



4 November 2012
Sally White

Chasing away the 'black dog'

Looking at Geoff and Steve Chase laughing with Steve's son Fergus in their wheat crop on "Waitara", Trangie, NSW, it's hard to imagine the two men ever experiencing depression. After seeking help they're now putting the "black dog" behind them. Here they tell their story to SALLY WHITE.

GEOFF'S STORY...

YIELDS look promising from this season's wheat crop on the Chase family's Trangie property "Waitara", boosted by a fall of 19 millimetres at the start of the month.

But Geoff Chase knows how poorly a crop can perform when the trace elements in a paddock are out of whack.

And he says it's no different for the brain.

Mr Chase, who fought depression for years before finally seeking help, likens chemical imbalances in the brain to problems with nutrient balances in a paddock.

From a cursory glance, everything looks fine.

But probe beneath the surface and the warning signs start to emerge.

Under stress, those signs become more and more evident – and if left untreated the crop can fail.

In his own case, complete "crop failure" was nearly the reality.

En route to a meeting during the drought, Mr Chase recalls how he lined up a tree on a sharp corner and wondered whether to turn ... or go straight ahead.

Looking back, he says, it wasn't one thing but rather a combination of factors that pushed him to the edge.

He'd only recently lost his father and was now making all the decisions on a property in the grips of a cruel drought. And little was going right.

"I was down all the time. I was angry. I couldn't concentrate and I had no confidence in the decisions I was making.

"At night you'd just lie awake, worrying, with your mind going 100 miles an hour. And I had no energy. I was so lethargic.

"It's something you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy."

Mr Chase counts himself lucky that amid the fog clouding his mind, he found the speck of rational thought he needed to make that sharp turn on the road.

Shortly after he took himself to his local GP who diagnosed him with depression.

Within weeks of starting treatment, not only did he feel better but, he says, he was back in a place where he could start to talk about what he'd been going through.

"It was only then that I could look back and say 'gee whiz, I wasn't in a good place at all'."

Mr Chase knows now those closest to him had seen the signs of depression in him long before he did.

"I think I probably had it for two to three years before I went to the GP – but it was very slow and that's why you don't realise a problem is developing."



AWGA - News Update

But he clearly remembers the day he was sitting at the kitchen table reading the paper and came across an article about the symptoms of depression – and realising he had three quarters of them.

Sitting at the same table today, chuckling at one of his three grandchildren, Mr Chase says he's in a much different place.

“But when you have depression, it's almost like you've been sucked into a black hole.

“In my book, the best thing you can do if you see a loved one in pain is not say ‘you need to go

and see a doctor’ but to recognise that and say ‘hey, I can see you're in a bad place – is there anything I can do?’.

“They need confidence and encouragement to enable them to work through the problem – not sympathy.”

What Mr Chase wants most of all is for people in rural Australia to recognise mental illnesses like depression are no different to any other illness.

“I look at it the same way I look at agronomy.

“If you're growing a crop and it doesn't have the right nutrients, especially those trace elements, it will never perform to 100 per cent.”

STEVE'S STORY...

THERE'S a golf green under construction just outside Steve Chase's house on the farm.

“It doesn't look too flash at the moment,” Steve notes, apologetically, “but we're working on it.”

Ten years ago, it's not something he would have ever imagined building. Nor something he would ever have thought he needed.

But after battling depression, Steve knows he needs to be able to switch his focus from the farm, the stud and the season to something else – even if it's just a short escape to work on his short game.

“In farming, there's very little division between the business and your personal life.

“Even if you leave the farm and go into town, you tend to talk about farming and how much rain you've had – or how much you haven't had.”

For Steve, drought wasn't the catalyst for his depression – although he says it certainly didn't help.

Rather it was a combination of factors – one of which he believes was genetic.

He'd seen his own father Geoff sink into a depressive state over a period of years and knew the warning signs.

“He was just flat and grumpy and it was like he thought everyone was against him – and he became very difficult to get along with because you couldn't ask him anything without him thinking you were criticising him,” Steve recalls.

Several years later, he started to see some of the same symptoms in himself.

“I just started to feel like it was all too hard – I'd cry, I had no energy and I certainly couldn't handle dealing with issues.

“I just remember being sad all the time and I didn't want to do stuff with people.”

Steve says the impact was not limited to his own well-being but also flowed through to the business.

“When you're depressed and you're convinced you can't do something and that it's not going to work it becomes self-fulfilling.”



AWGA - News Update

After three months Steve took himself to the doctor.

“I remember ticking the boxes against the symptoms of depression on the BeyondBlue website and thinking I’ve got to do something.

“I knew I wasn’t myself but I was also concerned I may have been overanalyzing it because I had seen dad go through depression.”

He now knows it’s the best step he could have taken – and is pleased that unlike so many, he acted fast.

Within two weeks of starting treatment – involving anti-depressants and seeing a counsellor – Steve says the change in his well-being was “huge”.

“I actually started feeling like myself again.

“I think it’s very important to be able to self-assess and recognise what you’ve done well and what you may have done badly.

“But when you’re in a depressed state it’s very hard to see anything you’ve done well.”

The experience has reiterated to him the need to raise awareness about mental health illnesses – and the fact help is available.

“It’s an illness like any other – and if asking for help can fix the problem, then really what have you got to lose?”

Steve recalls spending an hour chatting to a fellow cattle producer early one morning at Sydney Show while they were preparing cattle about his experience.

Twelve months later that producer contacted him to tell him that one conversation had encouraged him to seek help too.

“For me, if telling my story changes one person’s life, then I have definitely achieved something.”

So how has the experience changed him?

For starters, he says, he would never have built that golf green.

“I am aware now that I have to make time for things that aren’t farm related and that it’s important to have time off.

“And I’m back in a position where I can go forward in life and thinking I can do things instead of thinking that I can’t, thinking that I can face things, that I can achieve things.”

That he has.

In 2009, Steve and wife Amity were named NSW Young Farmers of the Year – and together with their two sons, Harry and Fergus, are excited about what lies ahead for the business.

Click here for a list of mental health resources and a link to The Land's Glove Box Guide to Mental Health.

<http://theland.farmonline.com.au/news/nationalrural/agribusiness-and-general/general/chasing-away-the-black-dog/2632030.aspx?storypage=0>