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MEDIA RELEASE

DROUGHT-RELATED STRESS HITS YOUNG FARMERS HARDEST

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FARMERS who are under 35 years of age, both live and work on a farm, are experiencing greater financial hardship, and are in outer regional, remote or very remote NSW, more frequently report personal drought-related stress (PDS), according to research published by the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

The researchers, led by Ms Emma Austin, from the Centre for Water, Climate and Land at the University of Newcastle, wrote that drought-related stress “may contribute to general psychological distress, but is distinguishable from it”.

“This stress included worry about the impacts of drought on themselves and on their families and communities, and was influenced by socio-demographic and community factors that were different from the factors that influenced the incidence of general psychological distress.”

Analysing data from the NHMRC-funded Australian Rural Mental Health Study (ARMHS), a longitudinal cohort study run from 2007 to 2013, the researchers sought to measure PDS, community drought-related stress (CDS) and general psychological stress (using the K10 score).

They found that the incidence of PDS was lower following mild wet periods and that of psychological distress higher. The incidence of CDS was significantly increased by moderate dry and moderate wet weather, and reduced by mild wet weather.

“Farmers [aged 18–34 years] reported higher PDS and CDS scores than older respondents,” Austin and colleagues wrote.

“The incidence of psychological distress was also significantly lower for participants aged 55 or more. The incidence of PDS was lower among retired than employed participants, and both PDS and psychological distress were lower among ‘prosperous’ or ‘very comfortable’ than for less financially secure respondents.”

The authors suggested that general practitioners were ideally placed to provide more support.

“The slow onset of the impact of drought contrasts with the immediate effects of extremes such as cyclones and floods. Investigation of modulators of drought-related stress could inform community-based strategies for alleviating stress, promote drought preparedness, and provide guidance for community and government agencies providing support for people in rural areas,” they wrote.

“General practitioners are in a unique position to contribute to programs and initiatives for relieving stress related to climate adversity and for supporting farmers experiencing stress. Educating general practitioners about drought and stress in farming communities, as well as about practical approaches to supporting farmer health and safety, is critical.

“Programs of support for drought-affected communities should incorporate an understanding of the relationship between drought and mental health and take factors into account that influence personal and community drought-related stress,” they concluded.

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CONTACTS: Ms Emma Austin
Centre for Water, Climate and Land
University of Newcastle
Email: emma.austin@newcastle.edu.au
Ph: 0424 752 755