

**NUFFIELD
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Growing Support: Enhancing Mental Health and Wellbeing in Farming Communities

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Executive Summary

This report addresses the critical issue of mental health within the agricultural sector, focusing on the unique and significant stressors that farmers face. It examines the complex challenges contributing to mental health issues in this community, such as financial pressures, environmental uncertainties, and strict government regulations. These factors are compounded by the isolation often experienced in rural life, leading to a higher prevalence of mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and suicide.

The conversation around mental health has evolved significantly in recent years, with greater awareness and reduced stigma. Social media and influential public figures have played pivotal roles in changing the narrative, making mental health a more acceptable topic of discussion. However, despite these advancements, the adoption of healthy mental practices among farmers remains inconsistent, underscoring the need for more targeted interventions.

This report highlights several successful initiatives aimed at improving mental health in the agricultural sector. A key example is New Zealand's *Farmstrong* program, which employs a strengths-based approach to build resilience and promote wellbeing among farmers. This model emphasises the importance of community support and proactive engagement in mental health practices, working in collaboration with Rural Support Trust, an organisation that offers tailored support for farming families when needed.

Financial literacy is identified as another crucial area for intervention. By equipping farmers with the skills to manage their finances effectively, the stress associated with financial instability can be alleviated.

In response to the identified challenges, this report offers several recommendations. These include strengthening community support systems, enhancing financial literacy, promoting positive mental health practices, educating influencers and public speakers on the importance of using appropriate language, and increasing access to mental health services.

Overall, this report calls for a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach to address mental health in the agricultural sector. By focusing on both systemic changes and individual support, we can create more resilient farming communities that are better equipped to cope with the challenges of modern agriculture.

Keywords: Mental Health, Agriculture, Farmers, Financial Literacy, Environmental Factors, Government Regulations, Mental Health Promotion, Service Delivery

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Foreword

For the first ten years of my life, I lived in Melbourne. While that part of my childhood was fun, I always disliked the fact we were surrounded by concrete and tall buildings. I had to constantly look out for cars when learning to ride a bike and backyard cricket often meant I had to climb over a neighbour's fence to get the ball back.

However, in 1988 my parents decided to sell our family home, moving us to a farm in Deniliquin, NSW, where there was lots of open space for my two brothers and I to explore. We learnt very quickly about life on the land and backyard cricket was replaced with chipping away thousands of Bathurst burrs and building endless piles of fallen branches and sticks to clean up the paddocks. While it was hard work for a young girl, in reflection it was the making of me. I built a strong love for the land and endless time with my brothers taught me how to connect with others.

I now live in the Northeast of Victoria with my husband and two children where we run a dairy farm. While I love this life, I enjoy interacting with people and learning about their lives. When my youngest started school, I started university studying social work. Fast forward several years and I now combine my understanding of living and working on a farm with my social work degree as a rural mental health counsellor.

Over the years my community has been hit, like many communities, with natural disasters including droughts, fires and floods. Predominantly a dairy community, I have witnessed and lived through the devastation of milk companies collapsing around us and unstable milk prices impacting businesses and farmers trying to navigate the uncertainty. I have seen mental health services come and then go due to funding cuts. Mental health speakers have blown in and out of town all with good messages but leaving with very little backup support. This has prompted my curiosity which had me asking a few questions over the years: Is this the best we can do for farmers? Are there more support services around or not? How are other countries tackling mental health and supporting their farming communities? What are we missing? What can I do about this issue?

This led me to my Nuffield journey, one that has been full of adventure as I have travelled to Canada, New Zealand, Argentina, Ireland, France, Poland, England, Scotland, Netherlands, Germany and across Australia. I have been given the opportunity to explore all aspects of our farming communities' mental health and wellbeing, with the hope of finding new ideas, solutions, and ways to improve. The answers are not simple, however, we have a lot to be proud of. As a society, I believe we are on the right track and that one day in the not-too-distant future, conversations about mental health will be just as "normal" as conversations about the weather or cricket!



Figure 1. The author, rural mental health counsellor and dairy farmer, Sarah Crosthwaite, on her dairy farm in Northeast Victoria. (Source: Rebecca Haycraft)

Table 1. Travel itinerary

Travel Date	Location	Visits/Contacts
November 7 – 11, 2022	Australia: Adelaide	Rural Mental Health Conference
February 22 – 24, 2023	Canada	Cynthia Beck – Rural Psychologist Denise Rollin – Farm Management Canada
March 7 – 10, 2023	Canada: Vancouver Island	Pre-Contemporary Scholars Conference
March 11 – 17, 2023	Canada: Vancouver	Nuffield International Contemporary Scholars Conference
August 7 – 12, 2023	New Zealand North Island	Nigel Beckford – Farmstrong Kelly Dickey, Neil Bateup, Maria Shanks, Sam Owen – Rural Support Trust Ben Chapman-Smith – Talking Dairy NZ Kane Brisco – Dairy farmer, Mental Health Advocate & Author Nickey Stanley-Clarke – Massey University 4 x Dairy Farmer Interviews
September 10 – 17, 2023	Argentina	Global Focus Program
September 17 – 24, 2023	Ireland	Global Focus Program
September 24 – October 1, 2023	France	Global Focus Program
October 1 – 7, 2023	Poland	Global Focus Program
November 9 – 11, 2023	Australia	Australian Rural and Remote Rural Mental Health Conference Gerard Vaughan – Farmstrong Sarah Donaldson – Rural Trust
March 19 – 22, 2024	Australia: Zoom	Jeremy Hutchings & Sam Pincott – Farm Owners Academy 8 x Farmer Interviews
May 5 – 9, 2024	England: Stratford-Upon-Avon, Oxford	Will Brown – Nuffield Scholar Caroline Harrison – RABI Margaux Manners – RABI Alix Morley – Yellow Wellies
May 11 – 13, 2024	Scotland	Hamish Matheson – Scottish Farmer
May 18 – 20, 2024	Netherland	Linda Kopchczinski – Nuffield Scholar Didi Stoltenberg – Hogenkamp Agricultural Coaching
May 21 – 23, 2024	Germany	Meinke Ostermann – Nuffield Scholar Tobis Honvehlmann – Dairy Farmer

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To Nuffield Australia, thank you for recognising my passion and drive for my topic, industry and community. The ongoing encouragement and support from all within the organisation has been wonderful and you have helped open many doors. I will be eternally grateful for the opportunity awarded to me.

To the Gardiner Foundation for seeing and believing in mental health and wellbeing as much as I do. The dairy industry is fortunate to have such a foundation supporting people like myself to pursue their curiosity in the hope of supporting the wider industry.

To my loving husband Stuart, you have been the best “bag boy” anyone could ask for. Your notetaking skills are second to none and your curious mind has led to some great conversations along the way. You have supported me in thinking outside the box and challenged my ideas and hypotheses. You push me every day to be better than the day before and I am truly grateful for all your support.

To Indi and Otto, thank you for being so understanding and supportive of my travels. Your love and support means the world to me. I hope I have shown you both that you are never too old to learn and that there is a big wide world just waiting to teach you something new every day.

Lastly, to all the wonderful people I have met along the way. The topic of mental health can be difficult for some people to talk about. I am so grateful for all that allowed me to interview them, to those who shared their struggles and to those in the field doing their very best to support others. I will treasure everyone's openness, honesty, and vulnerability.

Abbreviations

FMG	Farmers Mutual Group
FOA	Farm Owners Academy
GP	General Practitioner
GPA	Grain Producers Australia
HAC	Hogenkamp Agricultural Coaching
NEF	New Economics Foundation
NFU Mutal	National Farmers Union Mutal
NZ	New Zealand
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
RABI	Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution
RAMHP	Rural Adversity Mental Health Program
RST	Rural Support Trust
TIACS	This Is A Conversation Starter
TTM	Transtheoretical Model
UK	United Kingdom
WHO	World Health Organisation

Objectives

The objectives of my research project were to:

- Investigate the common stresses for farmers
- Investigate ways to reduce these stresses
- Understand what mental health services and support are on offer for farmers currently
- Understand how other countries are supporting their farmers with their mental health and wellbeing, and what they have prioritised
- Understand the roles, responsibilities and opportunities the agricultural sector plays in supporting farmers

Introduction

The prevalence of declining mental health within the general population has surged globally over the past decade. Formerly considered a taboo subject that carries shame and stigma for individuals and their families, the discourse around one's mental and emotional wellbeing has undergone a gradual transformation.

When I commenced my career in social work more than a decade ago, discussions about one's thoughts, emotions, and self-esteem were often dismissed as inconsequential. However, there has been a noticeable shift in this dialogue over the last ten years. The advent of social media has empowered individuals to share their personal stories, while public figures and renowned athletes have begun to openly discuss their own mental health struggles. Moreover, various institutions and communities have initiated awareness campaigns to address an issue that impacts every individual at some point in their lives.

Although poor mental health affects all segments of the population, my focus is specifically on individuals working within the agricultural sector. Statistics indicate that in Australia, a farmer takes their own life every 10 days (Sartor, 2021). Research suggests numerous factors contributing to the decline in mental health among Australian farmers, including but not limited to, financial pressures, weather uncertainties, labour shortages, government interventions and regulations, as well as social and personal factors such as isolation, demanding workloads, and stoicism (Younker & Radunovich, 2022).

The surge in mental health advocacy over the past 10 years, coupled with the influence of social media and public figures sharing their mental health journey, has brought to light several essential practices that individuals can adopt to support their mental wellbeing during challenging times. These practices encompass exercise, better sleep patterns, reduced alcohol consumption, a well-balanced diet, and fostering social connections. Developing mindfulness, journaling, and similar activities have also been emphasised.

Although these practices are crucial and have demonstrated efficacy in enhancing positive mental health, in my time as a rural mental health counsellor, I have found that the message while getting through, is not often followed up. However, I've noticed in my conversations with clients that often led to discussions around issues they felt were out of their control. Extreme weather events, changing government regulations and financial pressures due to uncertainty within the markets. In all of my travels, I have observed these issues. The world is moving at a very fast pace, and pressures are coming thick and fast. Do farmers have the necessary skills to better manage and navigate these challenges? Or are there new skills that farmers need to learn to reduce their stress during these difficult times?

Background

While working as a rural mental health counsellor I have sat at many kitchen tables and had countless conversations with people going through real hardship. In 2020 the Upper Murray region of Victoria and southern NSW was heavily impacted by large bushfires, more than 380,000 hectares of land was burnt, 600 properties were impacted, 82 homes were lost, as well as farm buildings and machinery and over 6,000 livestock and many kilometres of fencing destroyed (Towong Shire, 2024). Shortly after this devastation Australia and the world were impacted by COVID-19. Many services that came into the Upper Murray to support the recovery were told to leave, and face-to-face visits were not allowed for some time.

Isolation was felt across the world, but for many in the Upper Murray the feeling of abandonment, lack of care and support was very real. Behind the scenes, several local organisations were working very hard to offer support and as soon as the government restrictions were lifted, face-to-face counselling and support were offered and taken up by many.

Local councils, sporting clubs and community groups raised money, and several guest speakers came into the community over the next three years to give talks on resilience and mental health. I noted that often after these events there would be comments made within the community that there “wasn’t any local support”. This got me thinking about the way organisations promote their services, and what role a keynote speaker plays in educating the community about local services. While I believed there was good support being offered, many others might have disagreed. Could it be that people didn’t want to take up the offer of support or could it have been that they didn’t know how to access the services?

Chapter 1: Mental health

The discussion and understanding of mental health have advanced over time. It's important to take a moment to clarify and comprehend the definitions, terms, and explanations related to various mental health issues and challenges.

Below are some of the most commonly used mental health terms:

Mental health	The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health as “a state of wellbeing in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community (WHO, 2023).
Mental health conditions	A broad term covering mental disorders and psychosocial disabilities. It also covers other mental states associated with significant distress, impairment in functioning, or risk of self-harm (WHO, 2023).
Depression	Depression is different from usual mood fluctuations and short-lived emotional responses to challenges in everyday life. During a depressive episode, the person experiences a depressed mood (feeling sad, irritable, empty) or a loss of pleasure or interest in activities, for most of the day, nearly every day, for at least two weeks. Several other symptoms are also present, which may include poor concentration, feelings of excessive guilt or low self-worth, hopelessness about the future, thoughts about dying or suicide, disrupted sleep, changes in appetite or weight, and feeling especially tired or low in energy. People with depression are at an increased risk of suicide (WHO, 2023).
Anxiety Disorder	Generalised anxiety disorders are characterised by excessive fear and worry and related behavioural disturbances. Symptoms are severe enough to result in significant distress or significant impairment in functioning. Various types of anxiety disorders exist, including generalised anxiety disorder (marked by excessive worry), panic disorder (involving panic attacks), social anxiety disorder (involving heightened fear and worry in social situations), and separation anxiety disorder (involving excessive fear or anxiety about being separated from individuals with deep emotional bonds) (WHO, 2023).

Stress Stress is a common and normal physical response to challenging or new situations. It can be triggered by different life experiences. Stressors can be external (for example, weather) or internal (for example, illness). Stress can initiate the 'fight or flight' response, which is a physiological reaction that can lead to physical symptoms such as increased heart rate, blood pressure, chest pain, sexual dysfunction, and problems sleeping. Stress can also contribute to chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, irritable bowel syndrome, and anxiety (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022).

Trauma Any event that involves exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence has the potential to be traumatic. The trauma experienced can be physical and/or mental and not everyone will respond in the same way. A well-known trauma-related mental illness is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a chronic condition that can be diagnosed when fear, anxiety and memories of a traumatic event persist. The feelings last for a long time and interfere with how people cope with everyday life (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022).

Determinants of mental health

Throughout our lives, a variety of individual, social, and structural factors can either support or undermine our mental wellbeing, influencing our mental health. Individual psychological and biological elements, such as emotional skills, substance use, and genetics, can heighten vulnerability to mental health issues.

Exposure to adverse social, economic, geopolitical, and environmental conditions, such as poverty, violence, inequality, and environmental deprivation also increases the likelihood of encountering mental health conditions. Risks can manifest at different life stages, with developmental periods, especially early childhood, being particularly impactful. For instance, harsh parenting, physical punishment, and bullying during childhood can significantly contribute to mental health challenges (Alegrica *et al.*, 2018).

Conversely, protective factors exist throughout our lives, contributing to increased resilience. These factors encompass individual social and emotional skills, positive social interactions, quality education, meaningful employment, safe neighbourhoods, community cohesion, and many others.

Mental health and farming

The mental health and wellbeing of farmers can be a significant concern, influenced by various factors unique to their profession. The demanding nature of farming, coupled with economic uncertainties, isolation, and the unpredictability of weather conditions, can contribute to increased stress and anxiety among farmers. The financial pressures associated with farming, market fluctuations, and the constant need to adapt to changing agricultural practices can also take a toll on their mental health. (Yazd, Wheeler, & Zuo, 2019).

Farmers often face challenges such as long working hours, physical exhaustion, and limited access to healthcare services, further exacerbating mental health issues. The close connection between personal identity and the success of their agricultural endeavours can

make it particularly challenging for farmers to cope with setbacks or financial difficulties. Additionally, social isolation in rural areas can contribute to feelings of loneliness and depression. The stigma surrounding mental health issues may prevent some farmers from seeking help or discussing their struggles openly.

Growth mindset versus fixed mindset

A growth mindset, as proposed by Carol Dweck, suggests that our attitudes toward intelligence and our ability to change mindsets can significantly influence how we tackle challenges, handle criticism, and set our objectives. While people with a fixed mindset believe their talents or intelligence is simply a fixed trait. They tend to document their intelligence or talent rather than develop them (Wolcott *et al.*, 2021).

A growth mindset, as shown in Figure 2, equips individuals with the resilience to face challenges head-on. Instead of being discouraged by failures or setbacks, individuals with a growth mindset see them as stepping stones toward improvement. This resilience helps in managing stress and anxiety, promoting better mental health. A growth mindset encourages individuals to approach problems with an open mind and a belief in their ability to find solutions. This approach promotes a positive outlook, leading to better problem-solving skills and reduced feelings of helplessness. Individuals with a growth mindset are more likely to seek help and support when facing challenges. They recognise that seeking assistance is a part of the learning and growth process, thereby reducing the stigma associated with reaching out for help and support for mental health concerns.



Figure 2. Growth mindset versus fixed mindset. (Source: Intelligent Training Solutions)

We cannot change external problems such as a drought, a growth (positive) mindset will not change that reality. But what a positive mindset will change is you and your ability to face it. A positive mindset empowers you to be resilient, resourceful and brave in the face of the reality that's around you.

Chapter 2: Common themes

Recent research has indicated that prolonged exposure to stressors has a significant impact on mental wellbeing. Specifically, stress has been correlated with a higher prevalence of mental illnesses, particularly depression and anxiety, which rank among the most prevalent mental health disorders. Nonetheless, extensive studies examining mental health within agricultural communities worldwide have identified recurring themes that contribute to unfavourable mental health outcomes. These include financial pressures, market fluctuations, climate variability, extreme weather events, government policies, social isolation, and succession planning as primary factors associated with poor mental health outcomes in farming populations (Goffin, 2014; & Yazd, Wheeler & Zuo, 2019).

Throughout my Nuffield journey, I encountered three consistent themes through interviews with farmers, academics and service providers. These themes have been extensively discussed in academic literature on mental health and farming as well as various reports. They include the challenges of environmental factors, financial strain, and government regulations imposed on the farming industry.

In 2023, Norco collaborated with the National Farmers Federation to conduct a nation-wide survey focusing on identifying the main stressors experienced by farmers. When asked about their triggers for mental health issues, the top three responses were: extreme weather events (47%), financial stress (36%), and inflation and cost pressures (35%). The Big Farming Survey (2021) conducted by the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RABI) in the UK also asked farmers what their main stressors were. 45% mentioned regulations and compliance, 43% cited unpredictable weather, and 40% cited loss of subsidies/future trade deals, with 31% reporting financial pressures. Similarly, in Canada, the Healthy Minds, Healthy Farmers report (2020) highlighted similar findings: 77% mentioned unpredictability (extreme weather or changes in markets), 72% cited workload pressures, and 73% cited financial pressures as the main stressors.

Environmental factors

In modern agriculture, farmers face numerous environmental challenges that can significantly impact their wellbeing and livelihoods, more than other industries. Extreme weather, including droughts, floods, fires and heatwaves, can devastate crops and livestock, leading to financial losses and emotional strain for farmers. Research shows that psychological distress increases significantly within farming communities when extreme weather events occur (Charlson *et al.*, 2021). These events are becoming more frequent and severe due to climate change, posing a significant threat to agricultural productivity and sustainability.

Commodity prices and markets

Volatile commodity prices can create uncertainty and financial pressure for farmers. Fluctuations in the prices of agricultural products such as grains, livestock, and dairy can directly impact farm incomes and profitability. The unpredictability of these prices adds another layer of stress for farmers, as they struggle to manage their financial obligations and plan for the future amidst market instability (Riethmuller *et al.*, 2024).

The impact of political instability, such as the current conflict in the Middle East, and other international conflicts and tensions like Russia/Ukraine and USA/China, is currently and will continue to disrupt the status quo. This disruption creates unforeseen and unpredictable financial pressure on farmers due to market instability, such as commodity prices, and input prices, such as fertilizer, live export and chemicals.

Financial literacy

The decision-making process in agriculture often focuses solely on the production of food and fibre, neglecting important business aspects such as financial management. This emphasis is influenced by the challenging conditions that farmers face and their perception of their role in the agricultural sector (Clune & Downey, 2022).

Poor financial literacy can significantly impact production and decision-making in various ways. Without a strong grasp of financial management, farmers may struggle to allocate resources efficiently, leading to overspending on inputs or neglecting essential investments, which can negatively affect productivity. Farmers with limited financial knowledge may also fail to anticipate and mitigate financial risks, such as market price fluctuations or unexpected costs, resulting in financial instability and reduced ability to withstand economic shocks. A lack of financial literacy can hinder a farmer's ability to accurately evaluate investment opportunities.

Farmers who lack an understanding of financial principles may also struggle with budgeting, leading to cash flow problems that can disrupt production and operations. Additionally, farmers who lack financial intelligence may find it difficult to develop and implement long-term strategies for growth and sustainability, hindering their ability to compete effectively and adapt to changing market conditions.

Government regulations

Government regulations are a prominent issue and a growing source of uncertainty and stress across Europe and New Zealand. Australian farmers are not immediately impacted yet, but an opportunity exists for Australian farmers to be proactive in investigating what could be imposed on them in the future. These regulations are designed to ensure food safety, enhance environmental outcomes and deliver on globally agreed targets such as emissions, biodiversity, animal welfare and fair-trade practices; all of which are very important to the farmer and the consumer.

However, they can also impose financial and administrative burdens on farmers. For instance, regulations related to land use, water rights, and environmental protection can restrict the way farmers utilise their land and water resources. Making it difficult for a farming business to grow. Compliance with these regulations may require significant investments in infrastructure and technology, which can strain the financial resources of many farming families.

Chapter 3: Research outcomes and case studies

During my travels, I met with many organisations and individuals working within the prevention, promotion and service delivery area around mental health. Each is doing something a little different, however, as you will see they are all working from a positive, strengths-based approach.

This report highlights case studies that stood out.

Case Study: Farmstrong - New Zealand

“Live well, farm well”

Established in 2015 *Farmstrong* is a “social good initiative” founded by New Zealand Mental Health Foundation and insurance group Farmers’ Mutual Group (FMG). *Farmstrong*'s mission is to improve the wellbeing of people working in farming and growing, with a vision of supporting rural New Zealand in adapting and thriving in a constantly changing world.

Farmstrong works from a strengths-based, positive psychological perspective, focusing their research and resources on how resilience can be taught rather than negative mental health. *Farmstrong* shares its message through short videos, articles, and resources on its website, as well as directly engaging the community at workshops and events. Sam Whitelock, All-Blacks rugby player, is the *Farmstrong* ambassador. His support within *Farmstrong* has been crucial to its success and brand development.

Farmstrong uses an evidence-based science model known as change behaviour, however, instead of delivering science-heavy information they have adapted this science into layman’s terms making it more user-friendly. They focus on a model known as the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) or Stage of Change model, as shown in Figure 3. TTM is a psychological framework used to understand behaviour change. It suggests that people go through stages when making a change and interventions should match their readiness for change.

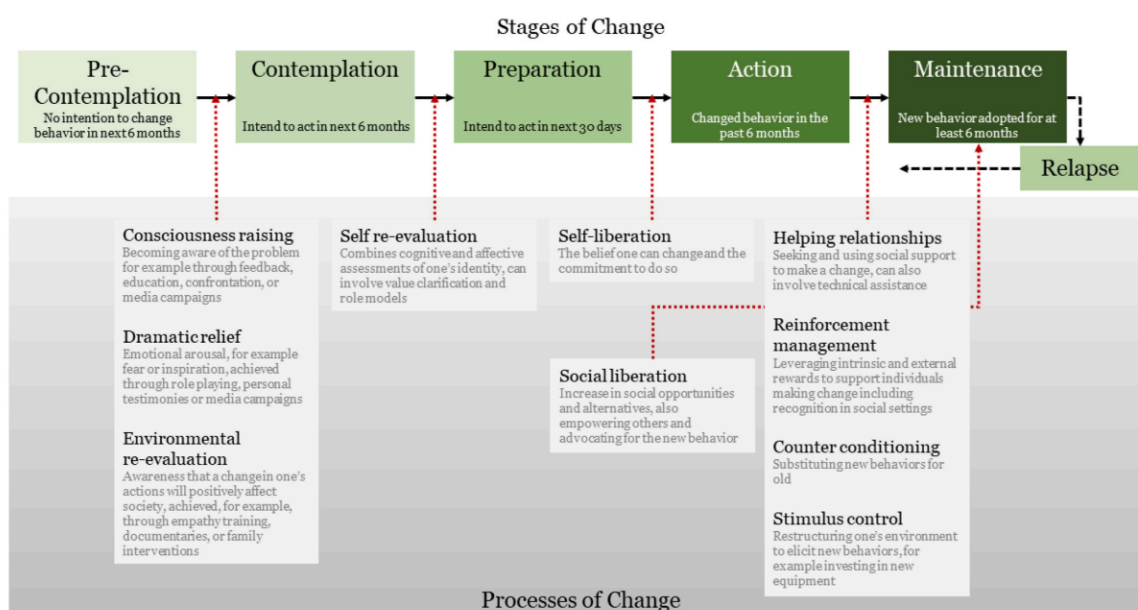


Figure 3. Transtheoretical Model Stages (green boxes) and Processes of Change, individuals typically move through the stages sequentially however relapse is possible at any stage. (Source: Doran et al. (2022))

Farmstrong also uses an evidence-based model known as “Five Ways to Wellbeing”. The Five Ways to Wellbeing was developed by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) on behalf of the Foresight Commission in the UK and adapted for New Zealand by the Mental Health Foundation. This model, as shown in Figure 4 featuring Sam Whitelock, found that building five key actions into our day-to-day lives can improve our mental capacity by building positive relationships, autonomy, and security (Aked *et al.*, 2008).

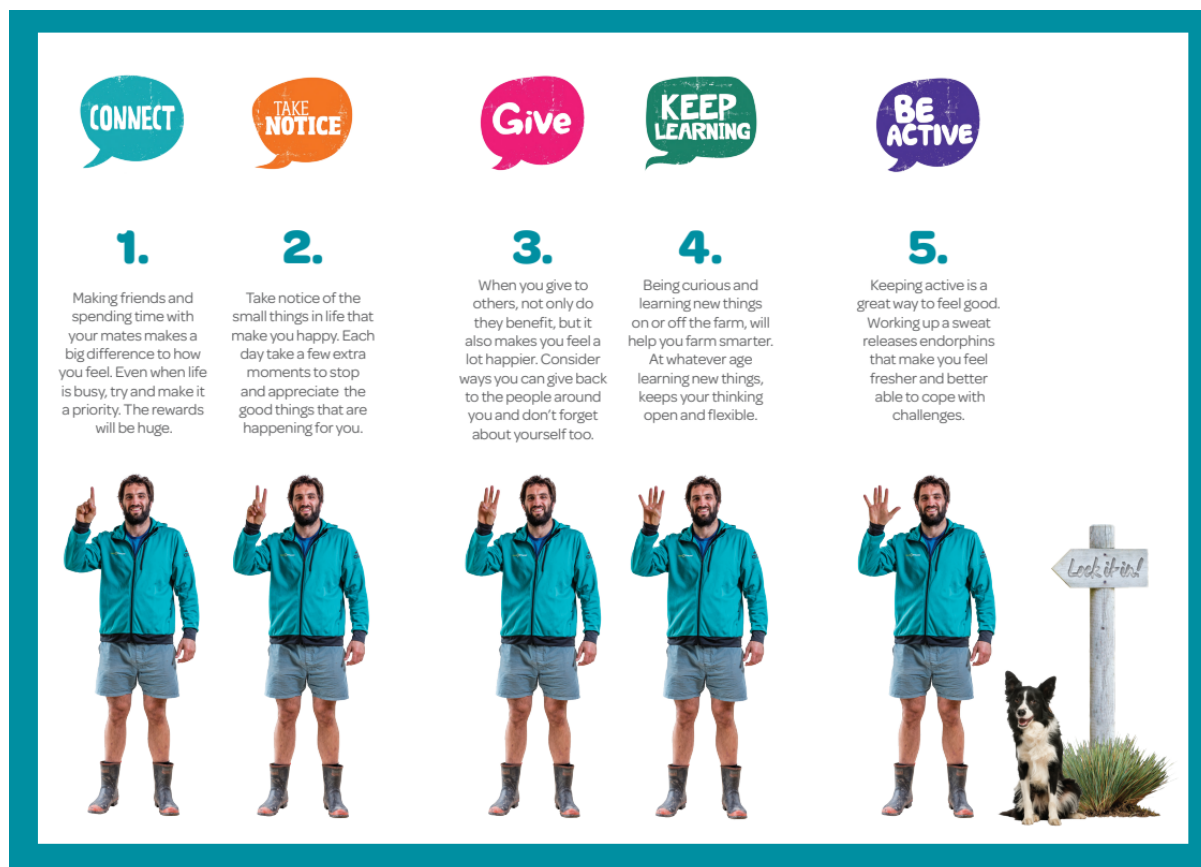


Figure 4. *Farmstrong* Five Ways to Wellbeing (Source: *Farmstrong*)

Farmstrong uses real farmers to share their experiences around the Five Ways of Wellbeing and improving their overall wellbeing making their content and information easily understandable and relatable.

Another *Farmstrong* ambassador is Kane Brisco, founder of FarmFit and author of *Tools from the Top Paddock*. I was lucky enough to spend a few hours with Kane on his farm in Inglewood on the North Island of New Zealand, as pictured in Figure 5. Kane started FarmFit after his physical and mental health declined. Kane had played rugby for most of his life, but injury put an end to that and the business of running a farm took over.



Figure 5. Visiting Kane Brisco, author of *Tools from the Top Paddock*, dairy farmer, and *Farmstrong* ambassador (Source: Author)

It was during a long, wet, and cold calving season that Kane realised he was very unfit, and that this poor fitness was not only affecting him physically during calving but also mentally. If he was going to be a successful farmer he needed to not only be physically fit but the strong connection to mental fitness was obvious to him. He was able to reflect on the enjoyment he got from going to rugby training, not only was it the physical aspect but the coming together with mates to have a laugh and connect.

Kane decided to start a fitness class; FarmFit. He turned a shed and paddock into a gym and invited other farmers to come along and train. Kane soon had a group of farmers coming weekly to work out and connect. It was the connections that helped improve Kane's mental wellbeing and that of others in the community. In 2022 Kane wrote a book, *Tools from the Top Paddock*, sharing his mental health journey and throughout the book he offers tips and tools that have helped him maintain positive mental health.

The key to *Farmstrong's* success is its way of connecting with farmers. By sharing stories via their website, their coffee table book, and attending many community events, farmers can learn that small changes can improve their wellbeing.

Case Study: Rural Support Trust - New Zealand

“Rural people helping rural people”

Rural Support Trust (RST) was established in the Waikato region in the 1980s by a group of local farmers who saw the need to support rural people after natural disasters. In the early 2000s, RST became nationwide and now has 14 regional trusts with one national governing body. Each trust can tailor their service delivery to the needs of its area, however, the main focus for each trust is; health and wellbeing, supporting financial pressures, employment support (both employer and employee), and support after adverse weather events.

Each regional trust is run by local facilitators who know the area and understand agribusiness. The facilitators come from a range of backgrounds; some are retired accountants, rural bank lenders, psychologists, social workers, agronomists, industry leaders or farmers with lived and life experience. The role of a facilitator is to connect with the farmer, either by phone or in person, offering a free, confidential chat to hear what might be causing them some distress and offer support and guidance to external services when needed.

I met with Neil Bateup, National Chair, and Marie Shanks, National General Manager, who shared that when recruiting facilitators they are looking for someone with empathy, a good listener, non-judgmental, and will not try to “fix everything” but rather support the farmer. RST works in conjunction with *Farmstrong*, with both organisations supporting each other at events. This collaborative approach shows the farming community that the support is united.

Kelley Dickey, psychologist and dairy farmer, is involved in RST around psychological wellbeing. She also understands the daily life of farming and can connect with farmers. When I met with Kelley, she shared that with the support of RST, she was able to quickly arrange a “no strings attached” evening for dairy farmers in the Waikato region after Fonterra cut milk prices for 2023/24. This evening was to gather dairy farmers together for connection and a wider understanding that they were not alone. Support services were in the background, however, it was more important for RST to bring people together to talk amongst themselves. The night was not about having a guest speaker talking about mental wellbeing.

Kelley shared that after that night several people reached out for support who had not previously engaged with the service. Other small events like “Pie Day Friday” have been very successful. RST offers a free pie at the local ag warehouse stores for lunch on a Friday, again, bringing people into a common place off-farm for social connection and conversation.

In recent years RST decided to make a national 0800 phone line: a game changer for the organisation. Neil and Marie shared that having one phone number across the country means that a farmer from the North Island can be talking with a farmer in the South Island. Having the same number makes it simple and easy for messaging. As I drove across the North Island I noticed RST signs at several different locations.

I met with a couple of farmers who had used RST and their comments stuck with me:

“Having RST at events, even in the background makes me feel that I am not alone. I love how I don’t have to talk to them on the night but know I can ring up afterwards and ask for some help”
(Male farmer, 42 yrs old)

“I love that their signs are on the side of the road, I feel like it just helps normalise the fact that it is okay to ask for help”
(Female farmer, 29 yrs old)

Case Study: RAMHP - Rural Adversity Mental Health Program - Australia

“RAMHP exists for regional, rural and remote people and communities of NSW”

Established in 2007 during a period of drought, the Rural Adversity Mental Health Program (RAMHP) provides support to individuals and communities reliant on primary production and agriculture, as well as other vulnerable populations at heightened risk of mental health challenges. Operating with a team of 20 coordinators spread across New South Wales, who are employed by local health districts, RAMHP is committed to delivering health promotion and education to rural communities, while also facilitating access to appropriate services for individuals in need.

RAMHP emphasises the importance of mental wellbeing and provides training for community members as well as professionals working within rural communities. They have a large array of resources on their website, run workshops and discussion groups and actively participate in community events and field days. Like RST in New Zealand, the coordinators are embedded in their local communities, so they have a strong understanding of local stressors and different referral pathways.

When I attended the 2023 Rural Mental Health Conference in Albury, NSW, I met with Kate Arndell, a RAMHP coordinator from Tamworth, she explained that the program not only focused on educating rural communities about mental health and identifying signs of poor mental health but also emphasises the resilience inherent in these communities.

Kate Arndell contributed to the creation of *My Drought Story: reflections of Resilience During Tough Times*, a book comprising photographs and narratives capturing experiences during and after the 2017-2020 drought. The book serves as a tribute to the resilience, kindness, and strength demonstrated within rural communities, providing individuals with an opportunity to contemplate their experiences during difficult times and consider strategies for navigating future challenges. Kate also shared how RAMHP coordinators run workshops and events to gather people together, noting that connection is a key driver for good mental health.

RAMHP is a trusted organisation within the NSW rural landscape as it has been around for nearly 20 years and is funded by the NSW Government. In an era where short-term funding is common and the longevity of services is uncertain, it is wonderful to see that the NSW Government sees the importance of refunding a program so that communities can continue to work and learn from a trusted, long-term program.

Case Study: Farm Owners Academy - Australia

As mentioned earlier in the report, financial stress is often cited as a significant contributor to poor mental health within the farming community. As a result, I was keen to see what programs or supports were available to farmers to help them in this area. Investigating this, I came across the Farm Owners Academy (FOA).

FOA is “farm business coaching for growth-minded farming families, building capability, not reliance” (Farm Owners Academy, 2024). From their website, one might think that FOA is about profitability, saving time, benchmarking, improving team structure and business skills. It is all of this nevertheless, but after meeting with Managing Director Jeremy Hutchings and Head Coach Sam Pincott, I learnt there is a lot more to FOA.

FOA runs several programs, but its primary program is the *Platinum Mastermind*. This three-year program aims to help farm owners grow a highly profitable farm business and lead a happier, healthier, and balanced life (FOA, 2024). The program includes yearly benchmarking, strategic planning, coaching and mentoring, and community events.

What intrigued me the most was that FOA also spends a great deal of time throughout the program looking at personal development. Personal development is being honest, assessing what you need to work on, and focusing on ways to better yourself. From building new skills and knowledge to developing healthy habits, personal development empowers us to lead a more fulfilling and purposeful life. Personal development supports self-awareness and understanding, self-confidence, improves relationships, supports fulfilment and finding purpose and enables long-term growth and learning (Aaron et al., 2021).

Through FOA, farmers focus on their core beliefs and values and are challenged to see if they are helping or hindering their business and personal lives. Jeremy outlined that they see a massive change in farmers' mindset once they understand more about themselves.

To explore this more deeply, I coordinated interviews with several farming families who had all been through the FOA *Platinum Mastermind* program and were now alumni. From each conversation, I learnt that the FOA program had transformed their individual businesses. Each person spoke about how they now had a stronger business plan, and that their businesses had been able to grow. They all shared they had a robust understanding of how to drive great production and set clear targets for their businesses.

I learnt that because both owners (typically husband and wife) had participated in the program, they had a new shared understanding and business plan. For some, it meant that, for the first time, they both felt comfortable with their debt levels and that business decisions were being made by both partners rather than one. This had not only helped from a business sense but also helped with personal relationships.

All the farmers I spoke with, except for one, shared that the personal development and self-awareness aspects of the program had the biggest impact, not only within themselves but also on their farm businesses. They all shared that once they had a better understanding of themselves and their motivations, they could see better pathways not only for their business but also for their personal lives. They talked about having gone from a “fixed mindset to a growth mindset”. How having a growth mindset allowed them to look at challenges as opportunities. Some talked about finding a love for farming again, after some hard times in the past. It was evident to me that farmers who had done the FOA program were positive about the future of farming.

Case Study: Rural Aid - Australia

Founded in 2015 by Tracy and Charles Alder, Rural Aid is a registered charity with the vision of “ensuring farmers and rural communities are supported before, during and after natural disasters and to help foster strong and sustainable rural communities” (Rural Aid, 2024). Primarily Rural Aid started after the successful *Buy a Bale* fundraising campaign.

In 2022 Rural Aid established their mental health and wellbeing service. 12 counsellors across the country are available Monday to Friday on their 1300 phone line. Where possible, counsellors will visit the farm, helping to build a strong trusted connection. When I met with Brian Morton, Chief Operations Officer, he explained that often farmers and their families would access Rural Aid due to hardship during or after a natural disaster. During this time the farming family would learn about all the services available through Rural Aid and over time once a trusted relationship was built, farmers and family members would often seek counselling support.

Being a registered charity Rural Aid has been able to build a long-term trusted relationship with rural communities. They are often the first to support a community in need and are often the last to leave. This ongoing commitment to rural communities highlights the importance of long-term relationship building and understanding of a community's needs.

Case Study: TIACS - TradeMutt - Australia

Co-founded by Dan Allen and Ed Ross 'TradeMutt' is a social impact workwear company. These young men started TradeMutt after losing a friend to suicide. They wanted to get "tradies" to talk about their mental health problems. They designed loud, vibrant work shirts to start a conversation about mental health, as shown in Figure 6.



Figure 6. Dan and Ed showing off a TradeMutt shirt (Source: Bunnings Trade, 2024)

Dan and Ed soon learnt that sometimes people needed more than a mate to talk to regarding their mental health. While starting the conversation was important, they noticed a gap when someone needed more help. It is well known that often waitlists for psychological support can be long, and often people need to go to their general practitioner (GP) first to get a referral. This can be a major barrier for people seeking help.

With this realisation, in 2020, Dan and Ed established TIACS which stands for **This Is A Conversation Starter**. TIACS provides a professional text and call service with qualified counsellors between Mondays and Fridays, free to blue collar workers. According to TIACS this typically refers to people working in Construction; Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing; Mining; Manufacturing; Electricity, Gas, Water, Waste Services; Transport, Postal & Warehousing (TIACS, 2024).

I met with Susan Jankovic, Co-CEO of TIACS, and learnt that it was not a crisis support service rather they offer up to eight free counselling sessions via phone or text with the same counsellor. Susan outlined that a lot of younger people feel too uncomfortable talking on the phone, therefore offering a text option has meant they can support more people. Susan also shared that if someone called who was not a blue collar worker, they would not be turned away. They would be offered two sessions, and the counsellor would then refer them to the most appropriate service. The average age of people making contact with TIACS was 37, and two-thirds of callers were males. Since operations started in June 2020, they have had over 18,000 individuals seek support.

Case Study: Hogenkamp Agricultural Coaching - Netherlands

“Making personal development in the agricultural sector a given”

Hogenkamp Agricultural Coaching (HAC) was founded in 2014 by Pauline Hogenkamp. Pauline started her career as an advisor in pig farming. One day she found one of her clients crying in his barn. He was at his wits' end and was struggling to deal with the pressures of farming. Pauline was still young and felt out of her depth about what she could do to assist him, she sought guidance from her manager, and when they didn't really have an answer for her, Pauline decided something needed to change.

Pauline went back to study applied psychology, as well as coaching and career coaching and slowly built up HAC. Today HAC has nine full-time coaches, all with a background in agriculture and have done extensive training in psychology, business coaching and relationship therapy.

During my travels to the Netherlands, I met with Didi Stoltenborg one of the nine coaches at HAC. Didi explained that a lot of the work done with clients focused on relationships. These relationships can be within the family system, with staff as well as external suppliers and contractors. Didi explained that often people struggle to see their own role in the relationship and how it is affecting not only them but those around them.

One tool used at HAC is *Karpman's Drama Triangle*, a theoretical framework to describe and understand the roles (Victim, Rescuer, and Persecutor) that people assume and perpetuate in interpersonal relationships, especially in contexts of "drama" or conflict (Lac & Donaldson, 2022). In the drama triangle, each player in the particular mind game begins assuming one of the three typical roles. The Victim; poor me, the Rescuer; let me help you and the Persecutor; it's all your fault. Working with clients HAC coaches help the clients to understand what role they might be playing in any given situation. Once clients understand this, they learn new communication skills which help create stronger, healthier relationships. To learn more about the *Karpman's Drama Triangle* refer to Appendix 1.

Didi also explained another important framework used within HAC is *Transactional Analysis*. This is a psychoanalytic theory that was developed by Eric Nerne in the 1950's. *Transactional Analysis* is the method used to analyse the process of transactions in our communication with others. It requires us to be aware of how we feel, think, and behave during interactions with others. To learn more about *Transactional Analysis* refer to Appendix 2.

What I found interesting about HAC and their frameworks is that they are working with people quite quickly to make significant changes. By focusing on communication styles and roles within relationships, people can identify the changes they need to make and can hold themselves responsible for their actions.

HAC has around 400 farmers who come through their doors each year. Nowhere else have I seen such large numbers of farmers reaching out to make positive changes in their relationships with others and themselves. Each client is required to write a review when they leave HAC which is key to their success. By putting their names to the review, Didi and the team believe that this helps other farmers normalise the need to ask for support.

Didi shared that the clients often talk to others about how helpful HAC has been. There is no stigma around asking a nutritionist for guidance in how to better support animals' health and welfare or asking an agronomist for help when a crop is not doing well. There should be no stigma around asking for personal development support.

Case Study: Farm Safety Foundation (Yellow Wellies) - United Kingdom

“Who would fill your boots?”

The Farm Safety Foundation was established in 2014 as a charitable organisation by National Farmers Union Mutual (NFU Mutual), however to most of the UK they are known by their nickname, Yellow Wellies. Preparing the next generation of farmers to be responsible, confident and safe is the main focus for the Yellow Wellies. This organisation combines both physical safety and mental health safety in their farm safety promotion.

When I met with Alix Morley, one of the farm safety campaign specialists, she outlined to me that in a recent study conducted by the Yellow Wellies, they found that 95% of farmers under the age of 40 believe that mental health is the biggest hidden problem facing farming. Records from the Office of National Statistics, UK showed that in 2021 36 suicides were registered among people working in agricultural and related trades in England and Wales. 21 farm workers lost their lives due to accidents in the workplace. Alix stated that their target audience is younger farmers (under 40) as their data highlights a need to educate and support this cohort.

Yellow Wellies is achieving this through engagement with high school students, and students studying agriculture at university as well as working closely with many of the young farmer groups across the UK. While most students will say sitting in a classroom and being “lectured” is boring, this is not the case when the Yellow Wellies present. Their half-day workshop on farm safety and mental health uses a virtual reality headset so that students can be immersed in the real-life operations of farming. Alix stated that once students have “seen the scenario” the classroom conversation is more robust as students can imagine themselves in the scenario. To date, they have delivered over 740 workshops.

The Yellow Wellies is not the traditional mental health promotional service I was expecting. Rather they are talking about mental health in terms of safety. To me, this is a different approach, rather than separating farm safety from mental health they are highlighting the two issues together. Getting young farmers to consider how poor mental health and the signs associated with it, such as poor sleep or disturbed thoughts can influence and impact your judgement within the workplace.

I enquired about the over 40 farmers, and who is looking after them. Alix explained that while they are focusing on farmers aged 16 to 40, they believe that the message is getting through to older farmers as well. Yellow Wellies attend all the major rural shows and events, allowing everyone to meet with them. She stated that the feedback they often receive is that young farmers are going back to their family farms and having conversations with older generations.

Case Study: Healthy Minds, Healthy Farms - Canada

During a visit to Canada, I met with Denise Rollin from Farm Management Canada who was the lead project manager on the *Healthy Minds, Healthy Farms* project, primarily a nation-wide survey and research project into rural and farmer mental health.

I was interested in examining the link between mental health and farm business management. Denise shared that the adoption of farm business management tools within the Canadian agricultural sector was relatively low. Only 26% of Canadian farmers have a documented business plan, and a mere 8.4% have a written farm transition plan (Farm Management Canada, 2020).

Across Canada, it has been observed that profitability is associated with fundamental farm business management practices (Agri-food Management Institute, 2015) and Denise stated that they found this was key to supporting farmers' mental health as well as their businesses. The research highlighted that key practices from top producers were:

- Seeking training and learning opportunities
- Working with business advisors
- Written business plan, followed and reviewed on an annual basis
- Detailed record keeping
- Risk assessment and management
- Financial planning and budgeting
- Strong decision-making skills

Denise highlighted that business success is closely linked to effective management, therefore promoting the adoption of strong management practices can reduce financial pressure and enhance the mental wellbeing of farmers.

Cynthia Beck is a beef farmer and master's student in clinical psychology at the University of Regina, Canada. Before her studies, she was helping in the farm business and received calls from farmers who were struggling with the season, business and subsequent mental health. She felt she needed a better understanding of psychology, hence her subsequent studies. We both had a similar path in our interest and practicing in the field of rural mental health.

I caught up with Cynthia at her family cattle ranch in the middle of winter at their annual bull sale with 75 local farmers eager to purchase their next Beck bull. Cynthia was a key contributor to the *Healthy Minds, Healthy Farms* report and had some interesting insight into the causes of poor farmer mental health. She stated that the majority of farmers' mental health declines are in large caused by the impacts of financial pressure, up to 80%.

The *Healthy Minds, Healthy Farms* report concluded that managing the risks that created financial pressure could be a major preventative measure most farmers could adopt. The project identified succession planning as a key causative activity in most family farms which had the potential to create large amounts of stress and financial pressure.

In Australia, there has been concerted efforts within industry organisations to help farmers improve their financial literacy and better manage their businesses. Dairy Australia has initiated numerous farm business educational programs, with varying uptake. A key observation in Canada was the play on words; they were generally speaking about risk and not farm business or financial management. When farmers looked at the risk to their business, they were more likely to engage in strategies to reduce the risk to the business.

Chapter 4: Mental health promotion

According to Nutbeam and Muscat (2021), mental health promotion aims to help individuals gain the knowledge and skills needed to improve and maintain their mental wellbeing. This involves working towards positive changes in our social environments to enhance our overall mental health. With a focus on four key outcomes:

- promoting high levels of positive mental wellbeing,
- preventing the onset of mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety,
- promoting mental health literacy to encourage self-care, reduce stigma around mental health, and promote help-seeking,
- proactive steps to enhance positive mental health and resilience.

When mental health in the context of farming is considered, it is often associated with negative language. News articles and reports frequently highlight the struggles and hardships of farming. Academics and researchers often focus their studies on the reasons for poor mental health within farming communities. When my husband and I tell people that we are dairy farmers, it is often met with looks of pity and comments about "what a hard life you must have working seven days a week and getting up so early."

Negative conversations around farming dominate, therefore a negative picture is painted. When my husband and I answer with "no, it's a great life, we get to see the sunrise each day. We work with beautiful animals and wonderful people in a great environment." We are often met with confused looks; we aim to paint a picture of optimism and fulfilment rather than pity and negativity. We all have a choice to either focus on the negatives or the positives.

Throughout my studies and travels, I was pleased to see that organisations worked from a strength-based positive lens.

Mental health advocacy

The fifth edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines an advocate as "1. person who supports or speaks in favour, 2. Person who pleads for another." This definition broadly encompasses a fundamental aspect of advocacy, which involves lending one's voice in support of something or someone (Stylianso & Kehyayan, 2012).

In recent years there has been a significant increase in efforts to advocate for and provide support in the field of mental health. Notably, numerous public figures, including celebrities and influencers, have begun candidly sharing their personal struggles, aspiring to inspire others to open up and help break down the stigma associated with mental health.

More and more companies working within the agricultural sector such as Grain Producers Australia (GPA) are investing time and resources into supporting mental health. For the last three years, GPA has partnered with Nufarm and Rural Aid to run the GPA *Farmer Mates Mental Health* program with Brad Hogg, a former national cricketer, as their national ambassador.

Shanna Whan's grassroots charity *Sober In The Country* has gained so much traction that Shanna became Australian of the Year Local Hero in 2022. While their main message is about

reducing alcohol misuse or dependence, Shanna and her team have been able to highlight the common association between alcohol and poor mental health.

Mary O'Brian's *Are You Bugged Mate?* grassroots program aims to engage directly with rural men, to break down the stigma. Mary does this with her straight-talking speaking engagements. I met with Mary after one of her speaking engagements in Rutherglen, Victoria. Mary's way of connecting with the audience and ability to say it like it is, really reduces the "uncomfortableness" that can sometimes be felt in a room when this topic is talked about. Mary's presentation is interactive and often brings out a lot of belly laughs from all in the audience.

Similarly, Warren Davis, known as the *Unbreakable Farmer* is connecting with a wide audience, as a keynote speaker, workshop facilitator and podcaster. Warren shares his story of struggle while being a dairy farmer.

There are many more individuals and grassroots programs, blogs and podcasts focusing on rural mental health issues. All this work helps to reduce the stigma and isolation many feel when dealing with mental health issues. Advocacy and normalising mental health struggles are fundamental to making change.

Equally important, however, is the delivery of the message. In the last decade mental health promotion has vastly improved, thanks to the rise of the internet and social media. However, there is growing concern that often social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube can be more harmful than helpful (Triplett *et al.*, 2022). Social media influencers are internet users who rise to fame by sharing their personal lives on social media. Being vulnerable and sharing one's story of struggle to help others know that they are not alone can be seen as helpful. People can relate to their story and when done well, it can give individuals the courage to seek help. However often influencers share thoughts without thinking about the impact of their words. When an influencer talks about a bad experience with medication or a therapist, they are sending a message that it is not worth seeking help. This in turn can lead to a negative belief system of help-seeking.

Mental health professionals who have completed years of university study and continue to engage in professional development, gain knowledge of fundamental principles and theories in psychology. This knowledge helps them understand how to use language correctly and the importance of delivery.

In numerous interviews throughout my Nuffield journey, professionals have consistently expressed concerns about the communication style of influencers. This concern of language is known as "trauma dumping". Cambridge Dictionary defines trauma dumping as "the detailed sharing of personal problems and emotional distress with others".

In a controlled and secure environment, such as with a therapist, individuals can share their experiences while having the necessary support and containment. Qualified therapists are trained to manage such situations without internalising the trauma. However, when such narratives are broadcast to the general public, they may evoke negative responses. Despite the influencer's intention to assist, the impact of sharing such personal stories with a wider audience could lead to adverse outcomes for the consumer of the information.

What are the roles, responsibilities and opportunities for the agricultural sector?

It's well known that when individuals face mental health challenges, they often make poor business decisions. In an industry marked by uncertainty, it's understandable why farmers might decide to exit. Chancellor & Boulton (2024) highlight that the number of dairy farms has significantly declined, from over 15,000 in 2004 to just under 9,000 in 2023. Each year, more farms leave the industry than new ones enter. There are many different factors that may contribute to this decline; however, the declining physical and mental health is a key contributor.

There are some companies that are recognising the importance of supporting their farmers' mental wellbeing. For instance, Norco has employed a mental health support officer, allowing their dairy farmers to access mental health services without needing a GP referral or facing long waiting times. This officer, who understands the unique challenges of dairy farming, can connect with farmers effectively.

While there is a growing emphasis on mental health promotion and more conversations are happening than ever before, there remains a shortage of mental health professionals available to support farmers. Other agricultural companies could learn from Norco's example by implementing similar programs.

The broader agricultural industry might consider establishing a graduate program for psychologists or social workers with a farming background, similar to the Rabobank Graduate program. Retaining psychologists or social workers who understand life on the land, means they have a stronger ability to connect effectively with the farmer seeking support.

What is the role and responsibility of the (individual) farmer?

One of my favourite sayings is, "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink". As a highly trained counsellor, it can be challenging to watch individuals who are unable or unwilling to make positive changes in their lives. Life presents many difficulties, some of which are beyond our control or rooted in the past. While family, friends, and professionals can offer support and guidance, ultimately, the drive for change must come from within.

Reflecting on the approach of Hogenkamp Agricultural Coaching, Netherlands, they emphasise the *Drama Triangle*: the victim, the persecutor, and the rescuer. It's crucial for individuals to recognise their role within this dynamic and take proactive steps towards change.

This report discussed the importance of mindset and I learnt a lot from the farmers I interviewed from the Farm Owners Academy about how learning about their mindset helped with their business as well as their personal lives. Those with a growth mindset can identify challenges and actively work to overcome them. It's possible to retrain yourself to adopt a growth mindset; often, it starts with being curious enough to try something new, even if it pushes you out of your comfort zone.

While we cannot control the uncontrollable, we can control our reactions. We can develop new strategies to navigate uncertainty and acquire new skills to enhance our businesses and relationships.

As Mary O'Brian points out, it can be incredibly difficult to lift yourself out of a bog when you're deeply stuck. However, if people begin working on their self-awareness earlier and gain an understanding of their behavioural patterns, they can change how they handle and respond to situations, whether those situations are within their control or not.

Conclusion

Within the agricultural sector, there is widespread recognition of the significant mental health challenges faced by individuals, including financial pressures resulting from market fluctuations and unpredictable weather patterns, persistent labour shortages, government interventions and regulations that can create additional stress, and social and personal factors such as isolation, demanding workloads, and an ethos of stoicism.

Equally, it is important to acknowledge the recent upsurge in mental health advocacy and promotion within the agricultural community, indicating a growing understanding and support for farmers grappling with the complexities of their profession and the associated mental health challenges.

The case studies provided demonstrate the committed efforts of organisations worldwide in thoroughly supporting farmers, their families, and the larger rural community. A range of approaches are being utilised to endeavour to connect with a cohort of people who historically find asking for help difficult.

Strengths-based, positive psychological approaches, where people take ownership of their mindset are proving to be successful. Farmers sharing that they have sought external support is helping to reduce the stigma often associated with mental health.

We can create a more supportive and resilient farming community that can thrive in the face of adversity through a multi-faceted approach to addressing mental health issues within the agricultural sector as showcased in this report. By fostering a positive dialogue around mental health, providing practical support through education and linking people with external psychological services when required, we can create more a resilient agricultural sector that is better equipped to cope with the challenges of modern Australian agriculture.

Recommendations

- Promotion of financial literacy in farming communities including educational programs, and workshops.
- Bring together all aspects of the agricultural sector (state and territory) to fund the development of a national organisation with a focuses on building resilience and promoting mental wellbeing among farmers.
- Utilise technology to provide farmers with access to mental health resources, including telehealth services, online support groups, and educational content.
- Build a framework to support social influencers so that they understand the importance of language and positive mental health promotion.
- Educate keynote speakers about the importance of offering local support options when talking with a community, rather than just Lifeline or Beyond Blue.
- Reduce conversations around stigma and increase conversations around accessing external support when needed.
- Ensure that farmers have access to mental health services modelled on Norco's Mental Health Support Officer.
- Consider a graduation program to bring more psychologists, social workers and therapists to farming communities.
- Encourage collaborative research between agricultural organisations, mental health professionals, and academic institutions to further understand the specific mental health needs of farmers and develop evidence-based interventions.

Resources

There are many different resources and services that can help you if you are struggling. Deciding which service to use may take some time and the first one you try might not work, but don't give up. Keep trying.

Here is a list to help you get started.

ACT for Ag www.actforag.com.au

Are you bogged mate? www.areyouboggedmate.com.au

Beyond Blue www.beyondblue.org.au

Farm Life Fitness www.farmlifefitness.com.au

ifarmwell www.ifarmwell.com.au

Lifeline 13 11 14

Mojo Crowe www.mojocrowe.com

National Centre for Farmer Health www.farmerhealth.org.au

Open Road Counselling www.openroadcounselling.com.au

Outback Futures www.outbackfutures.org.au

Rural Health Connect www.ruralhealthconnect.com.au

Rural Outreach Counselling www.ruraloutreachcounselling.com.au

Resilience project www.theresilienceproject.com.au

Rural Aid www.ruralaid.org.au

Sobber in the country www.soberinthecountry.org

TIACS www.tiacs.org

The Regional Men's Health Initiative www.regionalmenshealth.com.au

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Appendix 1: Karpman Drama Triangle

What is the Karpman Drama Triangle

Karpman's Drama Triangle describes dysfunctional relationships where the people in the relationship shift between three roles, Persecutor, Rescuer, and Victim, all held in place by guilt and blame.

When you find yourself stuck in a self-defeating or self-serving role, it's horribly easy to end up in an extreme state that doesn't help anyone, neither you nor the people you're interacting with. The idea is to move away from the extreme edges of the triangle towards the centre, where there's a much healthier and more positive balance.

By doing this we move from being an oppressive persecutor to an assertive person with good boundaries. We shift from playing the role of helpless victim to a less vulnerable state of self-awareness. We stop being self-sacrificing rescuers and move towards attunement and compassion.

You assert rather than persecute

You are vulnerable but you're not a victim

You are caring but you don't overstep the mark

Right in the middle of the triangle, at the sweetest spot of all, we find the place where all our roles integrate, the place where we are self-aware and are coming from a level adult place. From a stance where you are okay, and others are too.



How your professional presence is affected by the Drama Triangle

As you can imagine, stuck in or flipping between the roles of oppressive persecutor, helpless victim, or 'good' self-sacrificing rescuer doesn't make you a talented leader. Quite the opposite.

So how do you move out of these extraordinarily unhelpful roles when you find yourself slipping into one of them? How can you change the negative habitual roles you keep falling into? By stepping out of them, you and everyone you encounter in a professional context will benefit. The quality of leadership presence may actually depend upon your ability to do so.

How to step out of the Drama Triangle

It's your job to be aware of the roles you play, or have been placed in, and if they trap you in the Drama Triangle, to find ways to shift yourself out of that position. Moving to the centre means you stop acting as the victim, rescuer or persecutor. Noticing your immediate reactions and putting in a pause moment between the stimulus and your response, can help you. It may just stop you in your tracks and avoid you sliding into the *Drama Triangle* dynamics.

Refuse to accept your opponent's force. Stop struggling. Neatly avoid awkward, indefensible, or unreasonable positions. Once you move to the centre, your opponent will probably back away. It can be a simple and yet remarkable tactic.

All of this requires you to examine any ingrained thinking patterns that you want to change and adapt or replace them. You can simply refuse to be either superior or inferior – doing so breaks the triangle. Once you stop the game, the drama stops too. You can stop acting as 'poor me', ignoring your own needs, giving in to people even when it's not a good idea, or always taking the blame. To stop being a victim you need to accept the relationship with the other person, face the fact you're the one who will need to change, face your fears and take better actions. You can also stop trying to fix people. Rescuers are natural caretakers and it's a hard habit to break since it involves heavy emotions like guilt and obligation. Living beyond the *Drama Triangle* roles is about managing your own boundaries and having a strong sense of your own agency and value.

None of this means you care less about people. It simply means you'll be able to make better choices for yourself and for others who are stuck in Drama Triangles of their own.

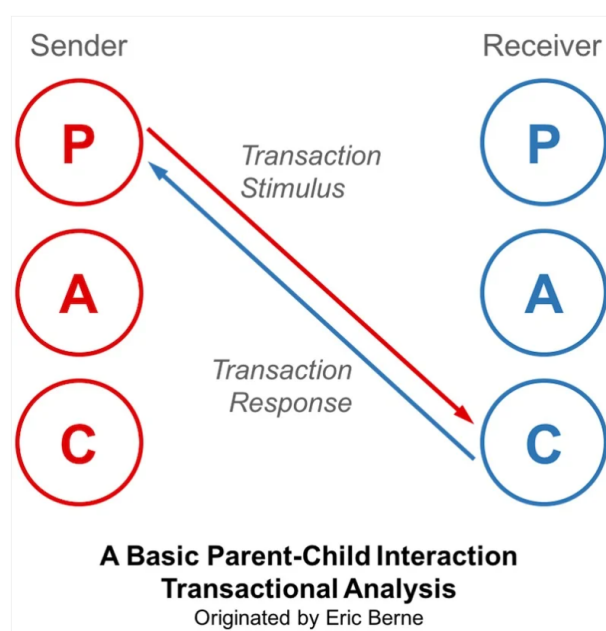
(Listening Partnership, 2024)

Appendix 2: Transactional Analysis Theory & Therapy

Transactional Analysis is a psychoanalytic theory and method of therapy developed by Eric Berne during the 1950s. Transaction refers to the communication exchange between people. During a conversation with someone, the person starting the communication will give the “transaction stimulus”, and then the person receiving this stimulus (or message of communication) will give the ‘transaction response.’

Transactional Analysis is the method used to analyse this process of transactions in communication with others. It requires us to be aware of how we feel, think, and behave during interactions with others.

Transactional Analysis recognised that the human personality is made up of three “ego states”; each of which is an entire system of thought, feeling, and behaviour from which we interact with each other. The Parent, Adult, and Child ego states and the interaction between them form the foundation of transactional analysis theory.



Transactional analysts are trained to recognise which ego states people are transacting from and to follow the transactional sequences to intervene and improve communication quality and effectiveness.

How was Transactional Analysis Developed?

Eric Berne founded *Transactional Analysis* in the late 1950s. Eric Berne was born in Canada in 1910 and died in 1970; his field of expertise was rooted in psychoanalysis.

His ideas for *Transactional Analysis* developed from Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory that childhood experiences greatly impact our lives as adults and are the basis for the development of our personalities and psychological or emotional issues that we suffer. In the same way, Berne believed that our childhood experiences, particularly how we are parented, affect the development formation of our three ego states (Parent, Adult, and Child).

This can then unconsciously cause us to replay the same attitudes and behaviours that our parents had towards us to someone else during a conversation or to respond to communication and interactions with past childhood anxieties and emotions.

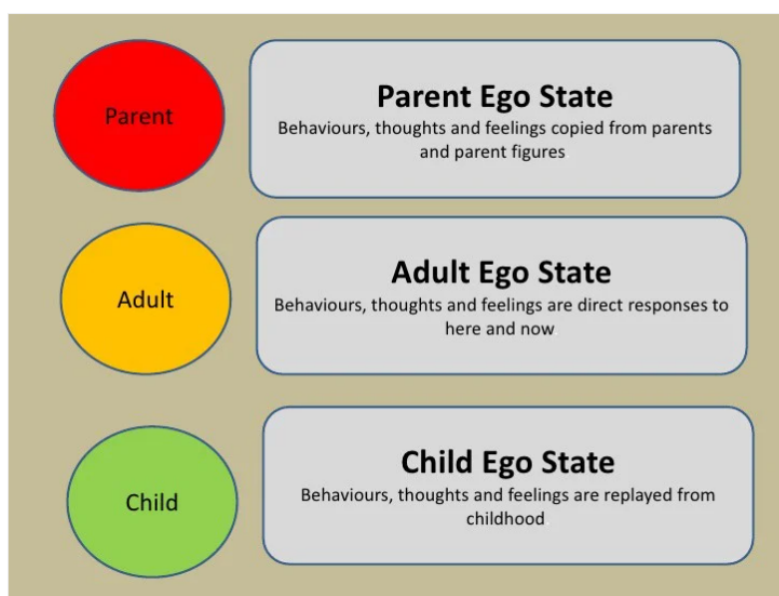
Eric Berne proposed that dysfunctional behaviour is the result of self-limiting decisions made in childhood in the interest of survival. Such decisions culminate in what Berne called the “life script,” the pre-conscious life plan that governs the way life is lived out.

Changing the life script is the aim of *Transactional Analysis* psychotherapy. Replacing violent organizational or societal scripting with cooperative non-violent behaviour is the aim of other applications of transactional analysis.

Since Berne created *Transactional Analysis*, other psychotherapists and psychologists, such as Thomas Harris and Claude Steiner, have added to it, developing the theory and its therapeutic applications further.

The Ego States

Transactional Analysis believes that we have three different states or ways of being during interactions, which are; the child ego state, the parent ego state, and the state of adult.



Which state we are in during an interaction depends on a few factors, such as how we have been conditioned to act or react from childhood, any past traumas that now cause us to act in a certain way during particular interactions or situations, and how the other person we are interacting with is treating us/ what ego state they are in when speaking to us.

Interacting with someone from the state of the child or parent mode is often a default or unconscious reaction that is used, and it takes conscious awareness to be able to bring ourselves back into adult mode and interact from that place instead.

Child State

There are two subdivisions of the child state; The adapted child and the free child ego states. This is when we interact and respond to someone based on our past conditioning of internal emotions felt in childhood, so when we revert back to our thinking and feeling from when we were children.

The child ego state is built on any reinforcements we were given in childhood, either positive or negative, to behave or not behave in a certain way, which still conditions and affects our interactions today.

The adapted child state conforms and acts according to others' wishes to please them and be seen as good and liked. Still, it also has a rebellious side when faced with perceived conflict and causes responses of resistance, hostility, and emotional reactivity.

The free child ego state can be creative, spontaneous, playful, and pleasure-seeking.

Parent State

There are two subdivisions of the parent state; The critical/controlling parent state and the nurturing parent state. These are behaviour and thinking patterns we have been taught from our past interactions with our parents and other authority figures (teachers, grandparents, etc.).

Berne believed our experiences during our first five years of life contributed to the parent ego state. This state holds a lot of judgments on how someone or something is, i.e., it is that state where we find ourselves having a lot of 'shoulds' and 'should nots' about something.

People are in this state when they are reactive to a situation and act out of their conditioning, copying how their parents (or another authority figure) treated them and others instead of analysing each situation afresh in the here and now.

It is when we use the voice of authority toward someone. The critical parent disapproves in a harsh and possibly aggressive way. In contrast, the nurturing parent tries to take over a situation in more of a rescuing way, trying to soothe others, which can be very inappropriate when talking to other adults rather than children.

Adult State

Unlike the other two, the adult state does not have any subdivisions. The adult state interacts with people and their environment in the here and now, not from past conditioning or how other people have told them to be.

This state is more open, more rational, and less quick to make harsh judgments on a situation or person.

When communication occurs in the adult state, we are more likely to be respectful, make compromises, listen fully to others, and have more healthy social interactions.

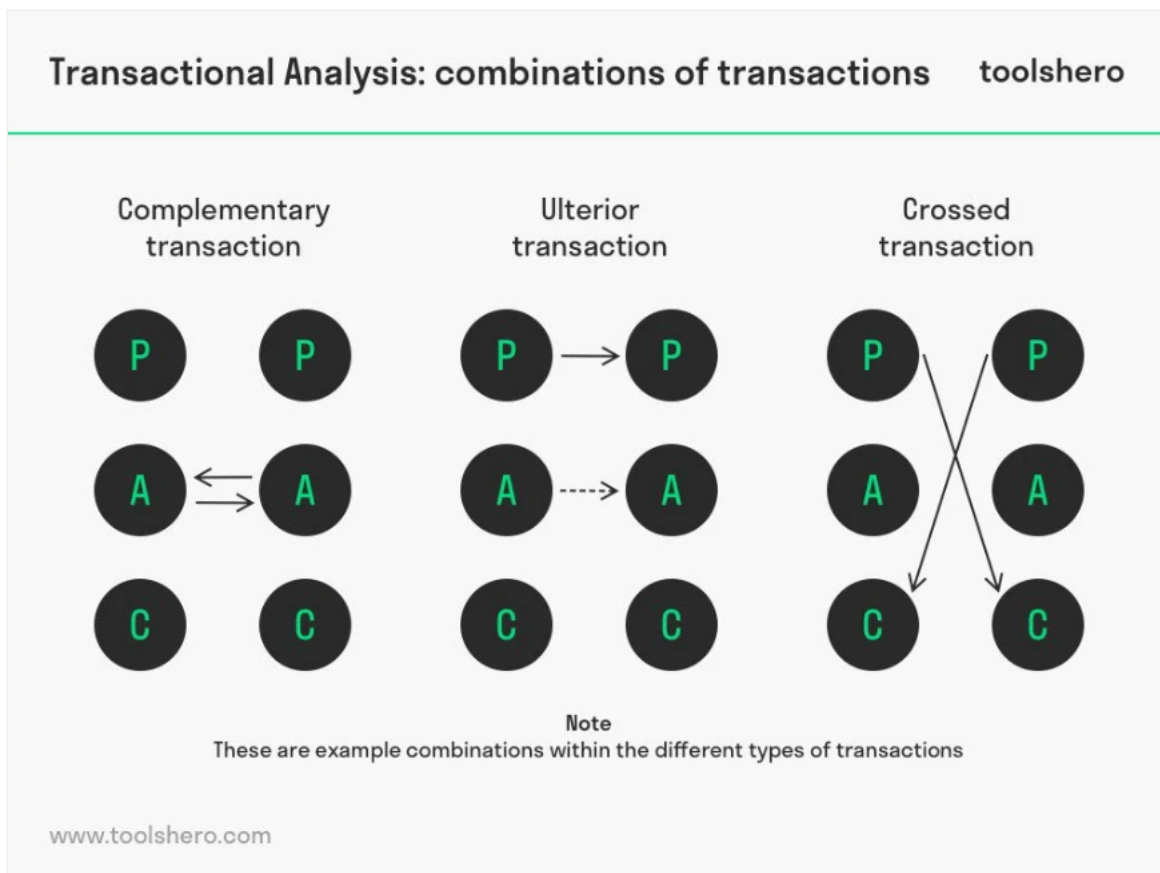
How do the Ego States Interact and Affect Communication?

The three states of child, parent, and adult affect how we receive, perceive, and respond to information or communication from someone.

Berne observed that people need strokes, the units of interpersonal recognition, to survive and thrive. Understanding how people give and receive positive and negative strokes and changing unhealthy patterns of stroking are powerful aspects of work in *Transactional Analysis*.

Transactional Analysis believes that adult-to-adult communication/transactions lead to more effective and healthy communication, thus, relationships with others.

The different types of transactions below explain how interactions from the different ego states interact with each other.



Complementary Transactions

It is important to note that although the phrase ‘complementary transactions’ sounds positive, it does not necessarily mean that this type of communication is always healthy communication.

A complementary transaction takes place when the lines between the sender’s and receiver’s ego state are parallel.

This means that whatever ego state the sender is in, their communication reaches or impacts the desired ego state of the receiver. Thus, the receiver responds in a way that complements the sender’s ego state instead of challenging it.

When this complementary transaction happens from an adult-to-adult state, it is thought to be the best type of communication, as it is respectful and reduces conflicts.

When a complementary transaction happens from the ego state of a child and is received and responded to from the ego state of a nurturing parent, it will also help to reduce conflicts and create a degree of harmony in the interaction; however, you can see why this would not necessarily be the best form of interaction in a workplace environment between two adults.

For example, in a marriage, if one partner is worried about an event, the other may take on a more nurturing parental state to help calm and support them, which is great; however, if this is the primary mode of communication between the two then over time it would cause strain and be quite draining.

Crossed Transactions

Crossed transactions are when the ego states of two people interacting do not match when the ego state of the sender does not reach the desired or intended ego state of the respondent; thus, they respond to the sender in a conflicting way (which can be seen by the crossed over arrows in the image to the right).

In a crossed transaction, it requires one or both of the people in the interaction to shift ego states for communication to be able to carry on.

An example of this would be if a customer came to you complaining of their recent purchase, using very belittling language, jumping to the conclusion that this mistake had been made purposely, and telling you that they were going to report you.

They are speaking to you from their critical parent state, intending you to then reply from your child's ego state, such as being very apologetic, begging them not to report you, and responding with anything that strengthens their authority in the situation.

However, if you were to respond from your adult or parent state instead, this would cause a crossed transaction, and someone would have to shift their ego states to accommodate for this so the communication can continue.

Transactional Analysis believes that if you respond from your adult state, it is more likely that the sender can then also come back into their adult state to accommodate for the discrepancy in uncomplimentary ego states, resulting in transactions from adult to adult, which is healthier and more respectful.

Ulterior Transactions

Ulterior transactions are when the sender outwardly gives a message to the receiver that sounds like it's coming from his adult state to the receiver's adult state.

However, there is actually an underlying, subtle message given from the sender's child or parent state, to be received by the responder's child or parent state. Thus, two messages are sent at the same time. This can be done consciously or unconsciously by the sender.

This type of interaction is highlighted in the image showing the dashed line. An example would be if someone's teacher or friend said, 'You can choose to study subjects that lead to becoming a doctor; however, it is very hard and requires lots of intelligence.'

The use of language suggests adult-to-adult respectful communication with a subtle warning; however, they may have said it with the intent of triggering the receiver's rebellious child ego state, so they might think, 'I will show you that I am also very intelligent and can become a doctor' and thus study harder.

The three different transactions in communication are not defined by verbal language and words alone. It also incorporates tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions.

How is Transactional Analysis used in Therapy?

The general goal or motive of *Transactional Analysis* therapy is to strengthen the adult state of the client. This is done through using skillful questioning and tools to understand what causes the client to shift into parent or child ego mode and thus come up with helpful strategies to use in these moments to stay in their adult state instead (Berne, 1958).

Transactional Analysis believes that our childhood experiences, particularly from birth to five years, strongly affect our behaviours and our responses in social interactions, so importance is placed on our upbringing and how we were parented.

This process is also referred to as script analysis, which analyses and explores our scripts developed in childhood. Scripts are unconsciously built beliefs and views we have of ourselves, others, and the world, which we developed to make sense of our internal and external environments from early experiences and interactions.

During script analysis, any positive or negative reinforcements we were given as a child to behave or not behave in a certain way will be explored, along with life messages we have given, i.e., 'only lucky people become rich,' or 'you have to suffer to succeed.'

People will also explore whether or not they are modelling/copying how they observed their parents and authority figures behaving.

Additionally, more subtle messages we received growing up will be analysed (referred to as injunctions), such as always being told to be quiet when your parents were speaking to friends, which could imprint the belief 'no one wants to hear me' or 'what I want to say doesn't really matter', these would be explored in therapy along with how they currently affect our interactions now.

The parent, adult, and child diagram, or 'structural diagram' as Berne called it, is a useful tool that *Transactional Analysis* practitioners use as a helpful visual in aiding clients to understand the three states they have within them.

This affects their behavioural and social interactions and is a way of helping them to see how the three states interact with each other during particular situations and with particular people they communicate with.

Transactional Analysis can be used in short-term therapy, in a brief solution-focused way, or in a more in-depth long-term way to gain more insight into our unconscious world, and improving our relationships with others, and reduce conflict.

Transactional Analysis is versatile and can be used in individual psychotherapy, couple's psychotherapy, and family counselling. It can also be helpful for other practitioners to apply to their work with clients such as nurses and teachers and even in industries such as business or sales training.

Current Research on Transactional Analysis

Current research *on Transactional Analysis* appears promising in its ability to improve relationships, decrease conflict, and improve individual life satisfaction, and self-esteem. It also shows its effectiveness in aiding people at work during their interactions with clients.

Critical Evaluation

Advantages

- Berne created *Transactional Analysis* with the intention of being straightforward, with easily understandable concepts. This makes it possible for the layperson to understand the theory and become familiar with its mechanisms and how social interactions in their lives take on the form that they do.
- *Transactional Analysis* helps people to be able to gain deeper insight into their own behaviours, reactions, thoughts, and emotions, which they might not have been aware of before, providing them with greater self-awareness.
- *Transactional Analysis* helps to improve communication skills and relationships with others while decreasing conflicts, and these benefits are supported by current research.
- *Transactional Analysis* can apply to many social environments/interactions and many types of relationships. For example, work, colleagues and manager relationships or interactions, teacher and student interactions in schools, romantic relationships/marriage, families, parent and child relationships, difficult clients at work in all industries, etc. Making it a very versatile theory.

Disadvantages

- *Transactional Analysis* requires someone to have a good degree of self-awareness and the capacity to look at and notice their own behaviour, emotions, and thought patterns; some clients or people may not have this capacity.
- *Transactional Analysis* requires the client to be willing and motivated to take ownership of their problems and behaviours, so *Transactional Analysis* may not be suitable for everyone.
- *Transactional Analysis* was originally created by Berne to be simple and easy to understand, thus more accessible to the average person, however, with more recent psychotherapists and psychologists adding onto this theory, it has made it more complex, losing some of its originally intended simplistic nature.

(Murray, 2023)