

Stoicism masks high rate of health worries

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There's no point in having a healthy bottom line if you're not around to enjoy it.

That's the catch phrase of the amazing Sustainable Farm Families project currently run out of Victoria.

I say amazing because the project shows clearly the toll farming takes on the health of farm couples, but has had great success in helping those couples improve their health.

The project wants farmers to take their health as a personal and business priority so that they can manage their properties more productively for longer.

Farm couples in the three-year program attend a two-day workshop where they have a 30 minute physical assessment, develop an action plan to improve their health, and then attend one-day workshops in the following two years to check their progress.

The physical assessment is a major drawcard for participants, many of whom say a full and detailed assessment is not provided by modern medicine.

So far the project has looked at the health of broadacre farming couples and dairy couples.

Initially, more than 60 per cent of men and 70pc of women had to be referred for further treatment to GPs. While more than 90pc of both men and women reported their health as good to excellent, 70pc of men and 50pc of the women said they suffered from muscle, joint and backpain, and 30pc of the men and 20pc of the women said they suffered moderate to very severe body pain.

A third of all participants said their health interfered with their daily life; 70pc of the men were overweight, as were 21pc of broadacre women and 47pc of dairy women.

Interestingly, most participants said they did at least 30 minutes of physical activity most days, but none of the men and few of the women were assessed as technically fit - that is regularly doing activities that increase the heart rate.

One farmer is now increasing his fitness by parking his ute 50 metres from gates, running to the gate, opening it, and running back.

The project has revealed substantial farm health issues concerning mental health, alcohol consumption, body pain, poor work practices and substandard OHS practices.

Results from the second and third year of the program have shown significant improvements in participants' body mass, cholesterol, blood pressure and waist measurement.

All participants say they would recommend the program to others and many have found it to be a life-changing experience.

The Victoria Western District Health Service has won awards for its project, and has now been funded to work with farming couples in cotton, sugar and remote regions.

The Sustainable Farm Families project has important implications for everyone working in agriculture.

Agriculture is not just about making money; it also requires healthy people and healthy natural resources if it is to continue as an industry. This project has shown just how crucial it is to look after the social aspects of sustainability.

If you'd like to know more about the project, go to www.sustainablefarmfamilies.org.au or email Stuart Willder at stuart.willder@wdhs.net.

Ten tips for better health and better farms:

1. Make allowances in your work for possible sick days.
2. Take time to relax each day.
3. Take a minimum two-week holiday away from the farm each year.
4. Participate in physical exercise five times each week.
5. Have a yearly checkup with your doctor.
6. Be aware of your family health history.
7. Reduce health risks like weight, cholesterol, blood pressure and stress.
8. Address farm safety.
9. Prevention is better than cure.
10. Laugh often!

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