

MENTAL-HEALTH CHAMPION

ALISON FAIRLEIGH IS USING HER RURAL WOMEN'S AWARD TO SHINE THE SPOTLIGHT ON A DARK PLACE.

STORY GRETEL SNEATH PHOTOS ROB PARSONS

GRAB THE THICKEST, heaviest, grey woollen blanket you can find. Soak it in steaming hot water, and completely cover yourself with it while lying in bed. Then, try to climb out and go about your normal day with that suffocating weight hanging over you. Queensland's Rural Woman of the Year, Alison Fairleigh, says this is what depression feels like. She knows, because she has worn this cloak of misery.

"You have no light, because no light is able to shine in," she says. "You can also hardly breathe, yet you have to try to continue functioning and navigate your way through the darkness."

Ayr-based Alison is trying to improve that navigation process using a bursary she received from the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation as part of her Rural Women's Award announced in March. Her chief aim is to forge better pathways for farmers and fishers to access frontline health and mental-health services, and it's no coincidence that the work parallels her own healing journey.

Growing up on a mixed cropping and cattle property near Kingaroy in south-east Queensland, Alison adored country life, yet difficult family circumstances left her feeling disconnected from the farm. She masked her childhood sadness by concocting her own perfect world of make-believe, enriched by the stories of a staggering 52 penfriends from all parts of the globe. "In the '80s, we didn't have internet chat rooms or Twitter, so writing letters was my own form of escape and enlightenment," she smiles.

While her older brother, Tony, opted to stay on the land, Alison studied teaching at university and spent several years working in China before returning home to take on a job at an agricultural college in the Burdekin. The new recruit was to play a pivotal role in the launch of the facility's international student program, but her career took a dramatic change in direction in 2008

when three local men inexplicably took their own lives just days apart, and Alison was called upon to provide pastoral care to affected staff and students.

"People didn't seem to be able to accept what happened; I'm sure that there was pain inside, but on the outside, they were uncomfortable discussing it," she says. The tragedy sparked a desire to delve deeper into the psyche of agricultural communities, and Alison combined her college role with volunteer work delivering suicide-prevention training. She also began collating evidence-based research into mental health and suicide, and was staggered by what she found. "I couldn't believe that our farmers were killing themselves, and I was shocked by the high numbers – these were our farmers!" she says.

Alison was already well aware of the difficulties in trying to access appropriate medical support in country areas; a traumatic experience in her mid-twenties triggered her own mental illness, and she spent seven harrowing years trying to convince herself that nothing was wrong. "I went from being the bubbly life of the party to an angry, highly anxious recluse who wanted as little to do with people as possible, but I was stubborn and ignorant, and kept pushing myself to just get over it," she explains. "I always thought that if I could just try harder to be a better person, toughen up and think happy thoughts, then everything would be OK, but it doesn't work."

It wasn't until she heard two men discussing the signs and symptoms on the radio that she realised depression was a diagnosable illness. "Everything just resonated, and that was the first time I recognised that there might be a problem and went and saw a doctor," she says. "If I knew then what I know now, I would have sought help immediately and prevented myself from years of spiralling downwards before learning how to claw my way back up."

Alison now knows that mental illness is treatable, so long as those who suffer are given help to get well, along with the skills for managing any relapses. But what



Queensland Rural Woman of the Year, Alison Fairleigh.



Alison grew up on a mixed cropping and cattle property near Kingaroy, south-east Queensland.
LEFT: On Gainsford Station near Ayr in the Burdekin, Alison chats with station owner Warwick Cox and station hands.

would the prognosis be for a farmer or a fisherman who is more likely to choose heavy machinery over a meeting with a health professional? “It is well known that when you are going through a stressful time like drought and financial hardship it will have health consequences, but you can’t put mental-health services into farming and fishing communities and expect the people to come to you, because there’s far too much stigma attached to it,” Alison says. “We need to get smarter about how we get information and services to the people who need it.”

Alison saw an opportunity when the Federal Government moved to reform Australia’s primary and mental health-care sector by dividing the nation into 61 Medicare Local regions. “If these Medicare Locals are going to work effectively in local areas, they need to be able to understand farming communities,” she says. “It’s very easy to just criticise and not offer solutions, but for me, it was about working out what we were going to do, and I knew this Rural Women’s Award would help to make a difference.”

In addition to her management role with the Mental Illness Fellowship of North Queensland, Alison is now working with the Townsville-Mackay Medicare Local to develop a training program that will be delivered to up to 40 staff, with the potential for an Australia-wide rollout. “We want to establish the most efficient and effective reach into rural and regional areas by basically teaching them to implement systems from the ground up rather than the top down, and empowering people within the communities to be part of the process and the solution,” she says.

Mental Health Services director, Aileen Colley, says it’s a privilege to be selected for the pilot program and support its further development. “Townsville-Mackay Medicare Local covers a vast area of 239,180 square kilometres, and it is very important for us to have the skills to work with, and engage, the people living and working here,” she says. “Alison’s enthusiasm and drive is to be applauded and her project will give us an opportunity to learn more about the needs of the farming and fishing communities and how we can provide services in a practical and meaningful way.”

Having people who can act as a buffer or translator between the health services and the community is expected to make discussions much less confrontational. “They’re not a psychologist – they’re someone who is working really hard to be a bridge,” Alison says.

Creating “soft entry points” is another proven approach – industry bodies, field days, race meetings, grower forums and events run by service groups are ideal platforms for the subtle dissemination of information. “I recently spoke at a beef forum

in outback Queensland about the human body’s reaction to stress and the impact on mental health, and the response from the group was fantastic – if we tried to do that even five years ago, I doubt that we would have achieved this,” Alison says.

Social media has been identified as another terrific tool for prompting discussion and raising awareness, giving people the option of anonymity while also enabling those in remote areas to be part of the conversation. Emerald GP and obstetrician Dr Ewen McPhee began following Alison’s blog posts and Twitter feed while he was president of the Rural Doctors Association of Queensland, and he remains a strong supporter. “She’s pretty proactive and we need people like that to attract attention and raise the profile of mental health for rural and isolated people because it’s essentially the elephant in the room,” he says. “If we left it up to the powers that be, they would go to the most heavily populated places, where the people are noisiest, access is easy and you get a quick bang for your buck. Alison is not only raising awareness about other areas, but is looking at practical solutions.”

Describing herself as “a realist, rather than an idealist”, Queensland’s Rural Woman of the Year says she’s not going out to try to change the world; she’s simply trying to make a difference – even if it’s just for a few people.

“I know how difficult it is to accept the symptoms as a serious illness rather than as personal weakness, but we shouldn’t be ashamed, as it’s not something you choose,” Alison says. “Sometimes you may need to take it an hour or a minute at a time, but just keep going. To take action and control of your life again is a very empowering thing.”

