

HAVING A *yarn...*

Opportunities to gain the skills needed to start conversations on mental wellbeing are proving powerful in veterinary workplaces.

By Caitlin Sykes

In the past, during her work as a busy dairy veterinarian, Emma Franklin would sometimes sense a farmer was struggling with their mental health. She found it difficult to reach out to help – but these days she’s found the words.

“There’s that old adage, ‘first do no harm’, and previously I wouldn’t have been able to ask someone if they were okay because I’d be afraid of saying the wrong thing,” says Emma. “I didn’t want to offend them or make things worse – but then I’d lie awake at night worrying about them.

“Now I have the competence to recognise when someone isn’t okay, and the confidence to start a conversation with them.”


That competence and confidence has come from Emma’s involvement with GoodYarn, a programme for workplaces that gets people talking about mental wellbeing. The programme was established in 2014 and is now overseen by the Good Programmes Trust, which trains facilitators in businesses to deliver

three-hour-long GoodYarn workshops to their peers. The workshops have three aims for those who attend: to increase their awareness of the signs and symptoms of common mental illnesses; to build their confidence in starting conversations where they’re concerned; and to improve their knowledge of where and how to get help.

An evaluation of GoodYarn, published in the *Journal of Public Mental Health* in 2017 showed that the programme had delivered. It found that:

- » 94% of the workshop participants noticed it had increased their awareness of mental health and wellbeing issues
- » 87% felt very or extremely confident in starting a conversation with someone whose mental health they were concerned about
- » 93% felt very or extremely aware of mental health support services.

Dana Carver, Chair of the Good Programmes Trust, has been training facilitators for the programme



since its inception. She says the peer-to-peer nature of the programme's delivery is unique and has wider benefits. "People tell us they feel really empowered because when the person reaching out to you is a colleague it makes you feel you can reach out too. And what we're seeing as a result is that many more people are reaching out. People aren't ashamed to ask for help; they're more open to saying, 'Hey, can I have a chat?'"

"Facilitators are also saying – and this is almost a by-product of the programme – that it's a really neat way for them to do something different in their jobs. It's an opportunity to learn and help others and it makes their jobs more engaging."

GoodYarn was initially developed to get farmers talking about mental health issues, but it's since been developed for use beyond rural settings and in a wider range of workplaces. Dana notes that the NZVA was one of the first two professional organisations (alongside the Pharmacy Guild of New Zealand) to be licensed to deliver GoodYarn, and the programme's rural roots make it a good fit for use in veterinary practice.

"Many veterinarians work with people in rural contexts and understand the pressures of farming, so it's helpful for them to have tools they can use to reach out to farmers who need support. And the programme has multiple benefits, because a client's stress often flows on to everyone who works with them, and GoodYarn can also help veterinarians look after themselves and their colleagues."

Emma Franklin
undertook
a GoodYarn
workshop
in 2017



Pirongia-based veterinarian and NZVA Wellbeing Advocate Charlotte (Lotte) Cantley was among the first cohort of NZVA staff to participate in a GoodYarn workshop, four years ago. The experience impressed her so much that, soon afterwards, she signed up to the two-day training course to become a facilitator.

Lotte notes that working as part of a veterinary team can be highly stressful owing to myriad factors – everything from long hours to moral and ethical dilemmas, challenging clients and toxic workplace relationships – that can have negative impacts on mental health. Veterinarians can also develop long and close relationships with clients, especially farmers, who in turn face their own challenges – whether they be extreme weather events, isolation or financial pressures – that can lead to poor mental wellbeing.

“Mental health is often a taboo topic,” she says. “The GoodYarn programme helps normalise talking about mental health, with the workshops providing participants with tools to recognise signs of stress and other common mental health problems, as well as information on where to find support.”

Lotte has worked alongside a non-veterinarian to co-facilitate workshops in a number of practices and, importantly, across entire veterinary teams.

“A veterinarian isn’t an individual in a workplace; they’re working as part of a team – and if anyone in a team is struggling, everyone is affected,” she says. “A real strength of the programme is that it’s not one person doing this in a clinic; it’s the whole clinic doing it together, so you’re speaking the same language and everyone’s looking out for each other. It’s a tool that promotes healthy teams.”

In turn, she says, that makes it a helpful tool in the fight against chronic veterinary staff shortages.

“People will leave if they’re burnt out, stressed and depressed, and this creates a domino effect because when someone leaves it means more work for others, who also become stressed and burnt out. So investing in your people to keep them mentally healthy has all kinds of paybacks: they become more productive, have better relationships with clients and each other, and ultimately will stay in workplaces for longer.”

Emma was another early adopter of the programme. After undertaking a GoodYarn workshop in 2017, she championed its rollout in her own workplace, Anexa Veterinary Services.

A large mixed-practice veterinary club with 12 clinics in Waikato and the Hauraki Plains, Anexa Veterinary Services committed to the programme in 2018 – initially by supporting Emma and three others to train as GoodYarn facilitators. The business

Above left, centre and top right: Emma and Anexa’s Human Resources Manager Liana Kaye. Above right: Anexa’s latest GoodYarn workshop, in December 2022, included veterinarians, veterinary nurses and technicians, and clinic support staff



initially put its 120 staff through the training in a series of 10 workshops over two and a half years, and continues to run workshops periodically, co-facilitated by Emma and Anexa's Human Resources Manager, Liana Kaye, to ensure new staff are engaged in the programme.

To minimise workplace disruption and maximise engagement, Emma says, participants in each workshop are drawn from a range of roles and locations across the business. Like Lotte, she says co-facilitation by a veterinarian and a non-veterinarian has been key to engaging staff.

In the case of Anexa Veterinary Services, the benefits have been sustained. At the 2022 NZVA conference Emma presented a paper called *GoodYarn in practice – talking the talk and walking the walk*. The paper included an outline of the findings of a follow-up survey of Anexa Veterinary Services staff a year after the last workshop and three and a half years after the first.

The survey found that the vast majority of the respondents had applied the skills they'd learned in both recognising the signs of mental distress or illness and initiating conversations with people they were concerned about. Almost half of the respondents reported using their skills with people in more than one relationship category, such as

clients, colleagues and family. "As one example, I was concerned about a farmer client so I said, 'I'm worried about you. What can we do to help? Can I connect you with the Rural Support Trust?' They agreed and were able to get some support. And when I checked in with the farmer and his wife, they said it had made a difference," recalls Emma.

"I've been able to put the tools I've learned into practice in pretty much all aspects of my life. It really does provide a platform for normalising these important conversations."

Caitlin Sykes is an Auckland-based journalist interested in the small-business, technology and innovation sectors. These days she also delves into the heritage world as editor of Heritage New Zealand magazine.

REFERENCE

Morgaine K, Thompson L, Jahnke K, Llewellyn R.
GoodYarn: building mental health literacy in New Zealand's rural workforce. *Journal of Public Mental Health*, 16(4), 180–90, 2017

For information on the GoodYarn programme, visit www.goodyarn.org or email info@goodyarn.org. To organise a workshop for your practice, email Leanne Fecser at leanne.fecser@vets.org.nz