A new approach to supporting farmers' wellbeing

Rural farming communities face: (i) a higher risk of suicide than urban communities; (ii) a range of specific stressors (e.g. drought, bushfires); and (iii) limited access to appropriate mental health support. The National Centre for Farmer Health, and our research partners at Deakin University, the University of Melbourne, the University of South Australia, and La Trobe University, are working with community to develop new ways of supporting farmers and rural community members to provide mental health assistance to their peers.

Doing things can help you feel better!

We're particularly interested in learning how farmers and rural community members can support their peers to schedule activities into their daily lives that will help improve their mood (the formal term for this evidence-based approach is 'behavioural activation' (BA)). Compared to other treatments for depression, BA has been found to be more effective than medication, and at least as effective as talking treatments (e.g. cognitive behavioural therapy). This practical approach to solving problems is also likely to appeal to farmers.

Video explanation:
www.bit.ly/peer-BA

What's in this document?

- The work we have done so far (page 2)
- Voices from the community - what could BA in the farming community look like? (page 3) This has helped inform our draft research framework.
- Our draft framework for delivering BA in the farming community
  - Findings so far (page 4)
  - The vision for this project (page 5)
Proposed solutions

Review of research evidence

Twenty-two members of the farming community participated in focus groups to share their thoughts on an approach where trained community members (lay workers) support others to engage in BA, to improve mental health in the farming community.

The research team analysed the workshop data to find common ideas about what peer support could look like. Several practical strategies for delivering lay worker-supported BA in farming communities were proposed.

Ideas and remaining questions were presented at an online community feedback session.

The research team has drafted a model of how a farming community peer support service could be developed (see pages 4-5), using feedback from the community interviews, community workshop, existing research, and the working group.

Need for mental health support

Farmers face higher risk of suicide when compared to the general Australian population. The farming community has a strong need for mental health support.

Review of existing research describing:

- Mental health risks in farming communities
- Application of BA in other population groups

Community focus groups

Draft model
Voices from the community: focus group thoughts on what BA in the farming community could look like

Current services do not meet community need

- "Particularly in the area where I am, the services are sparse still, certainly for psychologists."
- "When [my son] died [by suicide]...the big hide started to reveal itself to me...I could go down the main street...and in every household there was people who was suffering depression or suicide behind the door."

Importance of community involvement

- "You just know how much community is, and how important it is to you...you always try and be there as you get older, because you know you've lived a lot more of your life than you've got left, so you hope to make a difference."
- "I would further highlight that farmers like to help farmers. There's a really strong community spirit."

This program needs to be community-based, informal and trusted

- "If...you've got farmers in a large group, you'll get two that will be speaking the whole time, and the rest of the room will be quiet...So I think small groups, face-to-face."
- "If you said to me, it's going to take five days to train you, [it would be impossible]. But if...I could be filling in some stuff online and reading some things...that would be a lot easier...to facilitate."
- "If there was someone that is unemployed, or can't work for whatever reason, but they want to be a [coach], but they can't afford the petrol [you should cover it]."
- "A [coach] is exactly a [coach]; somebody you go to because you respect them...and not just because they're being paid to do so."

Clear role of lay workers and strong support pathways

- "You'd have to go to those rural community leaders. Small towns...there'd be somebody in that town that...knows everybody. He'd...be able to end up with a group of people."
- "[Coaches would need a] clinical support debrief, [and a] network of peers to be able to connect to as well."
- "If you really want it to be sustainable in communities, there still needs to be that layer of someone who's employed... because [otherwise] you'll get that burnout."

Format of training

- "Particularly in the area where I am, the services are sparse still, certainly for psychologists."
- "I come from a family of a lot of farmers [and] there would be no substitute for me than someone coming to the local CFA tin shed and [bringing] sausages with them, and having a bit of a yarn...before they head off home."
- "I think you have to be really clear about the role of the peer behavioural activation person...it's not fair on that person for them to think that they're therapists."
- "You'd have to go to those rural community leaders. Small towns...there'd be somebody in that town that...knows everybody. He'd...be able to end up with a group of people."

Recognition of lay workers' contribution

- "The rural community gets a bit weary of things being outsourced; things moving and coming back...the ongoing need is left...I think that makes the situation worse."
- "The sporting clubs in rural communities are the lifeblood, so...you can tack something on your existing event or meeting."

Engagement and connecting people with the program

- "The rural community gets a bit weary of things being outsourced; things moving and coming back...the ongoing need is left...I think that makes the situation worse."
- "If...you've got farmers in a large group, you'll get two that will be speaking the whole time, and the rest of the room will be quiet...So I think small groups, face-to-face."
- "If you really want it to be sustainable in communities, there still needs to be that layer of someone who's employed... because [otherwise] you'll get that burnout."
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Program sustainability

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- "The rural community gets a bit weary of things being outsourced; things moving and coming back...the ongoing need is left...I think that makes the situation worse."
Our vision for lay worker mental health support for the farming community

1. Identify and recruit suitable lay workers in farming community
   - Trusted
   - Respected
   - Represent community values

2. Training
   - Small groups
   - Face to face
   - Extra information online
   - Clearly defined role
   - Fit within existing commitments (e.g. farming calendar, other roles)

3. Connect lay workers with community members
   - Referral (self or other)
   - Champion through existing connections/groups/leaders

4. Ongoing training and support
   - Reimbursement
   - Clearly defined support structures
   - Network of coaches

5. Community members learn new skills with support of lay worker

6. At-risk community members identified and referred to professional support

7. Improved support and improved mental health in farming community

Findings from research so far
Phase 1: June 2020 - May 2021
**Ongoing training and support of lay workers**

- What sort of organisation could support this?
- Who will provide professional support?
- How will support be structured?
- What documentation/reporting processes are required?
- How will adverse events be reported?

**Identify and recruit suitable lay workers in farming community**

- How do we determine suitability?

**Training of lay workers**

- Can existing evidence-based training be adapted to suit farming communities?
- Does the training result in suitably skilled lay workers?

**Connect lay workers with community members**

- How do you engage with the ‘hard to reach’?
- How have other models had success?

**Community members learn new skills with support of lay worker**

- How do we measure successful engagement?

**At-risk community members referred to professional support**

- How do we determine who is 'at risk'?
- How are referrals made?
- Who are referrals made to?

**Improved levels of support and improved mental health in farming community**

**Focus of current and future research**

*Phase 2: June 2021 - February 2022*  
*Phase 3: ~November 2021 onwards*

Please note that Phase 3 is outside the scope of the current funding.

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**Phase 2**

**Phase 3**