

Coping with the social impact of drought



The social impact of drought

Centrelink recognises the significant social impact that the present drought is having on individuals and families. A degree of stress is normal in life and most rural people are experienced in coping with droughts, losses and various other difficulties. However, a prolonged drought represents a time of major change and crisis for many in the rural community. Prolonged uncertainty also increases anxiety and stress. In this type of environment, it is normal to have strong feelings that may change from time to time. It is helpful to know what to expect and to learn constructive ways of expressing feelings and managing change. It is also important to know when to get extra help.

Normal feelings and emotions in a drought

When dealing with the pressure of a prolonged drought, everybody responds in his or her own individual way. Normal reactions include:

- feelings of being out of control and at the mercy of the weather and markets
- fear of future lack of finances to continue providing for the family and continuing the farming/stock program
- strong emotions such as frustration, anger, helplessness and disappointment for the way things have turned out
- regret for decisions made/not made
- blaming others or yourself for things that are beyond your control
- social isolation, such as wanting to withdraw from being with others
- grief and despair associated with being forced to sell herds of stock built up over many years
- sadness associated with watching livestock, wildlife and pastures suffer and/or die

- stress and pressure associated with making difficult decisions for this year's farming/livestock program, **and**
- stress associated with re-negotiating bank loans/overdraft facilities to meet financial commitments.

It is important to know that these feelings are normal. They may settle when one practical problem is solved or some rain is received. They may also resurface as you face new problems and difficult decisions, such as how much to invest in next year's crop or when to re-stock.

Positive ways of coping

It is helpful to remind yourself of the positive ways in which you personally coped through the last drought or past losses, as this will help you to feel more confident and positive about coping this time. Some positive ways of coping include:

- taking time to be with family and close friends
- trying to keep the rest of your life as normal as possible
- openly discussing the reasons why household expenditure is being cut-back
- looking after yourself—eating properly, exercising etc.
- expressing your emotions and letting family members talk about their emotions
- taking more care when driving or working around the farm and home, **and**
- remembering your sense of humour and laughing.

When to get extra assistance

There are occasions when drought-related stress can become very difficult to manage. When this happens, it may be time to get further information or assistance. Signs to look out for include:

- feeling you have no one with whom to share your emotions
- feeling 'on-edge' most of the time
- feeling numb and empty
- feeling like you 'can't go on'



- your sleep is continually disturbed
- your relationships and work seem to be suffering or are significantly changed
- you are increasing your intake of alcohol, **and**
- you are experiencing health problems.

In children, these signs can also manifest themselves in additional ways, such as:

- withdrawal from group activity
- aggressive behaviour, **and**
- difficulties at school.

Remember, seeking assistance is a positive step and a sign of strength.

How can a Centrelink Social Worker help?

Centrelink Social Workers provide a confidential, professional and free service. You can receive assistance from a Centrelink Social Worker either over the phone or you can have an interview in a private office in a Centrelink Customer Service Centre. A Centrelink Social Worker will listen to you, give you support and help you work through your options while at all times respecting the privacy of your personal and family information. Centrelink Social Workers can assist you by:

- offering short-term counselling and support about any personal or family concerns
- giving you information about, or referring you to, other services in the community such as health, legal services, support groups, emergency financial assistance and counselling
- providing information about drought assistance payments and other payments and services available from Centrelink, **and**
- determining if you are eligible for payment under special circumstances, such as when a young person has problems remaining at home, or where a person is fleeing a situation of domestic violence.

Contacting a Centrelink Social Worker

You can arrange an appointment (over the phone or face-to-face) with a Centrelink Social Worker by calling the Drought Assistance line on **13 2316**. To provide you with prompt assistance, please let the operator know:

- the area you live in
- that you are calling about a drought-related enquiry, **and**
- that you would like to speak to a Social Worker.

If the over the phone service does not meet your needs or you cannot attend a Centrelink Customer Service Centre, a Social Worker may be able to arrange a service to visit you at a more convenient location.

Additional help

To access Lifeline's 24 hour counselling service, call **13 1114**.

How to find out more

Drought Assistance **13 2316**

In languages other than English **13 1202**

Customer Relations **Freecall™ 1800 050 004**
(for complaints, compliments and suggestions)

Australian Government Services Fraud Tip-off Line **13 1524**

TTY* payment enquiries **Freecall™ 1800 810 586**

*TTY is only for people who are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment. A TTY phone is required to use this service.

To make an appointment **13 1021**

Go to our website at www.centrelink.gov.au

Important: Calls to '13' numbers from a standard telephone service can be made from anywhere within Australia for not more than the cost of a local call (call charges may vary depending upon the telephone service provider). Calls to '1800' numbers are free of charge. Calls from public and mobile telephones may be charged at a higher rate.