

Breaking the silence on grief

DANIELLE GRINDLAY

SUICIDE, accidental death and homicide will be the talk among farmers, with a Hamilton PhD student hoping to break the silence on grief.

Farming communities see more death than the rest of the country, but they're the population group that's least likely to open up and talk about it.

University of New England PhD student, Alison Kennedy, has started a conversation with farmers and their families about the impact death had on their physical and mental health.

Ms Kennedy's hope is that her research will provide the understanding needed to develop farmer-specific support networks and programs.

"There are elevated rates of death through suicide and accidental death in farming communities," she said.

"Farmers have quite a distinct way of living and working.

"The cultural aspects will necessarily affect the way they're impacted by death and that impact is likely to be quite significant because the rates are higher."

We know that farming communities see more of it, but little is known about the impact death has on colleagues, neighbours and families.

"This project is a real starting point," Ms Kennedy said.

"No one has asked these questions before."

Working out of Hamilton's National Centre for Farmer Health, Ms Kennedy will hold face-to-face, phone and email discussions with participants.

Ms Kennedy has lost young members of her extended family to suicide and accidents and understands that every person's grief is unique.

"People in general don't get the opportunity to talk about their experience of loss and grief, particularly in farming communities," Ms Kennedy said.

"Farmers don't talk about mental health and feelings; it's just not done."

Despite the tendency to avoid such discussions, Ms Kennedy said farmers wanted to take part in changing the worrying health statistics that plague their industry.

"I worked as a research assistant, looking at the impact of alcohol misuse in farming



BREAKING the silence ... PhD student, Alison Kennedy, is talking to farming families about the impacts of suicide, accidental death and homicide. Photo: JUDY DE MAN 130618jd07

communities," she said.

"That was another one of those things you don't talk about, but all the farmers I spoke to were so giving and keen."

The project received the go-ahead last week and Ms Kennedy is now recruiting people willing to share their stories.

All adults over the age of 18 and a member of a farming family are eligible to participate.

"It's people that have been exposed to a death

by external causes – suicide, accidental death and homicide as well as death by unknown causes," Ms Kennedy said.

"It could have been the death of a neighbour or a colleague that's had a real impact."

For more information, email Ms Kennedy at alison.kennedy@wdhs.net or phone 0499 752 130.

Readers seeking support or information can contact Lifeline 13 11 14.

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