



Sheep farmer George Graham is speaking out about his personal mental health struggles to encourage more farmers to talk. © Philip Doyle

‘There is light at the end of the tunnel’

Sheep shearer and farmer George Graham is encouraging people to take the first step and get mental health support – he shares his experience of the struggles he faced, writes Sarah McIntosh

Last week at the National Ploughing Championships, there was a constant hum of noise at the *Irish Farmers Journal* stand as we chatted to readers. Yet, the noise level dropped and people sat up and listened when George Graham spoke on stage about his struggles with mental health in recent years, as part of our Break the Cycle campaign.

Growing up on a small farm in Wexford, George was always involved in farming and is a third-generation sheep shearer; he has represented Ireland 11 times at The Golden Shears, the world shearing championships.

Around 12 years ago, after months of not eating properly, not being able to sleep and having a restless mind, George realised there was something wrong. “What I remember is not being in good order for quite a long time,” he says. “But being a typical man, I wasn’t talking about it to anyone as I didn’t know what was wrong with me. That kept going on, not eating properly, then not sleeping properly.”

George developed a racing mind that he couldn’t control.

“That racing mind is a horrible, terrible thing, I couldn’t stop it. I would go to bed early at night and the only thing in my head, that I couldn’t stop happening, was the thought I want to end my own life,” he says.

PLANNING

No matter what he did, George couldn’t stop that thought from being there. He used to go on his phone at the dinner table and pretend someone was ringing him because he couldn’t bear sitting at the table as he had no appetite.

“I put in hours and days at the back of my own house sitting in my jeep, planning on how and where I was going to end my own life,” he says.

The darkest point for George came when he hit the point of nearly following through on his thoughts. “I was there and for whatever good reason, whoever was looking after me, that just didn’t happen,” he says.

However, it wasn’t like switching on a light and these thoughts and actions stopped. George travelled to the north of Norway to shear sheep – trying to run away from his problems. However, no matter how far he travelled, they followed him.

Farm Safety

Awareness Head to Toe is a voluntary committee formed to promote mental health, general health and farm safety awareness throughout the rural community. It is a not-for-profit organisation and funds donated will only be used in hosting events, participating providing support to any person who needs to talk.

For more information, visit: awarenesheadtoetoe.com

Below: John Murphy, Tirlán, George Graham, sheep farmer, Susan Bran-nick, Aware and Ciara Leahy, *Irish Country Living*, during the Break the Cycle panel discussion at the Ploughing



got the help he needed. Although he was slow to tell his family and friends about what he was going through, he eventually did.

George has been asked many times where he got his glimmer of hope, or where it changed for him. Although it was a combination of many things, if he was to put his finger on one point, it was his GP.

“I remember he said to me, ‘I have known you for a long time, if anything happened, it would break my heart’,” says George. “You can feel that somebody wants you, somebody appreciates you and somebody cares for you. That doesn’t mean that their own family and your friends are not but it’s in your mind.”

In George’s opinion, it is very difficult for anybody to understand mental health challenges if they haven’t been through it themselves. “One way of describing it is like going through a long, dark, twisty, narrow, steep tunnel. It can be very steep in places and can get very narrow. It’s very difficult to get through that tunnel on your own.

“There are times you will get tired and you need someone’s shoulder to put your hand on. But if you can keep going, there is a light at the end, and that light will get brighter and brighter,” he says.

He encourages people to not try and fight it on their own.

“Don’t be afraid to talk to somebody. No matter who it is, there’s going to be somebody who will listen to you, whoever it may be, pick up that phone and talk to somebody.”

AWARENESS HEAD TO TOE

George wanted to help other people so he started training in mental health supports and is now chairman of the voluntary group ‘Awareness Head to Toe’ which is aimed at promoting mental health, general health and farm safety awareness throughout the rural community.

The hardest step you will ever do, according to George, is that first step of speaking to a professional whether that be a psychologist, psychotherapist, doctor or counsellor.

George has gone through training on mental health and now helps others by giving talks across different community groups and offering help and support. Everything he does is confidential and he prefers meeting people face-to-face. **CL**

Eventually, he took what he describes as his first step in Norway while shearing for a farmer whose wife was a psychiatric nurse. George asked her to help him translate in English with a farmer down the road. “She said she was only a phone call away if I ever needed her and that was a great comfort,” he says. “At the time I had two weeks of work left; I decided if I got out of Norway in one piece, I would look for help when I got home to Ireland.”

George went to see a family GP and

Farmers can start sowing the seeds of resilience

Heading into the winter, it’s vital farmers develop extra resilience to support their wellbeing and cope with the day-to-day challenges, writes Deirdre Verney

Farms are places of work, but more often than not, they don’t have the backup of a corporate workplace where there are various types of support available to employees and colleagues.

While much research shows a high satisfaction and quality of life with countryside living, it’s also acknowledged that farmers face unique stressors in terms of the long hours of often solitary work, weather worries, financial pressures, the strain of succession, and the bureaucratic form-filling nature of farming policies in modern Ireland.

Nine out of 10 farmers (91%) say their stress levels have increased in the last year, according to new research undertaken by FRS Farm Services – 87% of the 400+ farmers questioned say they are concerned about their wellbeing.

As autumn draws in and winter approaches, many people attempt to reset their lives in a bid to improve their physical and mental wellbeing over the dark months. And farmers and farm families should be no different, especially given the need for extra resilience to deal with the most recent challenges.

Resilience is not just about an ability to bounce back; it is also about moving forward, according to Finola Colgan, the national lead on farming and mental health and development officer with Mental Health Ireland, who is engaged in several national and international projects that aim to support the mental health and wellbeing of the farming community.

“I think resilience is more about moving forward and having the ability to move forward rather than finding ourselves stuck in gear,” she says.

For her, developing resilience begins with your physical wellbeing, and sleep, diet and exercise play a huge part in that. A simple thing like taking time to have a proper breakfast every morning cannot be underestimated.

“If you don’t substantiate your physical health that’s going to impact your personal wellbeing. Often, when people are tired or exhausted or drained and even hungry, it can impact their sense of wellbeing and how



Finola Colgan, the national lead on farming and mental health and development officer with Mental Health Ireland covering the Midlands, Meath and Louth pictured with Francis Bligh, health and safety specialist

they are thinking and how they are coping,” says Finola, who has worked with Teagasc and the IFA on this issue.

“When you are tired or exhausted, it is going to impact on your mental health; maybe your concentration or you may begin to ruminate; it may seem a bit extreme to say that, but you are on your own and your thoughts might wander.”

RECOGNISING SIGNS OF STRESS

An important approach to managing stress is recognising the signs or becoming aware of them, Finola, who didn’t grow up on a farm but is married to a farmer in Kilbeggan, Co Westmeath, adds. Then it is about coming up with ways to minimise it.

“The key to all of that is being aware, to know that there is nothing wrong with feeling down or exhausted; maybe you have had two or three hard days. The important thing is to respond to that – ensure you get a good night’s sleep or make time for yourself.”

“Small things can make such a difference,” Finola says, recommending that with the winter time forcing farmers to finish earlier, there is an opportunity to make more time for family meals, conversations, or to get involved in the community.

“So, we are talking about languishing or feeling stuck in a rut on the one hand; on the other hand, you’ll have those days that you are flourishing – the crops are going well, the weather is good, and you’re able to harvest. What’s important then to know is the days you languish (struggle) to seek out the days that you are flourishing.”

She says flourishing isn’t all ‘happy, happy’, but it is a time that things are going to plan, you’re focused, and you are content. Maybe someone thanked

“The important thing is to respond to that – ensure you get a good night’s sleep or make time for yourself”

you for something or did something nice for you. “I think it is important for farmers and for farm families just to recognise when someone is languishing – to be able to move in there and say, ‘how are things?’, ask the question, have the conversation, is there something on your mind, is there something worrying you,” she says. She adds that if the situation is more serious to seek professional and medical help or contact a helpline like Samaritans, Aware or Pieta.

FIVE WAYS TO WELLBEING

In a leaflet developed with Teagasc, Mental Health Ireland promotes the idea of ‘five ways to wellbeing’ as part of your routine for self-care. Connect is the number one – focusing on the need for social interaction or involvement in the community.

“Farming can be 24/7, but it’s about recognising that I need time off and making sure to take it,” says Finola, adding that getting involved in clubs like the GAA, a drama group, Men’s Sheds or agri-discussion groups can be hugely beneficial.

Be active, the second of the five ways, underlines the need for regular off-farm physical activity and the positive results that has on your mental health and overall health.

“It’s important to separate the physicality of being a farmer working hard physically, to making time for physical exercise. It could be joining a hiking club, a walking group or a cycling club,” says Finola, who adds that local ETBs and Sports Partnerships are great resources.

Take notice: the third pillar is really about recognising that farming is a demanding way of life, both physically and mentally. “Self-care and being self-compassionate are so important,” she points out, advising farmers not to be hard on themselves and to know they are not the only people struggling.

Keep learning is the fourth recommendation, and this could involve learning about new farm methods at a farm walk, keeping up on local news, or learning something new about a subject that interests you.

‘Give’ is the final of the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ and this recommendation recognises that the giving of your time, words or deeds can help you feel good about yourself. **CL**