

Let's talk about...
**The Elephant
in the Paddock**



Getting through together

"He should have been on top of the world. Instead, when Hauraki-Plains dairy farmer Casey Coxhead achieved his lifelong goal of owning his own farm he was anxious and unhappy."

"I was so driven to own my own farm and initially (straight after the auction) I did feel happy. Then, that night, the financial side of things just hit me. I was taking on this massive debt and so much responsibility. I went from having no stress to being really worried all the time. All I wanted to do was get out of it (the farm)," he said.

A few years earlier, Casey's wife Zhenya had been through her own baptism of fire. Born and raised in Ukraine, her first introduction to Aotearoa was a summer holiday tripping around the sandy beaches of Coromandel.

"I met Case through a friend and that was it. Love was in the air," she said.

Continuing a long distance romance with the Kiwi sharemilker, she eventually left her city job as an electrical engineer and packed her bags to fly back to New Zealand permanently. This time she touched down in the middle of calving during a wet and miserable winter. After years of wearing high heels and getting dressed up for work every day, she literally stepped off the plane and started feeding out hay.

"It was really hard. My first experience of New Zealand was a beautiful Coromandel summer. I had a tourist view of the country and I thought life would be the same, but this time it was just gumboots, mud and rain," she said.

"We just worked and worked. I had no idea what day of the week it was, or what time of day it was."

Casey's happy disposition and the birth of the couple's daughter, Eva, helped her to adjust, along with her experiences growing up in Ukraine.

"Life in Ukraine is not as smooth and stable as it is here. You can't rely on the



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Zhenya Coxhead

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Casey Coxhead

government and you don't have much choice, you have to overcome tiredness and problems and just get on with it," she said.

When Eva was two, the couple purchased their first farm in Turua. It should have been a time of celebration; instead, Casey started losing sleep.

"Casey's such a happy person but he was constantly unhappy. Buying a farm was something he'd always wanted and now he had it, I thought he should be happy," Zhenya said.

Although he loved sport, Casey lost interest in playing. Juggling management of the new farm on top of continuing with the couple's existing share-milking job, he was constantly worried about servicing debt. One day when he came in from milking Eva asked him why he was so sad.

"That really rocked me," he said, "I knew I needed to do something."

Making a doctor's appointment was a turning point for the couple and with the help of a counsellor; Casey was able to put things more in perspective.

"He was the best guy. He helped me realise I was putting too much pressure on myself because I was worried about failing and what everyone else would think," Casey said.

The couple also made changes to their lifestyle, including going to once-a-day milking after Christmas, although it was something Casey never dreamed he would do.

"It's worked for us, although I know it's not for everyone. We still try to get in as

much production as possible prior to Christmas, but going to once a day after that means we can enjoy family outings at the beach or playing tennis over summer," he said.

He credits family and friends, getting off the farm and having great staff, for his gradual recovery.

"We've been incredibly lucky with our employees. Zhenya's aunt and uncle do a fantastic job of managing the Turua farm for us, which gives us the peace of mind to take time out when we need to. If it wasn't for them, I don't know where we'd be," he said.

Today, the couple has plenty to celebrate, including the birth of their son Ryan, now two. Although the recent drought was "horrible" and like many farmers they've started the season well behind the eight ball, the challenges they've faced in the past few years have given them the strength to weather other storms.

"Balance is the key. There is life outside of the farm and you have to make sure you get off the farm and look outside the square. It's good to get out of your own little world," Zhenya said.

"When we get up in the morning the trees are still there, the sun is still shining. When Casey was down, I thought it's okay, we'll get through it together, and we did."

Checking in on the wellbeing of the Hauraki Rural community

"The Elephant in the Paddock began in 2017 when the Council teamed up with a number of rural support agencies to check in on the wellbeing of our rural communities. That project was so successful we're doing it all again. The revamp includes three new local champions who are sharing their stories, as well as a refreshed brochure with up-to-date information on how to recognise unhealthy stress or depression and where to find support services within the local community."

Support services available to the rural community

- Make an appointment with your GP
- **Rural North Hauraki Mental Health & Addiction Services** (DHB), phone 0800 08 03 39
- **Crisis Assessment and Treatment Service** for emergency calls after hours, weekends and public holidays phone 0800 50 50 50
- **Waikato-Hauraki-Coromandel Rural Support Trust** (farmer to farmer support), phone 0800 787 254, www.rural-support.org.nz
- **Need to talk?** phone or text 1737 anytime day or night to talk with a trained health professional
- **Depression Line** phone 0800 11 17 57, www.depression.org.nz
- **Alcohol Drug Helpline** phone 0800 787 797
- **Te Korowai Hauora O Hauraki - Hinengaro** (Mental Health), phone 07 868 0033

Find out more
www.hauraki-dc.govt.nz/wellbeing-farming

