



# **‘I feel like I’m dancing on the Titanic’: managing the stress of farming in difficult times**

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# About the project

- Staying healthy: Behaviours and services used by farmers and fishers
  - Funded by Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation 2009-2011
- Difficult times
  - Climate
  - Global financial crisis
  - Regulation

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## Background

- Most rural health research is about behaviours and services used by those with specific health conditions
  - This project is about how people maintain good health and wellbeing
- Rural people are viewed as being ‘at risk’ more than their urban counterparts, and less likely to engage in preventive health behaviours (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008).

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# Multiple case study method

- 5 sites between of 2000 to 10 000 people, different industries:
  - Cotton (Queensland)
  - Sugar (Queensland)
  - Grains (New South Wales)
  - Fishing (Western Australia)
  - Mixed farming (Victoria)
- Mapping of health and wellbeing services and facilities
- Interviews with 110, between 15 and 30 per site
- Health journal kept for 3 months by between 40-65% of interviewees, depending on the site.

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## Definitions of good health

- For most, good health related to being able to function in their daily lives and not being unwell.
  - incorporated a 'risk factor' analysis, health was not being overweight, was being physically active, and for some, not being stressed in everyday life.
- Capacity to function in everyday life, and not to be medically unwell, was viewed as **enabling choice** and **control** over their lives.
- Women were more likely to talk about an holistic view of health that incorporated happiness, spiritual values and general feelings about wellbeing.

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## Self perception of health

- Participants invariably described their own health as good
  - despite acknowledged health risks associated with increased age, long-term chronic illness, and monitoring of signs or symptoms due to increased risk factors (eg. elevated blood pressure or cholesterol).
- Medical check-ups were described by most as one way they monitored their health, but for many their 6 monthly or annual check-up was related to ongoing health problems, rather than a preventive measure.

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# Perceptions of health status are shaped by attitudes to health

- Tenuous balancing act between control or lack of control in difficult times
- The capacity to stay in control, even when unhealthy or when farming life is difficult, is due to the emphasis on ‘positive thinking’, balance and discipline (keeping busy).
  - Those who are not able to think positively are viewed as being unhealthy.
- Achieving good health was about strategies aimed at controlling risk factors and the stress of living in ‘difficult times’.

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# Mental health

- ‘I’m actually probably more worried about my state of mind than I am about my physical health ... I feel a bit like I’m waltzing on the Titanic’ (female cotton grower).
- ‘Drought most likely is the biggest source of depression for most people’ (male cotton grower)
- Mental health was threatened when they had little control over new government regulations
  - ‘I think most of it is uncertainty ... it’s forever a mind game...I don’t want to keep thinking about this crap, I want to be able to plan what I’m going to do next year and the year after’ (female fisher)



- Mental health was inextricably linked to good general health for most participants
- Was a high level of awareness of the importance of mental health
- Strategies include
  - trying to stay positive and not worry,
  - compartmentalising difficult decisions,
  - having good social support and networks,
  - making community contributions and
  - recognising the importance of off-farm pursuits and interests.

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- Decorative floral graphics in the top left corner, consisting of overlapping colorful petals in shades of green, yellow, blue, and red.
- Practical ways to deal with uncontrollable elements
    - getting enough sleep,
    - recognising the futility of lying awake at night worrying,
  - What is needed is a
    - ‘positive outlook on life, I suppose. I try to really keep a positive outlook on life. I try not to dwell on things greatly’ (female cotton grower), and
    - ‘making sure that, even if you don’t really feel like it, doing something social’ (female grain grower)
  - Ability to recognise what is controllable and what is not was central to staying positive
    - ‘well, I don’t dwell on problems with the farm over which I have no control’ (male cane grower).

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# Off-farm interests, relaxation and social engagement

- Having a good relationship with one's partner
- Physical activity (work, and leisure)
- Taking steps to minimise stress (socialising, sport, TV, music)
  - 'It's important not to totally focus on the farm' (male cane grower).
- Community contribution
  - '...caring for the refugees and working on that distracts [me] from drought issues...cause it gave me something else to be really cross with (female mixed farmer)
- Events and routines such as sport, esp children's sport, maintain a sense of normality in difficult times.

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## Those not able to maintain a ‘positive attitude’

- ‘ They don’t understand [mental health problems] ... everyone can imagine what a broken leg’s like ... But when the head’s melted down it’s...something you can’t describe’ (male fisher)
- ‘When you think about it, [the suicides] were the ones that were always a bit jittery’ (male cane grower)
- ‘It makes you wonder what makes them tick to make them think everything’s that bad you’re frightened to live. It’s strange. It’s just a waste really’ (male cotton grower)

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## Gender differences

- Women - importance of staying positive
- Men - importance of not worrying
- Women create opportunities for 'time out' for activities such as gardening, horse-riding and social engagement.
  - They were able to clearly articulate why this is an important part of their health maintenance strategy.

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## Conclusion

- Physical health and mental wellbeing are inter-linked, and both are at risk during difficult times
  - ‘People are working farms with less employees so they’re obviously working more. And that has a detrimental effect on health, both mental and physical, that they’re trying to work longer and harder and do much more’ (female cotton grower)
- Findings suggest a commitment to achieving and maintaining good health that is not evident in the literature on rural health, where risk factors, behaviours and poorer outcomes are emphasised