

Mental Illness and rural Communities

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The stigma surrounding mental illness in society is complex. Society responds to mental illness in a particular way: our negative image of mental illness is that it is frightening, shameful, dangerous, incurable and that people with mental illness are lazy, weak, helpless, unstable, irrational and dependent.

But the facts are an entirely different story. One in three New Zealanders will experience a mental illness in a year; those affected will be our mother, father, son, daughter, uncle, aunt, niece or nephew. Mental illness is not choosy – it can affect anyone of any age, culture, gender or income.

Neither does it distinguish between people living in urban areas or those living in rural communities.

Last year, a spate of deaths in rural Manawatu was attributed to mental health problems. The families left behind spoke of the stress of farming, social isolation, strain on mental health services and the stigma of mental illness especially in middle-aged men.

Leslie Mitchell, Dairy Farmer, of Combined Rural Support Network, in Manawatu, says stigma surrounding mental illness is worse than the illness itself. “There is a huge amount of shame around having a mental illness, and for those of us living and working in rural areas this stigma can affect whether or not we seek help to recover.”

Leslie said the Kiwi culture of ‘do it yourself’ remains alive and well and is probably more ingrained in rural New Zealanders. Poor communication can also be part of the problem and in the Manawatu cases, the families had not recognized the warning signs of their loved ones illness.

“We need to talk more to each other and not be reluctant to ask for help,” said Leslie. “We must improve and rebuild our community links and rural GPs too need to be much more aware of mental illness. Combining the right medication, if needed, with support from family, friends and colleagues can help most people.”

She said there are difficulties with rural health services, compounded by geography, long distances, smaller populations and dispersed health providers, “but even so all the money and medical services in the world risk being wasted if the community is hostile to people with experience of mental illness.”

About one in four New Zealanders (23%) live in rural areas (including small towns of less than 10,000.) The rural population has the highest proportion of children (aged 0-14 years) and older adults.

Given this profile, Leslie says the best solutions for how rural people safeguard their mental health in times of stress and pressure will need to come from rural communities themselves.

“Rural communities must begin to look at ways of maintaining good mental health and how to access information on mental illness. We need to know how to support and assist people around us, and recognise that the vast majority of people with experience of mental illness are

individuals who have tremendous strength of character, lead positive lives, hold down jobs, raise families and contribute to their communities.”

Some facts: of mental illness

Most of us will know someone who has experience

- In 1990 four of the leading causes of disability world-wide were psychiatric conditions: depression, bi-polar disorder (manic depression); schizophrenia and obsessive compulsive disorders
- Many people recover fully from mental illness, this is particularly so if they receive appropriate treatment early
- Some people require ongoing treatment to manage an illness, others will have only one episode and recover fully
- There are many kinds of treatments available to people, not all involve medication
- There are many types of mental illness and many kinds of symptoms. The most common are depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, and schizophrenia
- Overall men tend to experience mental illness at a slightly higher rate than women, however women are twice as likely as men to experience depression
- There is a public misconception that people with mental illness commit violent crimes; research shows however that the vast majority of crimes are committed by people who have no history of mental illness

Combined Rural Support Network wants rural communities to listen and recognise that mental illness is a very common problem and the shame of it is much tougher than the illness to deal with.

For this reason, the MidCentral Health, Public Health Services is part of a five-year public health project to reduce the stigma and discrimination around mental illness. A large part of the campaign is being devoted to educating the community about the issue with people who have had direct experience being at the heart of it.