

# Your TOOL KIT for getting through the drought



If you are seeking someone to listen confidentially, call **Lifeline on 13 11 14**, 24 hours a day every day of the week. Or use the **Lifeline Chat service: [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au) (7pm – midnight, 7 days)**



Rural people are known for their resilience, but prolonged drought can really put this to the test. Drought brings an array of difficulties that, when combined, can create extremely stressful situations.

**Lifeline** is a national charity that has been providing assistance to Australians experiencing difficulties for 55 years. This **TOOL KIT** is designed to assist those living in drought affected areas to care for themselves and those around them.

## TOOL KIT Recognising the symptoms of stress:



When faced with difficulties, there are physical, psychological and behavioural indicators that signal we are stressed.

### Symptoms of stress include:

#### PHYSICAL

Tiredness, headaches, accidents, tightness in neck and shoulders, restlessness, ulcers, hypertension, respiratory problems, diarrhoea or constipation, chest pain, back pain, upset stomach, skin problems, weight loss or gain.

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL / EMOTIONAL

Irritability, mood swings, nervousness, low self-esteem, worry, anxiety, tearfulness, guilt, fear, anger, grief, sleep problems, disappointment, depression, helplessness, hopelessness, shame, confusion, forgetfulness, dull senses, negative attitude, poor concentration.

#### BEHAVIOURAL / SOCIAL

Seeking isolation, fewer contacts with friends, overworking, lashing out, blaming, nagging, resentment, aggressions, arguing, alcohol / drug / tobacco use.

If stress is experienced for long periods of time it can result in physical, mental and emotional exhaustion or 'burnout'. The following tool kit provides tips for coping with stress.

“ People often say, ‘I don't know what to say so I don't say anything at all.’ But, those of us living in these communities, we know each other well. We're in the best position to notice when the stress is getting too much.

We just need to be ready to look out for each other, stay connected, ask if we're ok; and, if the answer is 'No', then know where to go get help.

Stephanie Robinson, CEO, Lifeline Central West

## 1 EXPLORE FINANCIAL OPTIONS

Financial difficulties caused by drought make the situation more stressful. It can become overwhelming when despite extra effort, there is little or no control. Stress is particularly intense when decisions must be made about the use of resources, especially when these decisions involve selling assets.

Rural financial counselling services can help to assess individual situations so informed and timely decisions can be made. See the list of resources on the back page. The financial situation affects the whole family so it's important to involve everyone in age-appropriate discussions. Work towards creating financial goals, setting priorities and planning a budget together.

Don't make quick decisions – discuss ideas and seek financial advice from qualified individuals.



## 2 DON'T GO IT ALONE!

In times of crisis, for many the natural inclination is to go into isolation, but this is one of the worst things to do. Social and family support is important because it reduces the sense of isolation, lessens depression and anxiety and provides a network of people who can listen and offer support.

It's important that during difficult times the community continues to offer support and people make the effort to connect with others, especially those who are struggling.

When reaching out to others, be aware of:

- Where to go for help and advice.
- What services are available.
- How the Government and financial services industries are working with people in this situation.
- What support is being offered in the community.
- How to recognise and cope with stress.

Should confidential support be required, don't forget **Lifeline crisis support is open 24/7 on 13 11 14** and the **web chat service** can be accessed **7pm – midnight, 7 days a week.**



“

**When in need of support,  
lean on those around you,  
in turn, they can  
lean on you!**”

Lifeline Crisis Supporter, NSW

## 3 IMPROVE COMMUNICATION

People under stress may also communicate in unhelpful ways. For example, families may find themselves increasingly in conflict. Effective communication begins with establishing guidelines for dealing with sensitive topics.

- Treat others with respect.
- Listen carefully and speak respectfully.
- Pay attention to the other person's ideas and how they feel about them.
- Maintain eye contact and be aware of body language (avoid crossing arms, rolling eyes, clenching fists etc.)
- When expressing personal views, state needs and feelings briefly.

- Be specific about what you hope to achieve.
- Try not to use loaded or accusatory words.
- Try not to exaggerate, withhold important information or speak loudly.
- Focus on issues rather than personalities by using 'I' statements (I feel upset when...) rather than blaming 'you' messages (You always...).
- Focus on the present and resist the temptation to revisit old hurts.
- If the situation becomes negative or hurtful, take time out until everyone has calmed down.

**Crying is often unavoidable when feelings are intense and this is perfectly natural.**

## 4 ACKNOWLEDGE CHANGING ROLES

A drought can lead to considerable personal and community upheaval. People are often forced to take on additional paid work, leave long-term employment, or become unemployed. In all these situations, it's important to maintain good communication.

In close relationships the best plan is cohesion – ride the situation out together. Be sensitive to one another's feelings and pay attention to unspoken pain as well as verbalised distress. Make time for each other.

Changing roles can lead to feelings of guilt and embarrassment. When things go wrong, people tend to blame themselves or think they've failed. These feelings are seldom justified.

The steps below can assist in developing a realistic understanding of the situation and reduce self-blame:

1. List the outside influences (weather, equipment breakdown, interest rates etc) that contributed to the role change.
2. List any people involved and their needs (fellow workers, your children, your bank manager etc) and include yourself on the list.
3. Being realistic, give each a score out of 100 for how much it/they contributed to the role change.
4. Score yourself last.
5. Ensure the scores add up to 100.
6. Look back at all the factors and re-evaluate your level of responsibility.



**Stopping and talking  
about how we were feeling  
made all the difference.**



Jess, Macksville NSW



## 5 MANAGE ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION



People under stress may also use alcohol to ‘unwind’ or ‘drown their sorrows’. But alcohol can increase feelings of depression and sadness, and overuse can lead to further family and social problems, farm injuries, and serious physical illness.

GPs recommend no more than four drinks a day for men, and two drinks a day for women, with two alcohol free days a week.



**I’ve noticed there are regulars who don’t come to the pub anymore and there are people here that never used to be.**



Publican

## 6 INVOLVE CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN COPING WITH TOUGH TIMES

Children are often very aware of what is happening around them. When adults withhold information, it can result in mixed messages, confusion and tension.

Parents should share their concerns with children and involve them as far as possible in decision making, provided they are age appropriate. Children can learn valuable lessons from watching how parents deal with pressure and stress. They can learn that painful feelings can be handled and that decision making involves information gathering, looking at alternatives and selecting the best option.

- Hold family meetings to discuss issues.
- Be honest and open about what’s happening.
- When a decision has been made, point out what will remain the same and what will change to the best of your knowledge.
- Outline the children’s responsibilities, i.e. to do well at school and help at home.
- Outline your responsibilities, i.e. to worry about...
- If they are accessing social media, encourage them to discuss any concerning comments they encounter, with you.

Adolescents have similar needs but are more susceptible to their own stress. Communication is even more important with them, as events may directly affect their future.



## 7

### MANAGE ANGER



Anger is an expression of hurt, frustration and a sense of being treated unfairly. It is often a rapid and instinctive response which takes time and effort to control.

#### To begin to take control of anger:

- Learn to recognise warning signs, such as muscle tension, changes in breathing, flushed face, clenched fist.
- Take a few slow, deep breaths **(In 1-2-3...Out 1-2-3).**
- Imagine a place that is calming and peaceful.

- Think before acting – consider alternative explanations for what the person did or said.
- Determine the next course of action and consider the consequences.
- Learn to negotiate – look at alternative solutions and compromises.
- Take ‘time-out’ from the situation if necessary.
- Be kind to yourself and your loved ones – you are doing the best you can given the circumstances that are often outside of your control.

## 8

### ACKNOWLEDGE LOSS AND GRIEF

Prolonged drought brings a range of losses including loss of property, stock, financial security, expectation, self-esteem and identity. It's not surprising that people facing these difficulties experience the signs of grief.

It is normal and appropriate to feel hopelessness, sadness, shock, depression, denial, helplessness, despair, guilt and anger.

#### Points to remember about grief and loss are:

- Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- It is normal and healthy to express intense and painful emotions.
- Grieving is important for healing.
- Remember that each person's experience is unique.
- Over time, sometimes years, the pain will diminish, but it is normal for these intense emotions to resurface periodically.
- Unexpressed or prolonged emotion may mean professional help is needed.
- Do things you enjoy, even if you don't really feel like doing them.



**There are times in life when we all need help and there are other times when we are blessed to be a blessing.**



Mikaela, artist, mother and friend, Bathurst NSW

## 9 LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

To cope well in stressful situations, self-care is important. If stress is allowed to accumulate, the body can be affected and health, decision making capacity and relationships may suffer. Tips for reducing stress through self-care:

- Become aware of personal stress levels.
- Take 'time out' for some enjoyable activities.
- Maintain links with family, friends and community.
- Stay healthy - eat and sleep well.
- Keep involved with sport, hobbies and other recreational activities.
- Vigorously exercise 30 minutes a day to relieve tension.
- Don't let the crisis dominate your life completely.

In times of drought, additional work on the property is required. It can be difficult to find time to keep up fitness and enjoy hobbies. Take some time to set up the property so that leisure activities are close by.

Where possible, avoid unnecessary media and weather reports. Continuous exposure to traumatic images can have a negative impact on mental wellbeing.

Occasionally stress may result in a physical illness. Be aware of any changes. If you suspect any problem, contact a GP or other health professional.

“

**Remind yourself daily.**

**This is what I do, this is**

**what I love and this is**

**what I'm proud of.**”

Brendan, Farmer, Broken Hill NSW

## 10 MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE

For some people, the stress of coping with drought may become overwhelming. Times of crisis, such as drought, result in a higher incidence of anxiety or depression.

Sometimes people think about suicide when they feel they are a burden to others or that they feel trapped in circumstances they cannot control. This is not surprising considering the prolonged nature of the stress and how little control people have over the situation. If a person's ability to engage in their usual activities diminishes, or relationships become impacted, or there is a risk of suicide or self-harm, seek help.

**Talk to someone you trust and feel close to amongst your family members or friends. See a GP, community nurse or rural health worker.**



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**Don't forget, use all the resources that are available to you. Seeking appropriate care and support is always a positive step.**

## **USEFUL RESOURCES**

**Farmer Assistance Hotline:  
Federal Farm Household Allowance.  
Free call 132 316 or visit:**

<http://www.agriculture.gov.au/ag-farm-food/drought/assistance/farm-household-allowance>

**Rural Financial Counselling Service  
Free call 1800 686 175 for your nearest service or visit**

<http://www.agriculture.gov.au/ag-farm-food/drought/assistance/rural-financial-counselling-service>

**Rural Aid Australia  
Free Call 1300 327 624**

**ATO Drought Tax Hotline  
131 142 (select option 3)**

**Ready to help 24/7.  
13 11 14**

 **Lifeline** Saving Lives  
Crisis Support. Suicide Prevention.