



BUSINESS
HEALTH

Depression has been the worst best gift ever, says Wayne Langford, pictured with Tyler and their three sons Lewis, Gordie and Alfie.



*Battling highs
and lows*



Words and photos by: **Anne Hardie**

Depression has been the worst best gift ever for Wayne Langford who decided he would have a 'You Only Live Once' – YOLO – experience every day and share it with others on Facebook.

That decision from a very dark period of his life has led to unforeseen consequences with 20,000 Facebook followers and the creation of a farm discussion group with members of their seriously green community.

Today the Golden Bay dairy farmer is known by his Facebook page of YOLOfarmerNZ where he shares his YOLOs, a term coined to describe the moments and adventures he plans every day because as the saying goes, you only live once.

His posts also describe the highs and lows of his life on the farm while battling depression with an honesty that has resonated with his followers.

His YOLOs can be anything from a big adventure to something as simple as catching up with an old friend or a cup of tea with his great aunt and these adventures have created connections he didn't expect.

His journey began two years ago on his 34th birthday when he was still in bed during the day and had been in bed the day before that and the day before that. He

decided he might have to do something or he was going to get even worse.

In hindsight, Wayne and his wife, Tyler, had probably recognised he had depression, but hadn't labelled it. Outright fear initially stopped him from labelling it because of how he thought others would perceive him but more than that, the fear he would be taken away from Tyler and their three young boys. It was the unknown and his brain was too foggy to deal with it.

'I sit in awe of Wayne being able to keep this up day after day. Most days are easy, but the hard days are the ones he says we have to do it.'

In the beginning, they simply said he had a bad day because after all, things on the farm were pretty stressful. The couple, who had met at Lincoln University when they were 18 and worked their way up through the dairy industry, had bought the 93 effective hectare farm a couple of years before and were milking 360 cows once a day with no staff.

With debt of \$35/kg milksolids (MS), profit and farm performance is a clear driver for their farming business and

though the target production is 87,500kg MS, it depends on the season. Take this year where it won't be achieved due to Tasman's crippling drought which will drop production to the low 70,000kgs MS.

It wasn't until about 140 days after beginning YOLO that they finally acknowledged the depression label. Admitting it occurred unexpectedly in front of a group of medical students he was speaking to as part of his role as Golden Bay Federated Farmers' president. Without planning to, he gave them an emotional account of his battle with depression.

"I still feel sorry for them. They were probably looking forward to Friday afternoon and they got me instead!"

Since starting out on his YOLO journey, Wayne and family have made numerous experiences that would not have been created without it and while he admits it began with more selfish ambitions a bit like a bucket list, it has morphed into something quite different where the connections made along the way are sometimes the most memorable.

Such as the time the family stopped at the Mapua Wharf near Nelson for fish and chips and a woman diving off the wharf sat down and joined them and got to know them. And all the connections through YOLOfarmerNZ where they have heard other people's stories while sharing their own.

Sometimes, it's the unexpected bonuses alongside the experience that makes a

YOLO even more memorable and would have been missed without making the effort do something special each day.

Like the time on day six of his journey which remains one of his favourites, when for the day's YOLO they got a relief milker to cover the morning milking so they could take the kids to the beach and make pancakes over a bonfire while they watched the sunrise. Sitting there on the beach, about 100 shags from one of the islands off Tata Beach flew across to the beach and Wayne says that is just one of the unintended consequences of YOLO that adds to the memory.

Or the time the family went mountain biking as a YOLO, which was fun, but the true highlight of the day was the purple and green sky as they drove home over the Takaka Hill. It was a sight they would not have witnessed without consciously having a YOLO experience.

YOLO has created a ripple effect and Tyler says it has gone from being a project to get Wayne well again, to a philosophy; a way of life. She's the extrovert of the pair; a strong personality who says depression is also tough on partners and families and for a while there, the kids missed out on dad until he initiated his YOLO plan.

"They've got their dad back – in a nutshell," she says. "I sit in awe of Wayne being able to keep this up day after day. Most days are easy, but the hard days are the ones he says we have to do it."

She says it's borderline impossible for a wife or partner to know how to deal with their partner's depression and she acknowledges it was a struggle and the mental health system needs a wrap-around service that includes families. Because it's hard on them too.

"We met when we were 18 and never had any trouble communicating with each other, so it was pretty soul destroying when he shut down.

"The biggest thing I figured out as a wife was we had to figure out once again what lit his life up; what was it that gave him absolute pure joy? And for Wayne, that is giving, whether it's giving his time, giving to people – just giving. When we figured that out, my thing was putting opportunities in front of him, over and over again."

'It's almost like they've been listened to for the first time and it's like they're getting something off their chest. Then the next stage is what are we going to do about it?'

She has learnt to be ready for anything with YOLO, which has been sometimes difficult as a mother who likes to plan everything and follow a routine. Like the night Wayne realised he hadn't done a YOLO for the day, so despite the kids being in their pyjamas and ready for bed, he led them into the bush behind the farm to see the glow worms.

Two years ago Wayne's plan was simply to share his YOLO experiences on Facebook for 365 days as a way of keeping himself accountable. But as that day approached, he realised others were benefiting also and that's when he set up YOLOfarmerNZ and numbers escalated.

"Initially it was to just get out of a dark place and I never envisaged that 20,000 people would care what we did every day."

Sharing the YOLO journey online

and opening up about depression was a decision made with the entire family, where they sat down with the kids – Lewis, 12, Gordie, 11 and Alfie, 9 – and explained what they were doing and asked them if they were all right with it.

One of the key goals of his Facebook posts is to give an honest account of depression that includes the highs as well as the lows, compared with many of the mental health sites that he says can be very dark and sad reading.

So it can be funny as well as honest and

fellow farmers can relate to some of the posts. Like the time tempers were tested trying to shift cows and calves....

It's funny in hindsight, but telling those stories honestly has been one way to relieve the stress which is all-too-common in farming, especially during spring and for many people, Wayne says it can be overwhelming. By telling his own story, he encourages others to tell someone when they are going through those tough times and it has prompted numerous people to admit they have struggled.

He knows how tough that can be and the fear of acknowledging depression. For him, it was fear of losing his family and he knows another fear for many rural blokes who love their hunting is losing their gun licence.

"My message is the world isn't going



Moments and adventures every day.



Above: Alfie, Gordie and Lewis.

Right: Alfie and beagle mate, Locky.



to end by telling someone. Especially by telling someone close to you like your wife or one of your friends.”

If someone isn’t ready, or doesn’t realise they need help, it can be next to impossible to get them to a doctor or someone who can help them, especially when it’s busy on the farm. So Tyler suggests getting someone like a friend to join them on the farm, spend some time with them and talk with them.

When Wayne gets messages via the YOLOfarmNZ page from people telling him they are struggling, he sometimes gives them a small challenge to start their own YOLO journey.

“And they’ll send a photo back with the connection they’ve made that day or something they’ve done that day.”

He encourages farmers to make sure they have a good work-life balance and do the things they love.

“We have to be really careful in the agriculture sector that we aren’t pushing someone to breaking point. If we can catch them and help them through it, we can stop them getting to breaking point.

“As an industry, what are we proud of? It’s not all about money at the end of the day and if it is, you should probably look at why you are farming.”

Today they base the farm around a 40-hour week and though it’s not always achieved, it makes them analyse if the extra hours are worth it.

“We keep the farm very simple with lean management. Most farm jobs will be here today, tomorrow and even next year, but the opportunity to do something awesome may not.”

Opening the gate

It’s too daunting to even consider for most farmers, especially in a region like Golden Bay where the greener members of the community can be very anti-dairying, but Wayne and Tyler have basically opened their gate and welcomed the community to join their Farming 2030 Project.

It began with a sustainable hui – attended as one of his YOLO experiences – where he realised he needed to do something about the disconnect between urban and rural communities and that they could actually help each other to get better outcomes. He then put an advertisement in the Golden Bay Weekly and Facebook, asking for help to make their farming business more sustainable.

It horrified other farmers who warned them against it, but by sitting down and actually listening to each other, they have developed an understanding of each other’s concerns and goals that enables them to work together.

They now get between eight and 12 people at meetings every six weeks where they talk about every aspect of the business, from the financials which

includes their drawings and debt, to management practices to see how they can find better solutions they can afford while ensuring a good balance with family life.

“They’ve been able to come and voice their opinions and I’ve been able to say I hear what you’re saying,” Wayne says. “It’s almost like they’ve been listened to for the first time and it’s like they’re getting something off their chest. Then the next stage is what are we going to do about it?”

Initially the group made a list of what they wanted to achieve from the project and that included wetlands restoration, reducing the use of plastic, a permaculture plan, dealing with giant buttercup infestation without spraying, herbal ley, water quality, nitrate testing and a fish survey.

Some of the group are now preparing a permaculture plan to test on the farm and are working on finding solutions for buttercup and wintering the cows. Part of the herd is grazed off in winter with the remainder kept onfarm.

In the past they used crops such as fodder beet for winter, but Wayne and Tyler say it’s hard to be proud of cows standing in mud so they switched to a sacrifice paddock instead. That wasn’t ideal either because of soil compaction, while they didn’t like standing the cows on concrete and support land has a cost.

One of the things the community group has discovered is that solutions are

not always easy and the farm's financial situation limits the choices. Now, some of the group have the challenge of finding alternatives to winter cropping and sacrifice paddocks that is affordable, in a climate that has regular 100mm rain events and 2.5m annually.

"One of the group told me she never understood the amount of debt pressure farmers are under," Wayne says. "We have a goal for \$4000/ha (profit) at a \$6 payout, so we're honest about that and that the family/work/life balance is really important to us."

Getting that balance right and reducing stress on the family and environment had already prompted them to reduce cow numbers from 360 to 250 which means they are also down to minimal palm kernel in the system. Wayne says they now recognise it was largely palm kernel supporting the higher number of cows.

Like so many dairy farmers, they are striving to be more sustainable which is also the goal of their green community and by sitting down together they have been able to recognise that they are closer to the same page than communities realise.

"One of the goals of the project is to make it replicable so you can come up with community-based solutions. And the success of it will be the IP of it being replicated in other areas."

"I know it's scary," Tyler continues, "but everyone we've had here has sat around the table and been so humble and has been able to contribute."

While the green members of the project have developed a better understanding of dairy farming, the challenges and the farmers' willingness to be more sustainable, Wayne and Tyler say they themselves have also developed a better understanding of the community's view and are learning from them. Through that, both sides are building trust with each other. To the point, they left the farm one day while project members were left alone to take samples.

"That was one of those light-bulb moments," Wayne says. "The community was on our farm and we had no worries in the world about it."

"It's about building up the trust again with the community."

The relationship between dairy farmers and the green Golden Bay community had deteriorated two years ago when the farmers were blamed for water quality problems in the Te Waikoropupu Springs which are the clearest natural water in the country.

The Langford's farm near Takaka are in the recharge zone which makes them all the braver for opening the gate to the community.

Throughout the country, farmers have lost a lot of credibility and trust which Wayne says needs to be earned back again.

The Farming 2030 Project is a result of YOLO making connections within the community and Wayne has another evolving project from those connections involving a national-based charity and though it's too early to reveal much, he says he's pretty excited about its future.



YOLO Farmer

23 Oct 2018 at 5:56 PM · 🌐

#YOLOd584 So we had one of 'those' moments this afternoon on farm. A simple job of getting 3 cow & 6 calves on a truck to their new home. We had;

- 3 breakouts
- 1 huntaway that wouldn't shut up
- 1 child fall over and hurt his shoulder
- 1 child more interested in being a wizard than helping
- 1 helpful child that no matter what he did it was wrong because his dad was losing it
- 1 wife who was just like Simon Bridges and called someone(me) "f\$cking useless" but really didn't mean it.(I hope)
- 1 farmer who did nothing wrong, judging by the way he blamed everyone else in the family when things went bad.

We got there in the end.....just!

I want to thank the very patient Sollys transport driver who witnessed the Langford family meltdown, said nothing, smiled and carried on his journey!

#YOLOd6 An early start this morning, got the relief milker in and headed to Tata Beach for a fire, a sunrise and pancakes



Follow Wayne@YOLO Farmer on Facebook