mistakes every single day. I used to beat myself up. Now I just say to myself ‘don’t do that again, learn and move on.’”

Clare Sarginson – ‘Attend to the basics’

Mike and Bridget’s daughter Clare Sarginson and her husband Ben moved back to Tolaga Bay two years ago and are part of the family business. They have their own block of land with sister Pen and husband Matt. Previously, Clare worked in banking and marketing strategy in Auckland while also supporting the family business remotely. Ben’s background is commercial construction, skills that translate well to agriculture.

The weather volatility and downstream global effects are main stressors for the business, says Clare. Ensuring your mental wellbeing is strong is vital for managing those challenges.

“A big part of it for me personally is exercise. Ideally, doing a workout four days a week and getting my heart rate up for 30 minutes is the best way to have a clearer and calmer mind.”

After the cyclones and having a baby, she used the Sweat app to rebuild a routine with short workouts. She also attended yoga sessions at the marae with some of the team, “a slow yoga that is a good way to reset your thoughts and breathing.”

Clare has also worked to improve planning and communication across the business.

“There’s an endless and fast-growing to-do list on a farm. When I came down from Auckland the family had lost the will to have meetings after the cyclones. At the beginning of weekly meetings I made everybody lie on the floor and breathe for five minutes without talking. There are some huge talkers in our family, so it helped calm minds and get everyone in the zone.”

An initiative Clare says has been an amazing tool for dealing with stress is Surfing for Farmers, a nationwide activity that began in Gisborne.

“ Good planning and a prioritised to-do list **are essential.**”



Clare and Ben Sarginson with Isabelle.

“It’s all about helping farmers get off the farm and have a break,” says Clare. “They provide the surfboards, wetsuits, a professional trainer and a barbecue at the end of the day. It’s quite a laugh seeing dad learn to surf in his mid-60s!”

Good planning and a prioritised to-do list are essential when feeling stressed and overwhelmed, says Clare.

“Ask yourself what are the top three priorities for the week. Do them first, anything else is a bonus.”

Finding ways to switch off is crucial, says Clare. She has two children under three, Isabelle and Archer. She plays pickleball, listens to podcasts and enjoys catching up with friends over a beach walk. For husband Ben, golf, sport and weekends away help him relax. And getting off-farm for a weekend break-away is hugely re-energising.”

Having someone to talk things through with is also important, she says. “My husband is my main person on that one. We highlight the good and the challenges that have happened during the day, and help each other problem-solve in our various roles.”

Clare’s approach to wellbeing is regular and sustainable.

“Attend to the basics like sleep, nutrition and exercise. Think of food as your fuel.

“Don’t set the bar too high. If you set a goal of doing a workout every day, you’ll feel like you’ve let yourself down if you miss a day. I’d rather under-promise and over-deliver. That’s more motivating and achievable.” 🍷

Right: Aerial picture from the farm to Tolaga Bay beach.



An aerial photograph of a coastal farm landscape. In the foreground, there are large, rectangular agricultural fields, some brown and some green. A small cluster of farm buildings, including a white silo and a blue-roofed structure, is visible. A winding road or path cuts through the fields. In the background, a blue body of water (the ocean) stretches to the horizon, with a rocky coastline and hills visible. The sky is clear and blue.

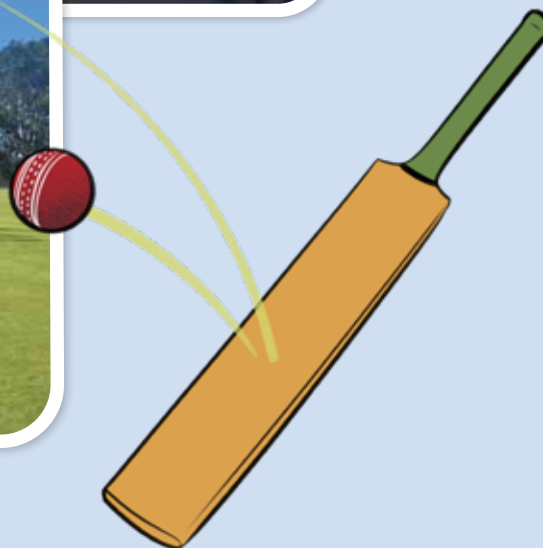
“ We’ve been out this morning moving stock around and **it feels like the farm has its heart-beat back again.**”

Mike Parker

Cricket – community builder



Stephen Crossan



STEPHEN CROSSAN

An annual cricket game between Bay of Plenty farmers and growers is now a regular fixture on the calendar, with the event in its seventh year.

The idea is to get farmers and growers off the land for a day and have some fun together, says organiser and driving force behind the idea, Stephen Crossan.

It's also a chance to raise awareness about Farmstrong and the importance of looking after yourself.

"It's important to down tools once in a while and have a great day with some like-minded people. It's easy for an orchardist or a farmer to be stuck in their own little bubble and not get out and see other people.

"A cricket game can work wonders. This event has been well supported over seven years now. It attracts not just the players but family and supporters who come along to watch. We get sponsors on board and it's a fun, community event.

"All the players have to do is turn up – we have the cricket bats, the uniforms and the food and drink there all ready to go. It's pretty hard to come up with an excuse not to play! An event like this is not just about the cricket. When we get together afterwards there is no 'shop talk'. We just talk about the game over a couple of beers and enjoy a nice barbecue."

For the record, the growers are in the ascendancy with five wins under their belt. A former dairy farmer, Stephen is now a horticultural spray contractor but his loyalties are still with the dairy farmers.

"The growers have dominated for a number of years. Even though I'm Team Horticulture I still want the dairy farmers to win. I haven't been able to shift that alliance yet," he says with a laugh.

Stephen is enjoying the change of scene, working in horticulture with growers and packhouses.

"I love what I'm doing. It's been a good change and a good challenge. Every day is different. I get to go around the region and visit some pretty beautiful places."

Stephen has observed similar pressures on growers and farmers.

"There's always time pressure, there's not enough time in a day. Sometimes it's rain that affects us, or the wind. And isolation can be an issue for growers just as it is for farmers."

It's really important for growers as well as farmers to look after themselves and find ways to stay connected, says Stephen.

"That's what the cricket game is about. We hope players will take away a message about the importance of doing what's needed to look after themselves. Farmstrong's 5 Ways to Wellbeing is a great place to start – simple habits, such as exercise and eating well and taking breaks, can help you stay well."

Stephen played premier cricket until recently which got him off-farm several times a week.

"I like to do things away from work. I enjoy golf now and schedule in as much as I can. That's my outlet. Small breaks are good too. I like to go and have a coffee on a busy day, just take some time out."

Stephen is grateful for Farmstrong, not just for supporting the cricket game. The work it does supporting farmers and growers in the community is definitely needed, he says. 🍌



‘None of us are invincible’

HAMISH RUSH

Apple orchardist Hamish Rush was one of a dozen Nelson growers who bared all for the 'Horti Boys' calendar to raise awareness about mental health. Here's why.

Tell us a little about your business.

We're growing 30 hectares of pipfruit and eight hectares of blackcurrants. We run a handful of sheep just to keep the hillside clean so I don't have to mow it [laughs]. Our predominant business is export apples. It's a family business and we've been doing it for 112 years.

What do you enjoy about the job?

I enjoy working outdoors. This business is also a big part of our family history, so I enjoy being able to continue the legacy. I also like working with other people and watching them grow while helping me grow my business.

What are the main challenges you've faced in recent years?

We had all the Covid-related stuff that put pressure on all primary producers because we didn't know whether we were going to be able to harvest our crops. We only get one chance to harvest our crop a year in the pipfruit game, so the pressures around that were immense.

We also didn't know whether we were going to be able to get staff in like we normally do or whether there was going to be anyone to pick up the product or buy it at the other end.

There was real uncertainty during those Covid and post-Covid years. This added another layer of stress on top of the usual business stresses, including random hailstorms and global market pressures.

That ongoing stress and uncertainty can take a toll.

It does. One of our good mates took quite a deep dive down the hole and was struggling. That prompted a lot of discussion around how we could support him and what we could do to raise awareness about mental health amongst growers.

Is that why you and your mates created the Horti Boys Calendar?

Yeah, my mate Evan Heywood and I were out for dinner one night with our lovely wives and they suggested we make 'a calendar' like the firemen calendar. We spent the rest of the evening brainstorming and laughing. To cut a long story short, I rang a photographer, did the first photo shoot holding a tastefully-positioned frame of bees and the rest is history.

Has it worked?

It's certainly helped to get the discussion going about mental health. As far as I'm concerned, it only had to help one person for all of it to be worth it. It's already prompted someone to ring us about someone they were concerned about and ask where they could go for support.

Doing the calendar is also a great metaphor – taking your shirt off for the camera makes you feel vulnerable because you are exposed. When you are talking to someone about your feelings you are exposed. Be vulnerable, talk about your feelings.



Stress doesn't discriminate – it can affect anyone, at any time and the people that look bulletproof can be the ones who are the most vulnerable. The really cool thing about the calendar project is that people are more likely to be on the lookout now for others who may be struggling.

What do you do to look after your own wellbeing?

A big part of keeping well for me is getting off-site and getting active. Doing things that work a sweat up.

I'm an outdoors guy. I'm a snowboarder, skier, water skier, mountain biker, gym bunny and I've done a lot of running in the past. You name it, I've done it. I'm currently on a mountaineering buzz and learning how to go rock climbing. It's been absolutely amazing to try something different.

I also love to go to gigs in town with my wife and dance. Dancing is a great stress relief and it's quality time together as a couple. Quality time together with your partner is important. That's a great stress relief.

How do you find time to do all those things when you've got a business to run?

Look, to be honest with you, in the first 20 years of my career, I did not prioritise it enough and I regret that. But I worked out after observing others who were better at it than me, that I needed to plan it.

Nowadays I just book a meeting with myself so I can do what I need to do to be the best me. When you say to people, 'I've got a meeting at four o'clock and I can't miss it', they're fine with it.

By booking a meeting with yourself, you're creating the window that allows you to do what you need to do to refresh mentally and physically. I've learnt over the years that it's really important to have that bit of time out that allows you to refresh and reset.

What else keeps you well?

I've got a very strong network of friends around me outside of my wife and kids. They are my top five people who I want to hang out with as much as I can, because they just fill my cup. They listen to my bullshit, they don't judge me and if I need help they do what needs to be done.

Those are really critical relationships in anyone's life, in my opinion. I really believe that you're as strong as the top five people around you.

“ Create some balance in your life and remember none of us are invincible.”

What about those days when nothing seems to go right? How do you manage those?

I think it's about reminding yourself what's really important in life. For me it's my family, my health and the community I live in. None of that is material. It's not about KPIs, flash cars in the driveway or international holidays.

I think when you're in a really stressful situation you've got to be mindful of what truly makes you happy. No matter what's going on at work, I remind myself I've still got my health. I've still got my family, I've got the community I live in. I haven't lost the shirt off my back. So, bringing it back to basics is the answer for me.

Farmstrong passes on mental fitness skills that build resilience and help people perform under pressure. Do you think these skills are relevant for growers?

Absolutely. Look at the All Blacks. The reason they are so good is because they get the coaching on how to deal with adversity, how to deal with that stressful moment and how to not let it overwhelm them. Everyone can be a better version of themselves if they have the skills.

Looking back on your own career, what advice would you offer someone starting out?

Create some balance in your life and remember none of us are invincible. We're all human, and it's okay to actually ask for help if you need support or to help someone else. Let's look for those signs that someone's under pressure and acknowledge it rather than fobbing it off. We'll go further if we work as a team. 🌱



The art of growing



ANDRE DE BRUIN

Northland kumara grower Andre de Bruin has been growing for decades. He is a former chair of the Vegetables NZ Board and a life member of both Hort NZ and Vegetables NZ.

How did you get into the industry?

I started working for a grower after school in the 1980s. Eventually we started growing on our own account.

What do you enjoy about it?

You're doing something different every day. The same thing doesn't go wrong each day!

What does it take to make a go of it?

You've just got to have passion. It's not all about the dollars and cents. If you don't like growing things, it's not the business to be in.

What are the pressure points for you?

There are different pressures for different reasons throughout the year. In winter, there's just two staff, myself and one other. At the peak of the planting, you're managing up to 20 seasonal employees.

Do you get breaks to recover from the busy periods?

The hardest thing in farming is predicting a good time for a holiday! It's challenging. We have higher and lower periods of activity in our business. But even during the low periods, we are the labour force, so there is very little downtime.

What's the answer?

When the kids were young, I had a policy where I always made sure that I was available for school sports. If the kids were going to athletics day, I'd take the time off and go to athletics day. And the timing usually wasn't great – it was when we were starting harvest. But I'd just close the business down for the day and catch up on work later that night.

At the end of the day the family is a big part of why we do what we do. That's just as important to us as the profitability of any particular day.

Do you have any regular activity off-farm to recharge?

I get away and play squash on a Wednesday night and have done for many years. The big benefit is you're off-farm and meeting totally different people.

Who helps you unpack your day?

My wife and I work very much as a team. She's an accountant by trade which is handy. She has her business pressures just like I do on the farm, so we're good at stepping up and supporting each other.

Can you share a challenging time and tell us what helped you get through?

Cyclone Gabrielle was tough for the whole industry. The weather was pretty dire that night and the system just wasn't moving away from us. Next morning we woke up to our property being a lake.

How did you mentally cope with that?

We took time to get our head around things and realised there was nothing we could have done to change it. We went out and sat on the hill behind our

place and looked out over the whole area for about half an hour. We realised the event was much bigger than just us, so we couldn't get too despondent about what had happened to us.

What was the impact on your business?

We were due to start harvesting the next week so we were at full exposure, but everyone in the industry was in the same position. When I got out there on the tractor, all the properties looked exactly the same, just big lakes and there were people with bigger problems than us. It was big for everyone. Everyone in our district went through that. And it wasn't just the growers. It was also our employees.

What helped growers get through?

We're a close-knit community so everyone kept an eye on each other. We worked with each other to help each other. I can't say it wasn't stressful, but when there's so much water what are you going to do – shoot down there with a bucket?

On the first day we cleared one channel so the water didn't build up around the neighbour's house. That was a constructive thing to do. Just take things a step at a time. After that, we were quite pragmatic. We just accepted it was a recovery operation, harvested what we could and got some income. We ended up with about 18 percent of our expected yield.

Does an event like that have a lasting impact?

An event like that does change you. If we get a lot of rain forecast, I still feel a little on edge.

Has it changed how you run the business?

Yes I think an event like that changes your vision and focus. It makes you reconsider why you're doing it all in the first place. It makes you appreciate that you

want to enjoy your life. We made a plan for how we were going to financially adjust and we implemented that quickly, but a big part of getting back on our feet again was having positive things to look forward to.

We'd been saving for a campervan for a number of years and we had a discussion with the bank manager and he turned to us and said, 'go and buy it'. That was his way of saying, you need to be able to get away and get some distance from these things. And so the following weekend we owned a campervan.

How's that worked out? Do you use it much?

Yes, we do. The greatest thing about having a campervan is we don't have to book to go and do something off-farm. It might be six o'clock on Friday night and you think, why don't we go camping and within half an hour we've gone and parked up at a beach.

If I'm starting out as a grower, what do I need to bear in mind? How do I keep well and enjoy the job?

The main thing is you've got to have a passion for growing. If you don't have that you'll struggle because the seasons are up and down, the prices are up and down and at some point there'll be a weather event. So, to be a good grower with a good future, the first attribute is to actually want to be a grower.

What else helps?

You need to go into growing with your eyes open and work out how you're going to fund it. It's very different than 30 years ago due to the cost of land and the size businesses need to be today to be profitable. You've got to be able to withstand quite long periods without cash flow because sometimes your cash flow just doesn't happen. You might have a season where you grow beautiful kumaras and everyone else grows beautiful kumaras and so they're worth less because

there's so many beautiful kumaras around. I've had years where there is under-pricing and that's always a soul-searching time.

How did you deal with those market dips?

We went 'old school'. We wrote down every single thing we bought in a notebook and its cost. That really showed us what we spent our money on and what was absolutely necessary and what wasn't. And you'd be surprised how much spending is unnecessary. We reduced long-term maintenance. We didn't buy any new tractors. You just live within your means and when it comes right then you catch up on your maintenance.

Any other tips about managing the pressures of the job?

Growing's all about getting the little things in order with your crop as best you can as you go along. Doing that gives you more control over your decision-making down the track.

Can you give me an example?

Yes, if you've prepared your crop properly six weeks or eight weeks before harvest and there's rain on the

horizon, you've got more flexibility in your decision-making, because you know you've got everything right up until then. If you've done everything you can, there are fewer decisions to make and they're easier decisions to make, which relieves pressure.

What about dealing with unexpected changes?

Growing is an art. It's never one plus one equals this, it's more this plus this and then something changes and you have to adjust. When things change, you need to be focused and flexible.

How would you sum up the rewards?

When the going's good for growing you do end up with good cashflow. But you need to save some of it for the years when you don't have cashflow. That's how you keep your stress levels down.

If you ride out the market cycles and weather, is there a promised land on the other side of that?

If you can produce in the top half of the industry and keep your costs in the bottom half of the industry, you'll create a pretty reasonable business and look after your family quite nicely. ●



"You've got to really want to be a grower. It's not all about the dollars and cents. If you don't like growing things, it's not the business to be in."

“Sometimes when the going’s rough,
it’s amazing how much difference a simple
smile or grin to somebody can make.”



Celebrate the day

LUKE POSTHUMA

Growing kumara is a source of great pride for Luke Posthuma and his family, but every year brings its challenges.

Tell us about your operation.

We're based in Dargaville and grow kumara and watermelons. This is our fifth season here.

How did you get into horticulture?

I always loved the outdoors, gardening and plants growing up. So I did an Ag. science degree at Massey, worked for Farmlands in the horticulture team for a while and then did soil mapping for a variety of companies after that. That involved a lot of report writing which wasn't really my thing, so I started looking for other opportunities.

I'd never thought about growing kumara, but when this property came up, we did the sums cash-flow wise and set up a family equity partnership so we had some capital to get started.

What do you enjoy about the job?

I love the outdoors work and growing kumara is really labour-intensive. It takes a team effort. We work with up to 20 staff through planting and a few less through harvest. We normally have quite a young crew, about half are locals and half are people with working holiday visas. It's great watching their skills develop and their confidence grow.

A lot must be riding on harvest time.

Yes, I get a lot of satisfaction when we get to harvest and you get a beautiful crop of kumara. When you've

got a paddock of something that comes out looking great and it really gives you a sense of reward. We mostly grow the orange variety.

Harvesting it, putting it in the shed, or when you go into the supermarket and you see your name on the product, it's exciting. There's not that many kumara growers in New Zealand. There's only about 40 of us. So it's not that hard to find your product around the country.

What's the key to growing a good kumara?

Kumara grow well in Northland. They're a tropical plant and need warmth. We're growing on fairly heavy soils. Clays are great for kumara because we don't get as many weeds or as much bug damage. But the challenge with heavy clays is it's either too wet or it's too dry and Northland has a challenging environment. We've had two very dry summers and one big cyclone since we've been here.

How do you cope with variables like that?

I've got an old grower who gives me advice, and he says, 'you've got to plan for a normal season, but be ready to shift to plan B or C. Change your plan.'

What does that mean in practice?

Timing is probably the biggest thing. A lot of that comes down to understanding your soil or block's limitations, and then managing operations, whether it be planting or harvest, around the weather, so it's about watching the weather forecast.

What are the other pressures you face?

I think the worst pressure I have felt, and it's probably because we're starting out still, is the financial pressure. When you've got average weather and the

prices are pretty low it makes it challenging to know where you sit. But when you're running a cropping business you've got to look at things in the long term – know where your costs are, understand where you're going and have a good cash flow budget so that you know you've got a route out.

What helps to boost your wellbeing?

The main thing is making sure you get time off the farm. That can be hard because there's always another job to do. There's always something else you can do to try and be more prepared in growing.

No-one's going to tell you to take time off on a farm. How do you achieve it?

I'm a Christian, so we don't have staff coming in on Sundays and we make time for church on Sundays. I might do some spraying in the afternoon or evening, but I'm always going to prioritise time for church and family. When the going gets tough for me personally on farm, my faith and my family are what gives me a reason to keep going. I realise I've got to protect those drivers so that I can keep on handling the stress that comes at me.

I was going to ask who helps you unpack your day.

My wife is amazing. I wouldn't do it without her because sometimes when you need another set of ears, she's so helpful. My parents have been very supportive too.

Can you share a particularly challenging time?

When we first got into farming, our bank got us to run some worst-case scenarios on our budgets and it was like, 'oh that would never happen'. Then in our

first year we had a really dry summer, our yields were pretty low, but there was an industry oversupply so the prices were low - and then the following summer we had Cyclone Gabrielle. We were quite a bit worse than the worst-case scenario! There was a lot of pressure in those first years.

How'd you get through?

Talking it through with somebody else who's been in business for a while helped. Keeping going helped too. You've got to take another step forward each day, because life doesn't stop, eh? And for me, I think, for that second year, family and my faith would have been the two biggest drivers as well, because for a wee bit, you couldn't really see what the route forward was.

What about the cyclone you mentioned?

After the cyclone, we had to keep going because there was still a crop to harvest. We lost just over 70 percent of our crop, but what was left was worth quite a bit so we ended up almost breaking even that year. We were lucky.

What did you learn from those challenges?

What I learnt is that yes, it's just a hard thing and you wouldn't want to go through it again, but somehow you do get through.

Opening up and talking to other people helps a lot. I remember my auntie and uncle came up for a visit from Christchurch and about a month later I got a box of 'one square meals' from my aunt with a note that said, "You look just like your uncle and when he gets stressed, he doesn't eat enough. So I sent you these, because when he's too busy to eat, one square meal gives him energy."

When you've got that sort of support and you know people are wanting you to succeed, it definitely helps you to keep going.

Do you have any hobbies?

At this point, family, we've got two little boys now, our oldest is three-and-a-half, our second is 18 months, so I'm trying to take more time to go to the beach or do things with them.

What about those days when things go wrong? Do you have a mindset to deal with them?

You've got to take yourself out of the moment to think clearly. Count to five and breathe deeply and then respond. In the end, if something major breaks, all it means is a bit more time to complete something or you'll get a bill for it. As long as nobody's been hurt, there's nothing that can't be fixed.

Sometimes when the day isn't going well, you're better off having a shorter day. During busy periods you might have work that has to be done in the evenings, but many tasks can be left to tomorrow. I've found from experience, normally a bad day only gets worse so pressing the 'reset' button can be a good way to go.

Looking back on your farming so far, what advice would you give yourself now starting out?

Have good systems and set things up efficiently because things often go wrong when you're busiest! You'll send somebody to find something, they can't find it and that just makes the problem worse. Having good systems means issues or problems don't become as big.

I think about our business as an outdoor factory environment producing a plant. We can't control the weather but good systems help to minimise staff challenges and machinery breakdowns.



What mental fitness tip can you share with other growers?

If you're looking at going into a managing role in growing, you need to be able to handle stress because there will always be issues like the weather that can make life challenging at times.

It's about working well as a team and putting systems in place so that others can help. Jobs might not be done quite how I want them to be done, but you can't do everything. Sometimes you need to take a step back and hand it off to somebody else that you can trust.

What does being Farmstrong mean to you?

You've got to accept there'll always be challenges in farming and still keep enjoying what you're doing. Life's short, there's no point being grumpy, so you might as well make each day count.

One of the most challenging things about farming is working with the weather which is not very predictable. But I much prefer being out there, loving what I do, to being in an office. A bad day out in the field is still ten times better than a good day hunched over a laptop writing reports. 🌞

Getting through tough times

Sometimes, without warning, life can just turn. It might be extreme weather or a sudden downturn in the market. Here are a few tips that growers and farmers who've been through tough times have shared with us.

Prioritise your wellbeing

Pace yourself, so you don't burn out/ hit the wall. Your own physical and mental fitness has to be an absolute priority even during challenging times

Take things day by day

Be realistic about workload. Decide what's the most important thing and focus on that.

As well as looking after neighbours, look after yourself.

Keep talking to others and take time each day to stop and reset mentally and physically. Even a ten minute break makes a big difference.

Look after the 'basics' such as sleep, nutrition and getting off-farm when you can.

Everyone has a limit to their energy.
You can't get by on adrenaline and no sleep.

Schedule recovery time.

Get off-farm when you can. Take time to connect with others and reset mentally rather than just keep going.

Stay positive/use 'realistic optimism'.

Things may be challenging now, but the grass always grows back.



Learn mental fitness skills that build resilience.

Breathing, exercise, train the brain to avoid unhelpful thinking, adopt a flexible/growth mindset to change and uncertainty.

Stay active.

It's easy to flag exercise in tough times but staying active is a mood boost that gets you away from work and connects you with others.

Stay connected and support other growers doing it tough.

It puts life in perspective and boosts your mood. People will feel good someone is thinking of them and they're not alone. They also might have a tip you may not have thought of yourself.

Breathing.

If you're dealing with extreme weather or some other big challenge, it's easy to start the day with a negative mindset and rush round achieving little. Take 3 to 5 deep, long breaths before you start work, gather your thoughts and go and 'win' the day.

Look after your body, look after your mind.

Good food, good sleep and good people will always help you get through the toughest seasons.

Work as a team and make sure everyone's on the same page.

Plan for the worst and hope for the best. Anticipate the pressure points, load up on supplies and get a plan/way forward set up. Then celebrate your wins.

Cut yourself some slack.

Focus on the controllables and make your peace with what you can't control.

Focus on the good stuff.

If you're working in a team, at your weekly meeting make every person share two things that went right so you focus on the good stuff and people feel valued and appreciated.

Find something that gets you off-farm or orchard every now and again and stick to it.

Dinner and a laugh with mates, kids' sport, a hobby. Make time for it. It clears your head and gets you out of the weeds.

You can't pour from an 'empty cup'.

Refill your cup by doing things you enjoy and will energise you.



Getting through together

Farmstrong and Wine Marlborough teamed up at the Viticulture Winter Field Day in Blenheim to help local winemakers and growers navigate challenging times.



After years of growth and expansion, the wine industry has struck tougher market conditions. As a result, growers and winemakers are facing a period of change and uncertainty. The impact is significant for the Marlborough region, which accounts for over 80 percent of New Zealand's wine production.

Opening the event, Wine Marlborough board director Nigel Sowman stressed the need for unity and optimism.

"I've been in this industry for 25 years and I've seen a few ups and downs. We're going through a tough patch at the moment. I know growers and winemakers here are feeling the pain, but the industry has been through these challenges before and always come out the other side. We have to remember that this is a great industry to be a part of and we're all in this together."

He also urged local growers and winemakers to make their wellbeing a priority.

"Looking after yourself is actually a really big part of how we get through. Maintaining a positive mindset is hugely important in situations like this. That's why we've got the likes of Farmstrong here to talk to us about things we can do to pull ourselves through."

Farmstrong chief executive Gerard Vaughan hosted a series of workshops during the afternoon. He reminded attendees that the number one asset in any business are the people who work there and to look after their wellbeing with the same level of care and attention they paid to their land, produce and machinery.

He encouraged people to regularly top up their 'wellbeing bank account' by investing in small, daily habits – the 5 Ways to Wellbeing – that are proven to boost mood and strengthen resilience.

Left: Marcus Pickens, Nigel Sowman and Ruth Berry of Wine Marlborough with Farmstrong chief executive Gerard Vaughan at the Viticulture Winter Field Day at Matador Estate in Blenheim.

"Boosting our reserves of wellbeing by making regular 'investments' gives us something to draw on when we're 'under the pump'."

Gerard also shared a suite of Farmstrong resources featuring growers and farmers who have experienced adversity and share what helped them to get through.

"There's a lot of wisdom and knowledge in the horticulture industry that can provide a useful 'roadmap' and inspiration for others facing similar challenges."

"Just like people go to a gym to become physically fitter, you can also train your brain to become mentally stronger and fitter. Thinking strategies such as avoiding common thinking traps, catching and changing unhelpful thinking and 'reframing' a bad day are all practical skills that people can learn and apply at work."

One of the winemakers at the event was Tim Adams from Vinlink Winery, one of the larger wineries in Marlborough. Tim's a good example of someone who's proactive about his wellbeing.

"I like to get out and ride mountain bikes and have a couple of hours to myself. It's not just about keeping physically fit, it also helps you stay mentally fit, I think. It's time for yourself where you don't have all those pressures, you don't have the phone, you don't have people asking you about work."

"Over the years, I've learnt that work and market pressures are always going to be there. Taking some 'me time' to work on yourself really helps you to refocus and think through issues."

Wine Marlborough's general manager Marcus Pickens also offered his thoughts after the event.

"It was fantastic to have Farmstrong at our Viticulture Winter Field Day. It has a lot of good, practical tools and resources for keeping well that work for people at the grassroots level." 🍷

“ I always find doing something that I call ‘active relaxing’ helps me to switch off the work worry brain, and just be present in the moment. I find trail-running in the bush with the dogs forces me to just think about where the next footstep will be. I also find my love of cars pushes me to go along to car meets and events. Meeting people from all walks of life is a great way to make new connections.”

Rowan Hoskins, Viticulturist & Site Manager, Escarpment Vineyards, Martinborough



Insights from the wine industry

“Stop and take in the view. Physically and metaphorically, when striving to reach the top, it’s important to stop, turn around and see how far you’ve come already. It’s already a pretty good view. Soak up the moment, appreciate what you’ve achieved and when recharged, carry on.”

Nicky Grandorge, Leadership & Communities Manager,
New Zealand Winegrowers.



“ To stay mentally healthy I like to take five minutes to stand in the sunshine when it comes out to take a breather. It’s such a great reset during a busy day.”



Georgia Mehlhopt,
Winemaker,
Greystone,
Waipara

“ I like to go mountain-biking with my friends and then de-stress with a yoga class. On the quieter evenings, getting lost in a good book is the best way to escape current life.”



Kelly Stuart,
Winemaker,
Cloudy Bay,
Marlborough





Power up your mental fitness



Just like you can become physically fitter, you can also build your mental strength and fitness to manage the ups and downs of life and work, writes Farmstrong content expert **Hugh Norriss**.

That's what being Farmstrong is all about. Getting more out of life and work and keeping well, despite the challenges that come your way.

Anyone reading this publication will realise that the challenges in horticulture aren't going away anytime soon – the impact of severe weather on harvests, market changes, regulations, time pressures. As the stories in this book demonstrate, challenges like these are part and parcel of working in the industry, whether you are a grower, sprayer, manager or work in the packhouse.

What's important is that people develop habits that make them mentally stronger and more resilient, rather than waiting for the pressures of work to take their toll.

The Farmstrong mental skills toolbox is a great place to start. These are skills that can help everyone in this busy, results-driven industry to deal with the inevitable ups and downs of the job. When these skills become ingrained, people are in a stronger position to focus on the things that really matter and maintain a good headspace for decision-making when the pressure comes on.



The most important part of staying mentally fit is to make your own wellbeing a priority, no matter how busy the week gets. Make time for activities that help you de-stress and recharge your batteries.

Here are some Farmstrong tools and tips to make the day work better for you. 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.

Even small changes in mental behaviour can make a big difference when we experience storms in life. Different things work for different people so lock in what works for you.

“Mental skills are like any skills, you can't just go from zero to 100.”



Control the controllables

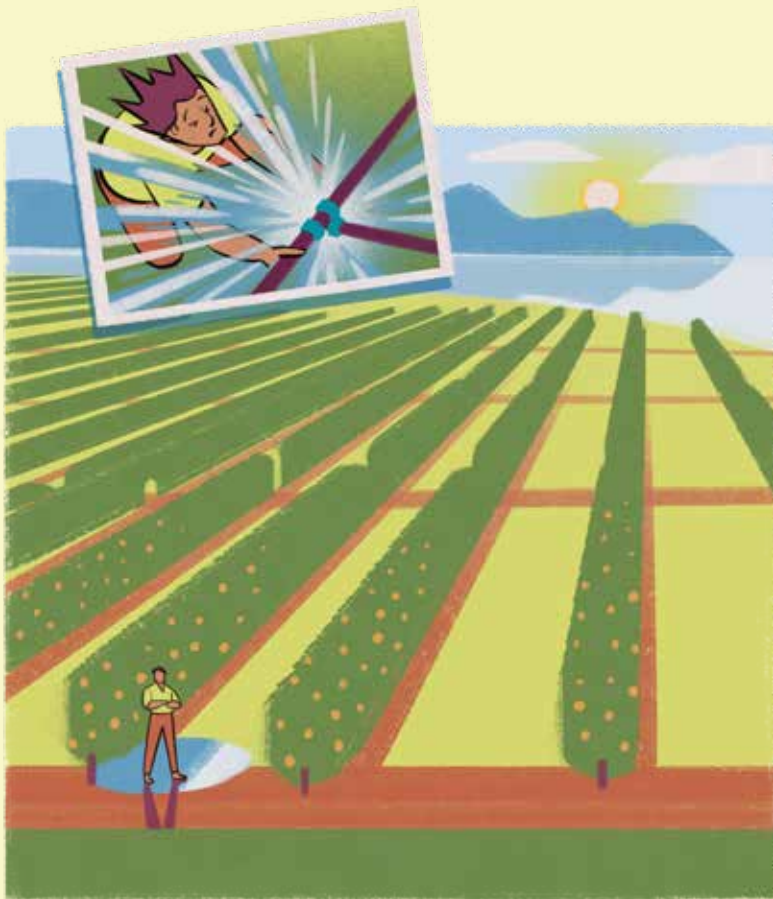
Working in horticulture can be an emotional rollercoaster. There are so many factors outside of your control like severe weather events including wind, hail and frost, fluctuating export markets or supply chain pressures. A great way to relieve stress and worry is to work out **what you can control and what you can't**.



- Grab a piece of paper. Divide the page in two and on one side **list the things you feel you have some control over and on the other side list the things you don't**.
- **Aim to let go 'mentally'** of the things you can't control.
- **Now prioritise the things you can control.** Focus on the top two or three things so you have a plan about what to attack first. This allows you to keep moving forward with a sense of control, so you're not overwhelmed by the scale of everything.
- You could also include another column called 'Things I can influence'. Sometimes we can't fully control a situation, but we still have some influence. A good example might be checking to ensure the equipment which is crucial to your operation is well-maintained.

Reframe a bad day

When you are really feeling stressed, there is a helpful 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 talk up 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 what has happened so things go better in the future?
Sometimes a setback can be a useful lesson.

Resist the urge to complain

It's fair enough to complain if we get terrible service or a bad product, but complaining about life is generally not helpful. Complaining can feel good in the short term, but after a while it really takes a toll on your wellbeing.



That's because negativity is contagious like a virus. If you complain a lot, you spread your bad mood, which means that people around you become more negative and feed it back to you, making you feel even worse. It's also true, however, that sometimes we just 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.

“ The way I like to think about complaining is a bit like a tap – turn it all the way on and get things off your chest, **but then turn it all the way off**, rather than leaving it on and it's dripping the whole time. That's an approach that works for me.”

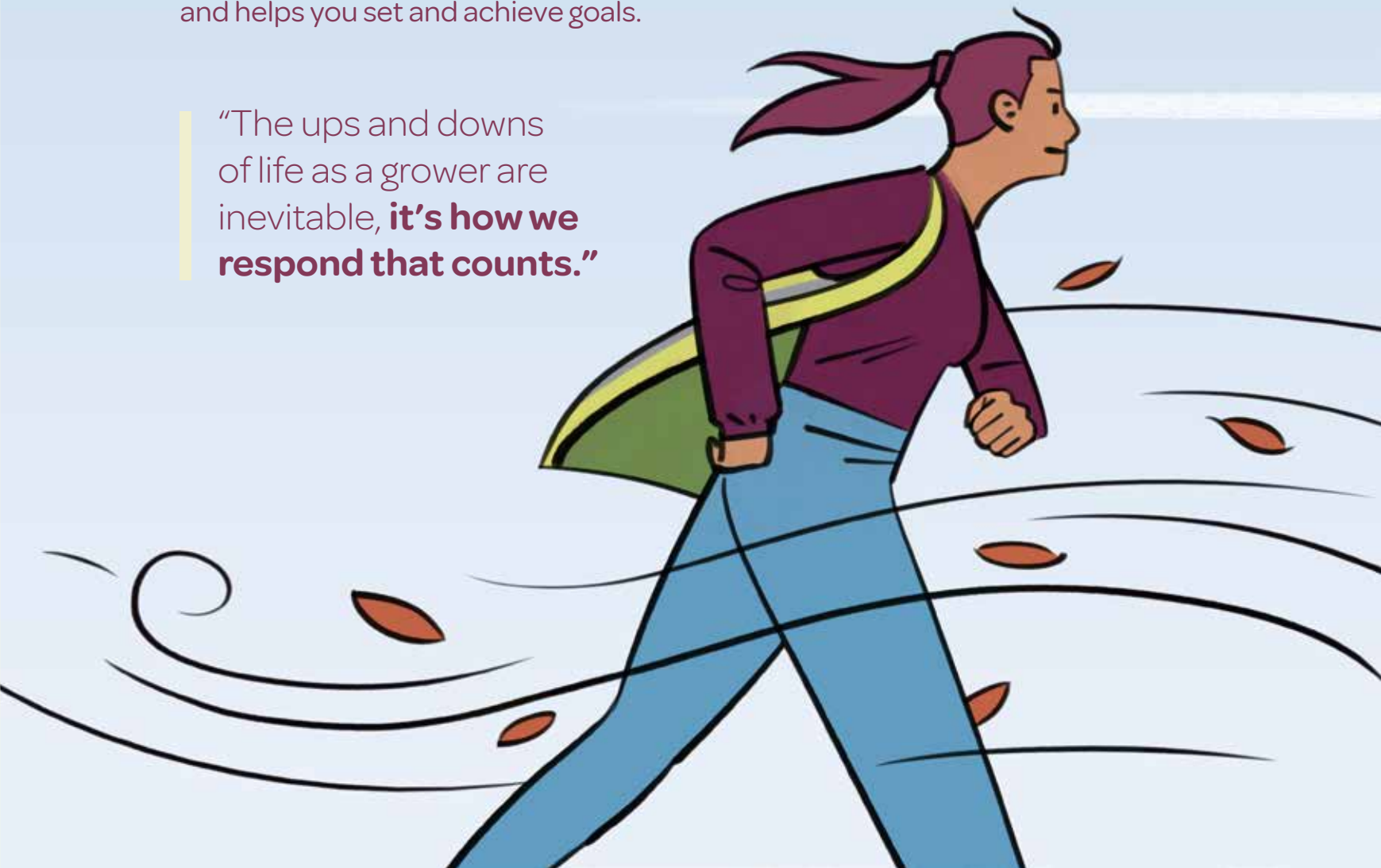
Sam Whitelock | Farmstrong Ambassador

Know your 'why'

Having purpose and direction helps you prioritise what matters in life and work and allows you to walk away from thoughts, people or activities that don't help with where you want to head. It's also a key driver to staying motivated when things get tough and helps you set and achieve goals.

Sometimes it can be hard to work out your purpose. Let's face it, it's easier just to 'go with the flow' 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 in the orchard or the packhouse into perspective, because you know why you are doing it.

"The ups and downs of life as a grower are inevitable, **it's how we respond that counts.**"



Choose what you pay attention to

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



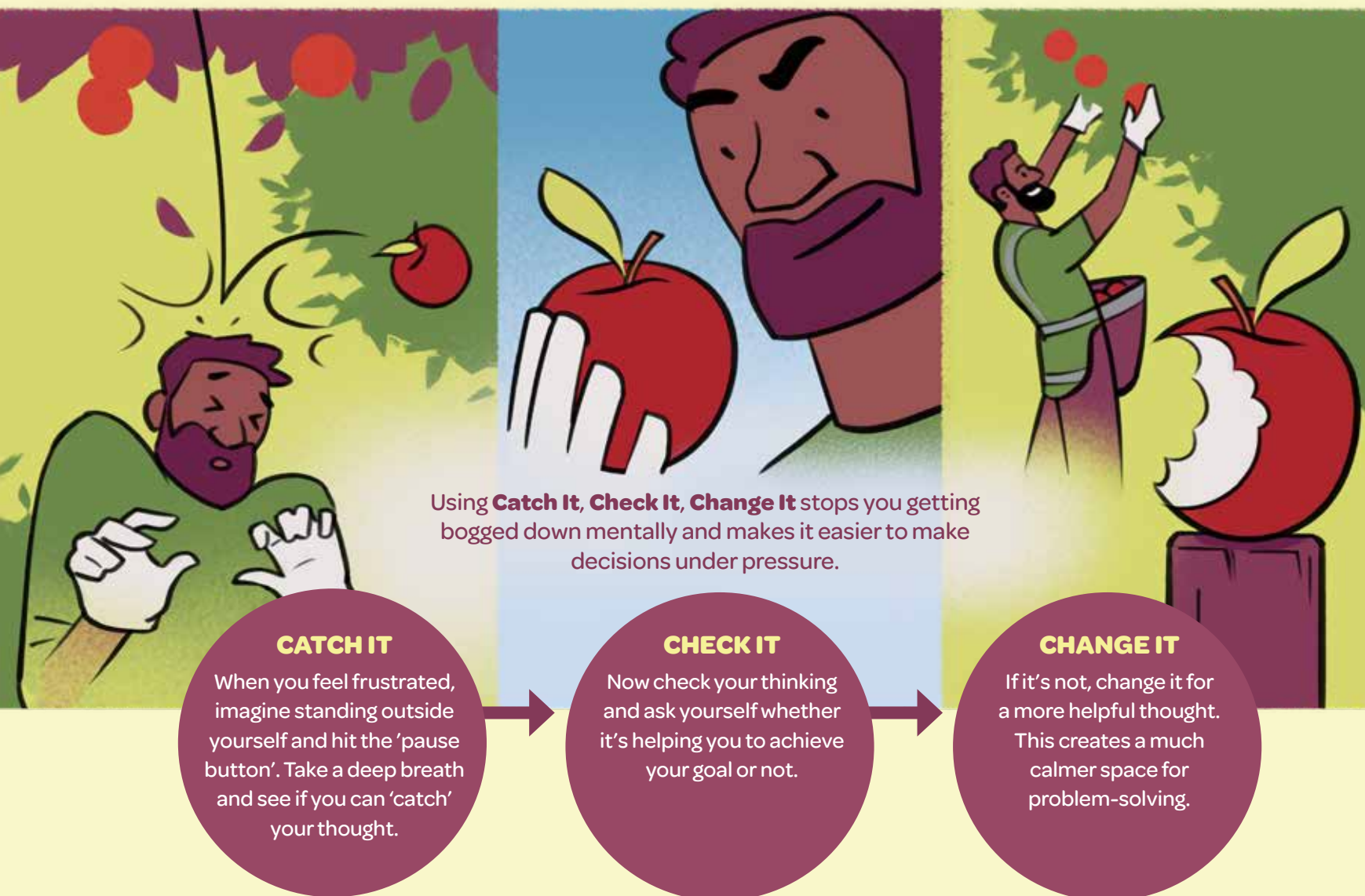
You can achieve this by hanging out with people who are positive and encouraging rather than those who are overly negative, pessimistic or judgemental. It's been said we become the average of the five people we spend the most time with.

It's also worth reflecting on what is taking your attention. The attention economy is a huge business with all manner of phone apps, social media and entertainment platforms, all wanting to grab your attention as part of their business model, but without necessarily having your best interests at heart. The news too is dominated by negative headlines, raising fears and anxieties. This is what we consume without thinking about it.

Of the millions of bits of information our brain takes in each day, we can only pay attention to a tiny fraction of them. It pays to choose carefully because what we choose will influence our outlook and have a big impact on how effective we will be.

Catch It, Check It, Change It

Whether you are harvesting, pruning or managing staff in the packhouse, everyone has days when nothing seems to go right. This can lead to a downward spiral of negative thoughts and make a bad situation even worse. The good news is you can train your brain to have more helpful thoughts using **Catch It, Check It, Change It**.



Practice ‘box breathing’

When we feel 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 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 round the four sides of the box.

To get the full benefit of ‘box breathing’, it’s important than 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.

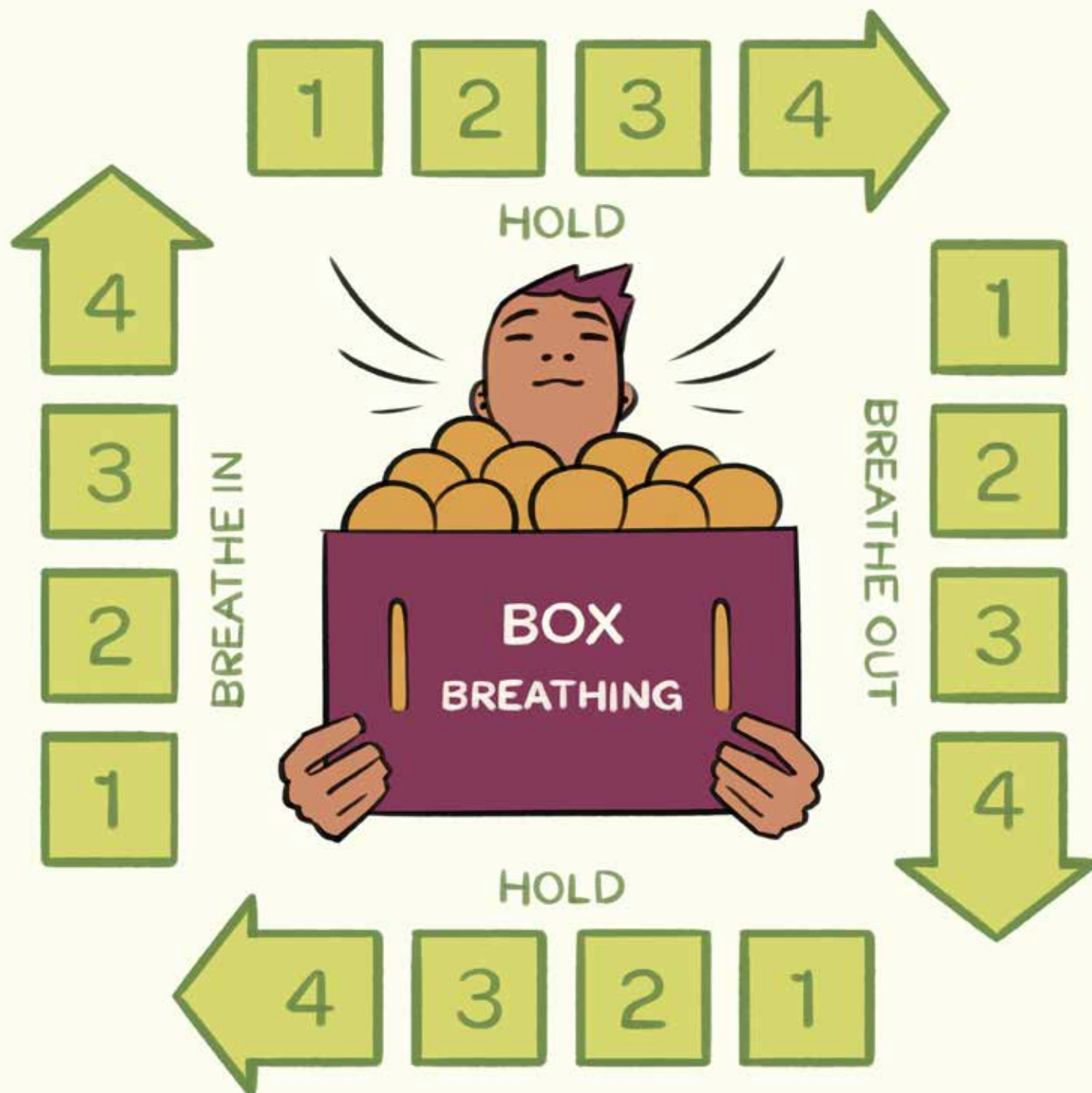
TO BOX BREATHE:

- **breathe in** for a count of four
- **hold your breath** for a count of four
- **breathe out** for a count of four
- **hold your breath** 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 round the four sides of the box.

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



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. 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 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 see if you are driven by mindsets you'd rather not have. Here are some examples of healthy and unhealthy mindsets.



Examples of generally healthy/helpful mindsets

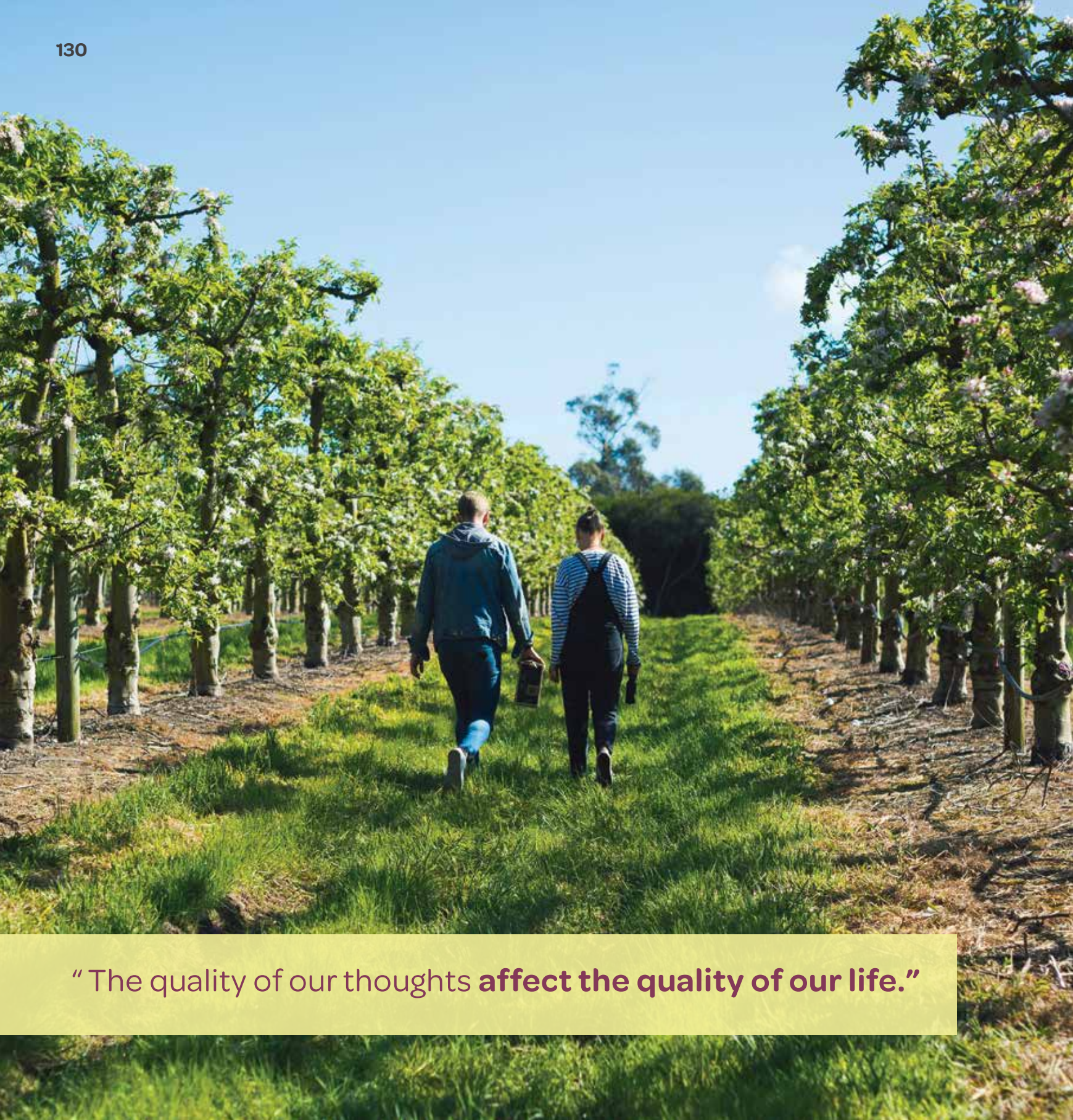
- I can change, I enjoy learning new things.
- When bad things happen, I feel the pain but learn from what happened and grow.
- All of us struggle with life, no one is perfect and no one is completely bad.
- It's better to trust people, after taking appropriate precautions, even if I get ripped off once 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 needs maintenance and investment for the future.
- I'm 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.
- 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.





“The quality of our thoughts **affect the quality of our life.**”

More Ways to Wellbeing

– Taking it to the next level



Shifting the dial

What the science tells us is that mental health is just like physical health. It can be good or bad. If we think about mental health as a continuum from minus five to plus five, minus one to minus five means people are feeling stressed, anxious, depressed or not coping. That's where most discussion usually ends and that's what needs to change.



We need to start focusing on the positive – the zero to plus five – so we start building people's resilience. Zero to plus five might involve activities such as adopting the 5 Ways, looking after the basics even during busy periods, exploring our mindset and learning flexible thinking strategies so people have the mental fitness to cope with change and pressure.

This approach is going to result in all sorts of benefits. The research shows people will be more productive, they'll enjoy better business success and when they do strike challenges and setbacks, it will lessen their impact.

It's a bit like sport. If you want to do well at a sport, you have to be fit and do the training so you are ready for the pressure of a game. It's the same with our mental health. If we "train" by developing habits that are good for our mental health, we will be in a far better position to handle the tough stuff when it comes along.

"We need to start focusing on the positive – the zero to plus five – **so we start building people's resilience.**"

Challenge and response

Major setbacks are a fact of life for all of us. In one form or another, they are unavoidable. There are many examples of setbacks which growers have to deal with in this book. A severe frost, flooding, staff shortages, crop disease, falling commodity prices – there are many sources of stress and uncertainty.



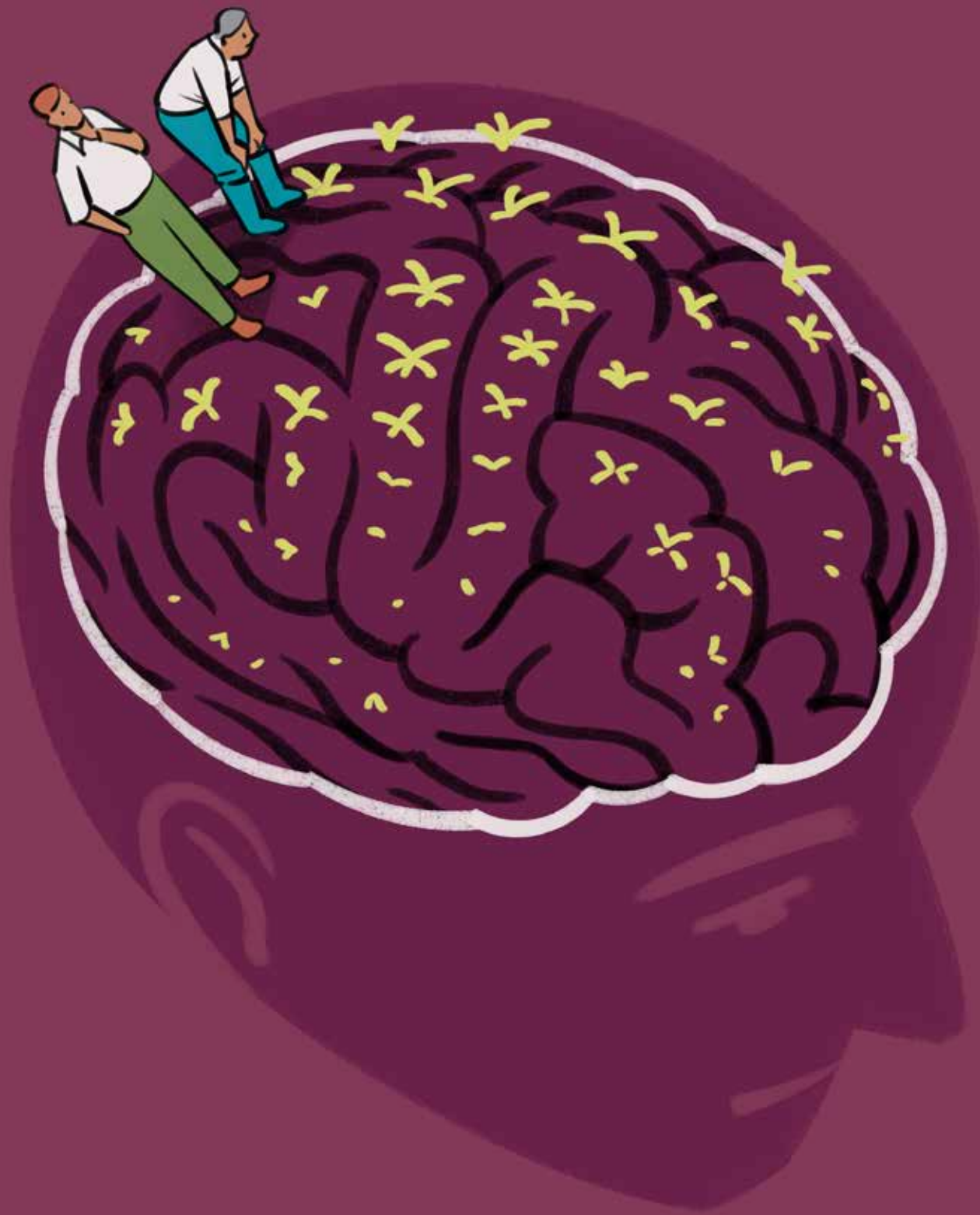
But as you can see from the stories in this book, what matters most is how we respond to what happens to us. We have the power to choose our reaction. A good analogy is to think of the image of two arrows. When we are struck by an arrow – there's been a hailstorm or a flood, a market downturn – there's nothing we can do about it and there's no doubt it's very stressful. We wouldn't be human if we didn't feel the pain and disappointment of major setbacks.

There is a second arrow however that we do have control over. The second arrow relates to our reaction to what is happening. If we respond with excessive worrying or complaining or catastrophising, our anxiety and suffering is prolonged. It worsens how we and others around us are going to feel.

The lesson is that while we cannot control the first arrow, we have the power to choose our reaction and avoid the second arrow, which reduces suffering. The second arrow is optional. We fire it ourselves.

Taking control of our thoughts and directing them to a more positive future reduces the toll that tough times take on us. This insight is a real game-changer. Human beings have the remarkable power to change their mindset, even in very difficult situations. This is not pie-in-the-sky thinking – it's demonstrated over and over in the stories in this book.

It's a good idea to practice being aware of your mindset, when confronted with the smaller stresses of life. Be aware of your thoughts and then try consciously replacing them with healthier ones. This habit can make a big difference. Put simply: the quality of our thoughts affect the quality of our life.



Don't believe all your thoughts

To develop a generally more positive outlook, we need to understand how our mind works. We have at least 6,000 thoughts each day. Most of them are junk.

Obviously, our thoughts come from the brain. The brain is just one of a number of vital organs in the body, along with lungs, liver, heart and kidneys, all doing an amazing job to keep us alive.

The brain's main role is to try and predict the future, based on our past perceptions and current sensory information, so it can manage the body's energy effectively. To save the body, and brain's energy (it takes about 20 percent of the total), the brain takes shortcuts, and encourages us to be lazy, eat too much, and to fall into bad habits. The brain is worried that scarcity and danger (social and physical) is just around the corner, so it has a strong negativity and scarcity bias.

A lot of our thoughts reflect the brain trying to look after us, but not always being that helpful.

A lot of our thoughts reflect the brain trying to look after us, but not always being that helpful.

The way to manage this better is by building greater self-awareness, and getting inputs other than our own repetitive and biased thinking.

Options include:

- **building time into your day to check on your thinking** so you keep heading towards your goals in work and life
- **noticing and celebrating the 'small wins' each day in a journal**
- **setting a goal that's meaningful** for you and enlisting a coach/mentor to help you achieve it
- **getting regular feedback on your thinking** from people you trust
- **exploring what other farmers and growers do to stay Farmstrong.**

Mind-body connection

Just as a grower runs an orchard as one integrated system with many different inputs across the seasons, so too our mental health is a complex system with many different inputs that affect our mood.

New research over the last couple of decades shows that physical health and mental health are very interconnected and affect each other. It feels like our thinking happens somewhere else but in fact the brain is deeply embedded in all our other bodily processes. It is just one organ in the body along with our heart, lungs and digestive system. It's all part of one amazing system.

There are four physical behaviours that we can control that greatly affect how we think - **Exercise, Sleep, Breathing** and **Diet**.

Doing these things sounds simple but when you are really slammed and up against it, it is easy to sacrifice sleep, to skip meals, to get carried away with emotions rather than take a deep breath and calm yourself. It's in times of crisis however that we most need to be functioning well. That's when attending to the basics is most important.

EXERCISE

Exercise, often something as simple as going for a walk, has been shown in many studies to boost our mood and is as effective as using anti-depressants. Physical activity triggers the release of endorphins which reduce stress and lift our mood. Regular exercise has also been shown to support memory function and help regulate emotions.

SLEEP

Sleep is of huge importance for wellbeing. It used to be viewed as a waste of time or a sign of laziness but it plays a vital role in restoring the brain and the body. People with insomnia, for example, are 10 times more likely to have depression and 17 times more likely to have anxiety than the general population. Sleep is fundamental to our wellbeing.

BREATHING

Breathing exercises, focusing intentionally on your breathing, improves mental health by regulating the nervous system, reducing cortisol levels and easing anxiety and stress. In a stressful moment when something triggers you, take three deep breaths so you don't just react in the heat of the moment, and then go from there. Quite literally, give yourself some breathing space.

DIET

What we eat has also been shown to have a significant effect on low mood and depression. Reducing ultra-processed foods and maintaining a diet with plenty of fruits and vegetables lifts our mood and contributes significantly to wellbeing.



Flexible thinking

To cope when the pressure is on and the to-do list is endless, we need to develop the capacity to be open to new ideas and be adaptable.

With growing, you never know what you are going to be dealing with next week. Whether you are growing kumara, kiwifruit or beekeeping, there are many variables at play on any given day so you need a plan B for when things go wrong. As the growers in this book demonstrate, the ability to pivot is essential for business success and for your own enjoyment of life.

The challenge is to think flexibly and be able to adapt to a range of scenarios. We cannot rely on the way we have always done things. Life is too random for that. As Farmstrong Ambassador Sam Whitelock notes: "Just because you've done something a certain way before and it's been successful, doesn't mean there's not a better way of doing it. And things change. What used to work doesn't anymore."

What's required is a frame of mind that is open to new ideas and approaches. Things that have some flexibility in them don't break as easily, they can bend or bounce back. Rigid things are more likely to snap when the pressure comes on. It's like that with our thinking. The person with a flexible mindset can adjust better and reshape themselves, even when the pressure is on.

The science around resilience tells us that setbacks and dealing with unexpected or challenging events are part of our growth, provided we have a good social network and we've learnt the skills to adapt to change. These skills include building our abilities in asking for help, flexible thinking, reframing and getting perspective.

What is certain in life is that every setback and difficult situation is at the very least an opportunity to learn something and grow if we are open to doing so. And there's every chance of success if we're up for a challenge.

The truth is we learn and grow by having life as we *don't* want it. This pushes us out of our comfort zone and makes us dig deep, finding the grit we didn't know we had.

A good analogy is to think of your average cat. Cats hate getting wet and will go to great lengths to avoid water, but when pushed by the need to survive, they are capable swimmers. They don't like water but they'll swim when they have to. That ability to adapt and do what is required in a difficult situation is a great mental skill to add to your toolkit.



Find your tribe

Top of the list when it comes to good health and wellbeing is having mates we can rely on and being part of a supportive community. Mixing with people from all walks of life gives us perspective and increases our empathy for others.

The impact of a support crew on our mental health and wellbeing is often underrated. When we have friends we can talk things over with, we are much more resilient, much more able to go back and deal with what needs to be done.

Staying connected takes effort but, in terms of health and wellbeing, the rewards are enormous. Research shows our health is strongly determined by the extent to which we are supported by, and contribute to, a group.

Often we neglect catching up with friends when we are busy. The endless to-do list gets in the way and it seems easier to plough on with the next job. However it's when we are busy for a sustained period that we most benefit from a natter with mates.

Spending time with your friends makes a big difference to how you view your situation and how you feel about yourself.

Being well connected with others is a win-win. Positive mental health is contagious. The more of it you have, the more it will spread naturally through your friends and social networks. Everybody benefits.



“Staying connected takes effort but ...**the rewards are enormous.**”

“Whether you are a grower or a professional athlete, **locking in Farmstrong habits has a positive, cumulative effect over time** and makes you much more resilient.”

Sam Whitelock | Farmstrong Ambassador



Life as a grower can be tough as well as rewarding. In this book growers talk honestly about how they deal with the highs and lows of the job, and what they do to look after themselves. The result is a collection of hard-won wisdom and practical tools and tips for keeping on top of your game.



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