

Stories from Queensland Farmers: "Why we don't seek help for mental health"

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ABSTRACT

Farming as an occupation and lifestyle has many inherent stressors and farmers demonstrate suicide rates twice that of the general population (Arnautovska, McPhedran, & De Leo, 2014). There are also reports that indicate farmers may show fewer help-seeking behaviours, although research to date has failed to uncover clear reasons for this. Mental health help-seeking includes behaviours directed towards seeking help from health professionals for issues relating to mental health or distress (Rickwood & Thomas, 2012); if this occurs in a timely manner then negative consequences may be minimised. There is an urgent need to identify factors specific to farmers that make mental health help seeking difficult.

The research presented here is part of a program of research aiming to understand the barriers and facilitators of mental health help-seeking in farmers from regional communities. The present research draws on findings from semi-structured interviews with 10 farmers residing in Queensland. The interviews were analysed drawing on the techniques of Braun and Clarke (2006). Several key factors were identified as having the potential to directly or indirectly influence mental health help-seeking including, the weather (with a strong focus on drought), finances, support, health services, mental health literacy and stigma. This paper discusses these factors from the farmer perspective.

The findings from this study advance knowledge in understanding what factors may influence mental health help-seeking in Queensland farmers. The outcomes have implications for developing and providing intervention to reduce barriers, and reinforce or strengthen facilitators of mental health help-seeking in farmers.

INTRODUCTION

Farmers show an increased risk of suicide and poor mental health help-seeking. There are many unique factors that may influence farmers' mental health as well as their inclination and capacity to seek help. It has been suggested that farmers may be influenced by financial matters, economics, government (over)regulation, weather and isolation (Hossain, Eley, Coutts, & Gorman, 2008). These factors may place great demand on farmers and may be distressing for this population. There is very little research that has specifically examined the mental health help-seeking of farmers in Australia. This research will focus on addressing a gap in the literature by exploring mental health help-seeking in farmers, specifically by examining factors that might facilitate, or act as barriers to, positive mental health help-seeking intentions and behaviours.

METHOD

A total of 10 Queensland farmers (n=7 male, n=3 female), aged over 18 years (M=57, range 43-70) where farming is their occupation, were recruited. The farmers were located in a variety of regions including North Queensland to Southern Queensland. The data was collected via semi-structured interviews either face-to-face or using a telephone. The data was analysed using thematic analysis informed by the techniques shared by Braun and Clarke (2006).

FINDINGS

Weather

The weather (especially drought) was a stressor for farmers that had widespread impacts. The impacts of weather include reduction in production outcomes which in turn had impacted farmers' finances.

Finances

Financial insecurity was reported as a major stressor for farmers. Another issue stemming from financial insecurity is that this may have a role in preventing farmers seeking help due to the associated costs.

Mental health literacy

Farmers reported that knowledge regarding mental health was improving, although more could be known. Recognition and acknowledgement (application of knowledge) of distress or mental illness was reported to be poor; preventing farmers from seeking help.

Stigma

Stigma in farmers is very complex with many types reported to be present, however, the stigma is also reported to be diminishing. The farmers indicated that stigma may prevent farmers from seeking help.

Support

Support is important regarding distress as well as help-seeking. Preferred sources include partners and family with the importance of other farmers also noted. Another point to note is the importance of how support is delivered.

Health services

Many aspects of health services were reported as influential of mental health help-seeking. The farmers indicated that the important aspects of health services include: how services are marketed/packaged and delivered, the availability and access, continuity of care, having knowledgeable 'bush' practitioners, and the desire for good outcomes.

"Recognising is a start and acknowledging that there is something wrong, maybe not seriously wrong, but wrong. Acknowledging and saying 'Hey look something's not right with...', or even sitting down like we're sitting down and 'Hey, you know, I've got this problem. I don't know what it is but I need some help'. [Tuppie]

CONCLUSION

The understanding provided by exploring the barriers and facilitators of mental health help-seeking in farmers allows further research on the relative strength and direction of the relationships between factors. Overall, farmers reported that weather (especially drought), finances, mental health literacy, stigma, support and health services may all influence whether help is sought for mental health.