

Emerging Minds

National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health

The big dry: the impact of drought on children and families

Sometimes the full personal impact of drought is not obvious because it happens more slowly than other types of disasters like fires, floods, and earthquakes. However, drought is insidious and devastating for the communities it effects. It has a massive impact on families, businesses, the surrounding environment, and can affect even the most resilient of individuals and communities.

The term 'drought' is widely used, but most commonly refers to when there is continuous below-average rainfall in an area. It can last for months or years, and in drought-prone places, re-occur regularly. Regional and rural communities are especially vulnerable to drought. The dominance of agricultural business in these communities means when drought occurs, people's finances, businesses, livestock, homes, and relationships can all suffer. It places large amounts of stress on individuals and families and can affect all aspects of community life; financial hardship, relationships, access to goods and services, community cohesion, and resilience are all affected. These things also have 'flow-on' effects to other areas of country life. When a farm is threatened, it is not just a business that could possibly be lost. The farm can represent a home (sometimes for generations), traditions and lifestyle, heritage to pass on to children, and something that defines who people are. Drought is a whole-family and whole-community issue.

People in regional and rural communities are known for being resilient, hardy, and down-to-earth. However, the difficulty of drought means that over time, it can wear

down even the toughest of individuals. The impact on families and communities grows and compounds, with each issue building on top of the last. For some whose focus is on 'getting through', it is only when the drought breaks that personal difficulties emerge. The length and severity of the drought experience will affect how people react, but the cumulative stress of ongoing hardship can be hard to manage.



What happens during drought?

There are impacts on community, environment, and country life.

Drought is often measured and/or talked about as being an agricultural and/or meteorological issue (meaning a lack of rain). However, it is also a social issue, affecting individuals, families, businesses, and community spirit. Drought can threaten tourism in an area, a community's sense of resilience, and children's certainties about their future. It can help some communities grow closer as they lean on each other, or the stress can lead individuals and families to isolate themselves.

There are impacts on family life.

Children may want to protect their parents and family. Children don't like to see their parents struggle and can

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sense tension in the family, even if it isn't spoken about openly. They may try to be on their best behaviour, take on extra responsibilities that are too much for them, or take on 'adult' roles in the household to try and ease their parent's worries. They may also avoid telling their parents if they are struggling emotionally or physically so as not to add further burden.

Parents and families want to protect their children.

Parents want to protect their children from the worry and stress of ongoing hardship. Sometimes, parents also find it hard to talk about what is happening, and so children may not know exactly what is going on. Children can pick up tension even if it is not spoken about. They know the family is struggling but without facts, they don't have context for how significant the problem is, and without conversation, they are left to deal with their feelings and worries on their own.

Some relationships grow stronger and other relationships suffer. There can be great variability in the impact of drought on relationships. Families may be the first line of defence against the hardship of drought, but can also be the site that takes the force of the blow¹. Despite this, numerous Australian reports of stronger friendships, marriages, and ties to community have emerged from families in drought, showing that it is also a time when friends, families, and communities cope as a collective².

There is impact on mental health.

As drought continues, there is corresponding impact on mental health. Research has found that while farmers and farm workers suffer the greatest mental health risk when experiencing drought, all community members are impacted, including children³. The emotional impact affects connections between people, financial stability, and identity. As the economic uncertainty caused by drought continues, this can have negative long-term effects for mental health. Reduced access to health services can increase this burden for some people.

You feel worn out. Everyone experiences stress sometimes, but the ongoing nature of drought can lead

to burnout (where you feel exhausted, frustrated or resentful, and/or like change is out of your control) and compassion fatigue (where you can't help or support others because you are tired, have too much to do, and/or are struggling yourself). Continuing high levels of stress can also cause physical health problems, like headaches, difficulty sleeping or eating, and/or aches and pains, which can also exacerbate existing health issues.

Limited access to and engagement with mental health services means individual health suffers. Mental health services in rural communities tend to have less resources than services in a larger city. This can mean services are not always able to provide adequate help and support for everyone who needs it. Research has also shown that the further away a mental health care service is, the less likely someone is to use it⁴. There are other issues that come with living in a small or rural community; you may feel like your confidentiality is not assured or there is stigma around seeking mental health care⁵. Men are also less likely to seek help than women, with only 1 in 4 men who experience anxiety or depression accessing treatment⁶.

What can I do to support the families and children in my community?

The hardship of drought can wear on even the toughest individuals. Drought is a whole-family and whole-community issue and though everyone experiences it, each person will experience it uniquely and differently to others.

Encourage parents and carers to look after themselves, and recognise their own needs.

This is not an indulgence, but a priority. Children are impacted by parental mental health.

Research has shown that some of the common things impacting children's worries during drought include their parents working more, worrying more, being angrier, a

1 Caruana, C. (2010). Picking up the pieces: Family functioning in the aftermath of natural disaster. *Family Matters*, 84, 79-88.

2 Edwards, B., Gray, M., & Hunter, B. (2008). Social and economic impacts of drought on farm families and rural communities: Submission to the Drought Policy Review Expert Social Panel. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

3 Edwards, B., Gray, M., & Hunter, B. (2015). The Impact of Drought on Mental Health in Rural and Regional Australia. *Soc Indic Res*, 121, 177-194.

4 Fraser, C., Judd, F., Jackson, H., Murray, G., Humphreys, J., & Hodgins, G. (2002). Does one size really fit all? Why the mental health of rural Australians requires further research. *Australian Journal Of Rural Health*, 10(6), 288-295. doi: 10.1046/j.1440-1584.2002.00463.x

5 <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/about-us/research-projects/research-projects/depression-in-farmers-and-farming-families>

6 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2008). National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results, 2007. Cat. no. (4326.0). Canberra: ABS.

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scarcity of resources, and more talk about finances⁷.

These are natural responses to drought stress, but we can underestimate just how much children are affected by that same stress.

Encourage parents and families to take some time off if possible. While the stress of drought can be unavoidable, it is important to be aware of how this is impacting a family. It is often easier to talk about drought in terms of concrete outcomes; you need things like rain, feed, business, and income. However, parental wellbeing and that of their children also needs attention. It may be difficult but assisting parents to find some creative or relaxing time away from drought related activities can help their state of mind and wellbeing.

Encouraging parents to link with their local GP, health and social services or to access on-line resources may assist them in gaining some needed support. For example: online mental health support and wellbeing apps can also be accessed anytime at <https://headtohealth.gov.au/search-resources> or call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

Encourage parents to picture things through their children's eyes.

Children are shaped by their interactions with family, friends, and community. Their ability to navigate tough times is directly impacted by the reactions of trusted family members and the support of their community. Children's reactions and behaviours can also make more sense when we imagine what they might be experiencing. Asking children directly how they feel or what they may be worried about helps them to feel heard and supported and doesn't leave them to manage their own feelings.

Some children will be affected more than others.

Children are more likely to need additional support if they had existing vulnerabilities or difficulties at home or school before the drought started; if they have recently experienced big changes or challenges like a new school or moving house; if they have a physical, mental, or developmental disability; or if parents and other adults who care for them are having difficulty with their own mental health and wellbeing.

⁷ Dean, J. & Stain, H.J. (2007). The Impact of Drought on the Emotional Well-Being of Children and Adolescents in Rural and Remote New South Wales. National Rural Health Association, 23(4), 356-364.

Maintain open conversations with children.

Encourage parents and carers to talk to and check in with their children about what is happening, how they are feeling and what they are thinking. It is valuable for parents to initiate conversations regularly and let children know that they (the parents) are available at any time to speak and hear their concerns. Children often get the message they should be 'moving on' or not worrying because various impacts of drought (like financial hardship or business problems) are only for adults to worry about. This can make them feel isolated if they are 'stressing out' or worrying and they think they can't talk about it. It can be helpful for families to set up a regular time each week to talk. This gives children the security of knowing they can speak to parents about how they are, and if they don't want to talk about something one week, they can talk about their worries next time when they are feeling ready.

In open conversations is important to encourage parents to:

- Accept all the child's answers about how they are feeling.
- Avoid responses such as "you are too old to be doing this", "stop being silly", or to "get over it". Telling children to "man up" or that "big girls don't cry" isn't helpful, because it tells them that it is not ok to feel sad or have difficulties with what is happening.
- Answer the child's questions honestly, with facts. Older children may need more details than younger children. Reassure the child that everything is being done to manage the situation. It is OK for parents to admit that they don't have all the answers.
- Maintain a calm and non-threatening environment at home, and give their child extra time, attention, and support. Children really benefit from one-on-one time with adults, like doing homework with Mum, or doing gardening or cooking with an aunt or uncle.

Encourage parents to be on the lookout for changes in mood and behaviour.

In times of stress, children respond in different ways. They can withdraw, stop paying attention, cry or throw tantrums, or find it hard to learn at school. They may act

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out, be anxious, be angry at small things, or be more tense than usual. They can also start showing behaviours typical of a much younger or older child. For example, a seven-year-old may suddenly become afraid of the dark, or an eleven-year-old may rebel against authority or skip school. While children have natural resilience, a minority of children will find the impacts of drought more difficult to deal with than others.

It is helpful for children to have boundaries maintained gently but firmly, especially in time of stress. Sometimes children act out when they are feeling unsure, unseen or lonely, and need care and attention. For example, you can express that it is fine to be angry about how the drought has affected your life, but it is not OK to trash your room. Although keeping boundaries and your cool may be difficult when you are also under stress, maintaining these boundaries will assist in providing a sense of safety for children.

If parents express concerns about their child, they may benefit from being encouraged to:

- Share with their children what helps them to deal with feelings of sadness, anxiety, or anger.
- Have patience as they continue an open conversation with their children.
- Maintain a relationship with their child's day care or school. Sometimes, children will feel more comfortable expressing how they feel to teachers or school friends, or they will act out at school instead of home. A child's teacher can help monitor their wellbeing and behaviours over time and communicate any changes to parents.

Remember, if children seem to be really struggling or are having increasing difficulties over time, link the parent to additional support services such as a GP, and/or local health and social services.

Encourage parents and children to participate in an active and supportive social network.

Some of the toughest effects of drought are the feelings of isolation, of not wanting to burden others who are also experiencing hardship, and the reduction in community events and spirit. For this reason, children and parents need friends and family time more than ever. Getting together with others for playdates, having a potluck dinner or attending community events provides an

opportunity for parents and children to speak to others who are having similar experiences. Research shows that building positive feelings about their community is key to adolescent's feelings of resilience during drought⁸.

Encourage parents to involve children with tasks and decision making.

It can be hard for children to watch their parents be troubled when they can't 'take away' the problem. It can leave them feeling powerless. Giving children tasks that are theirs to do can encourage and empower them, help them feel they are contributing to the family, and teach them how to manage hardship. Children are good at communicating with others about what they have done in the past, and enjoy sharing their experiences to help others, which makes them a motivating influence in the community. Involving children in decision making encourages their strengths, and highlights what they are good at. It provides an opportunity to praise them on their successes and encourage them to work on things autonomously.

Being involved in decision making is important to build children's sense of self. Drought can threaten personal identity because as it impacts the community, it also can compromise people's ideas of themselves as farmers or country people, especially if they move towns or change businesses. Uncertainty about the future can also be a concern for children if they question who they will become or what they will do if the family's farm or business is not able to function. Open discussion with children about these concerns can help them to feel calmer.

Encourage parents to focus on a positive future for their family, their children and their community.

It is important to keep reminding families and children that though things are very tough, with time, they will improve. Children will also need to tell their stories and talk about their experiences, but they need to be supported and guided as they also envision their future and help to make that vision positive and hopeful.

⁸ Dean, J.G. & Stain, H.J. (2010). Mental health impact for adolescents living with prolonged drought. *Aust J. Rural Health*, 18, 32-37.

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