

Working Together to Overcome Challenges of Rural Practice in Mental Health

Jason is a 42 year old man who has been forced to take work off his wheat farm after drought and a series of poor seasons. He still owns his property, but has been unable to plant a new crop due to the debts accumulated in the last few years. Twelve months ago, he started working as a fly-in fly-out labourer for a mining company in Western Australia. He works three weeks on, two weeks off. During his time off, he returns to his farm to spend time with his wife, Wendy and their three children, Sam (11), Matt (9) and Ruby (6).

The farm is located in a remote part of South Australia. The nearest town has a population of 3,000 and there are two GPs at the local medical clinic and a small rural hospital. The nearest regional centre is 70km away. Services at this centre are much better, but still limited. There is a psychiatrist, but she is often booked out months in advance making access to psychiatric care unpredictable.

Jason, Wendy and their kids have generally enjoyed good health and apart from Jason's work, they rarely need to travel beyond their nearest town. The town has a post-office, a small supermarket and a couple of pubs. Their children attend the local primary school and there is a small secondary school for when the time comes. A few teenagers are sent away to boarding school, but this has become less common as more farmers face financial hardship.

Jason admits to Wendy that he finds the separation from his family and friends necessitated by his work "*stressful*" as he feels he is abandoning them. He also says that he "*feels like an outsider*" at his work and doesn't fit into the dominantly macho culture.

He doesn't have a history of drug taking and cannot use illicit drugs at work because he is subject to random testing and dismissal. However Wendy has noticed that he is drinking more than usual at home and appears to have lost all interest in getting his farm producing again. He had originally sought work off-farm as a temporary measure, to help them "*get back on their feet*," repaying some of the mounting debt, but he has rarely mentioned his "*grand plan*" lately and seems to have lost all hope for the farm's future.

**Mental Health
Professionals' Network**

Emirates House
Level 8
257 Collins Street
Melbourne
VIC 3000

postal
PO Box 203
Flinders Lane
VIC 8009

email
contactus@mhpN.org.au

telephone
1800 209 031

www.mhpN.org.au

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[Continued over page >>](#)

Wendy often calls him during his "on" weeks and tells him about the latest crisis at home, which usually involves the kids, but he tells her that "*he is powerless to help when so far away*," and more recently has said he "*doesn't know why she bothers telling him*." He seems desperately lonely at work and when Wendy needs to pay for tradies to repair things that he could fix if he was there, he says he feels "*helpless and hopeless and can't see an end in sight*."

Wendy has noticed that when Jason is on his two weeks off, he doesn't seem interested in catching up with his mates. He had previously played cricket with the local team of "*over 35s*," but his work schedule made this impossible.

A friend of Wendy and Jason's, Bill, a fellow farmer in the district died by suicide six months ago. Wendy is unsure of the impact this has had on Jason, because whenever she tries to talk to him about Bill or his family, he changes the subject or tells her that he needs to check on something and leaves the room.

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In the last few months, Jason has told Wendy that he thinks his neighbours are stealing fencing supplies and using his machinery. Wendy has told him repeatedly that this is not the case, but he seems to doubt Wendy and more recently has started treating her with mistrust. He had said to Wendy that he "*knows the neighbours are taking things because he has heard them behind the sheds when he is there alone, but they have always taken off or hidden by the time he gets there to confront them*."

Jason has made a report to the local police and suggested that they "*keep an eye on Wendy*" as well. The local Sergeant told Jason that there is no evidence to act on and that when he spoke to their nearest neighbours about the possibility of them using the machinery without Jason's knowledge they seemed genuinely offended.

Jason requires periodic medical assessments as part of his employment contract. The family have seen the same GP for years. He is well known in the district and well regarded. Wendy loves the opportunity to go into town and will often pop into the medical clinic to say hello to the receptionist, who she knows well and then takes the opportunity to do some shopping. On this occasion, Wendy decides to see the GP with Jason. She feels embarrassed about Jason's recent accusations against the neighbours and wants to explain that he has been under a lot of strain and didn't mean anything by the accusations. When they enter the room, she starts by saying, "*Well I guess you have heard about the mix-up with the farm machinery and equipment going missing*." Jason interrupts and says, "*What mix-up? There is no mix-up. You are all as mad as each other. Someone has been stealing my fencing supplies, and for all I know, you are in on it too.*" Wendy looks terribly embarrassed and leaves the room. She can't imagine what the Doctor must think, let alone what will happen when word gets out that her husband is losing his mind.