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LEVEL THE FIELD

Working for a more equitable farming industry

OCTOBER 2025

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A comprehensive guide to

Neurodiversity and mental health in farming

Advice on establishing support networks for everyone in your team

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Why neurodiversity can affect mental health

Farming has always been tough on mental health. Long hours, financial uncertainty, isolation and increasingly volatile weather all add to the daily grind of running a demanding business.

The industry has made significant progress in recent years, thanks to campaigns that have helped break down barriers, foster open conversations, and establish support networks that convey messages of solidarity and hope. Farmers are realising they don't need to suffer in silence.

But there is another part of the picture that often gets overlooked. There is significant overlap between neurodiversity and challenges with mental health, as shown in the recent [Farmers Weekly survey](#).

Of the 1,700 people surveyed:

- Four in five neurodivergent respondents said their condition affects their mental health
- One in five said the impact is significant.

That means a large number of people in the farming community – including workers, business owners and family members – are still being left out of the conversation.

For the neurodivergent community, it means carrying an unnecessary burden in an already demanding job. For employers, ignoring this comes at a cost – losing skilled, committed people who could thrive with the right adjustments.



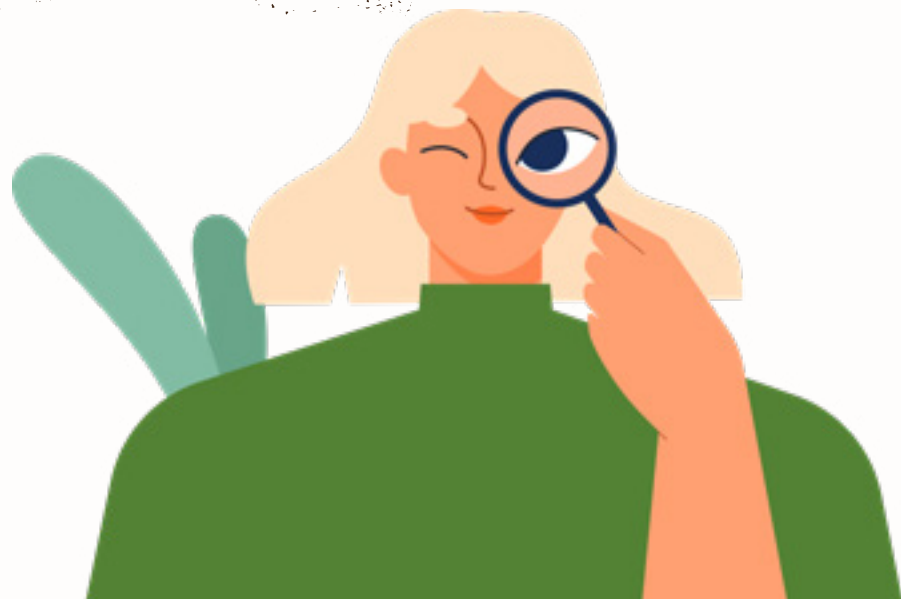
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What are the challenges?

For many neurodivergent people living with autism, ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia – among other diagnoses – the challenges are often misunderstood.

Too frequently, people are told their condition is a mental health problem when, in reality, they are experiencing the impact of their neurodivergence, and they are not receiving the support they need.

When those traits are misunderstood or unsupported, stress, anxiety or depression can follow. Studies in developmental neurodiversity show that the standard mental health support mechanisms often don't fit.

For instance, talking therapies usually rely on unstructured conversation and emotion-focused expression, which can be harder for autistic or ADHD individuals. Even when they try, the results are often less successful.

HOW NEURODIVERGENCE AND MENTAL HEALTH ARE LINKED

The key take-home message is that neurodivergence isn't a mental health condition, but misunderstanding – and lack of support – can create or worsen mental health struggles.

The evidence:

- Up to half of autistic people also experience depression ([National Autistic Society](#)).
- Up to half of people with ADHD live with one or more anxiety disorders ([National Library of Medicine](#)).

NHS Dorset highlights three key reasons:

- Different ways of experiencing the world – stressful situations hit harder when routine or predictability breaks down.

- Negative attitudes or lack of understanding – being labelled “difficult” or excluded fuels loneliness and isolation.
- Different ways of processing social situations – what looks like “difficulty” to others is often just a difference.

On farms, these challenges can be amplified, for instance:

- During lambing, constant changes in routine can heighten anxiety for someone who thrives on structure.
- A worker who avoids eye contact may be misread as “uninterested” when they're actually just focused on the task.
- When traits are mistaken for mental health problems, the wrong kind of support – or none at all – may be given.



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CASE STUDY: KAREN FISHER, COACHING FOR RURAL WORKPLACES

Karen Fisher has spent over two decades walking fields, advising farmers, and championing sustainable practices with the Soil Association. But her journey took an unexpected turn when, at 39, she was diagnosed with ADHD. “I just ticked every box,” she recalls.

That moment of recognition didn’t just change how she saw herself, it reshaped her career. Today, alongside her farming advisory work, Karen is a neurodiversity coach, combining her professional expertise with her personal journey to champion mental health and inclusion in rural communities.

“Since my diagnosis, the biggest thing I’ve learned is self-compassion,” she reflects. “I’d spent years beating myself up for not working like everyone else. Coaching helped me understand my own brain, and now I want to help others do the same.”



A place for neurodivergence in farming

For Karen, farming and neurodiversity can complement each other. “In farming, we celebrate diversity in the soil, in crops, in nature. Why not in people, too?” she asks.

And yet, she admits, farming culture can be a tough place to talk about difference. “There’s still this mindset of ‘just crack on’. Admitting you’re struggling can feel like weakness. Farming families are close-knit, but not always psychologically safe. That’s where stigma lingers.”

Her work as an accredited coach with the Universal Coaching Alliance focuses on practical strategies and tools that fit farming life rather than abstract wellbeing jargon. “Sometimes it’s as simple as a jobs board in the yard, breaking tasks into smaller steps, or sending instructions on WhatsApp so they’re not forgotten,” she explains.

Coaching has also deepened Karen’s understanding of the close link between neurodivergence and mental health. “Around 70% of neurodivergent people experience anxiety,” she says. “And for women, hormones add another layer.”

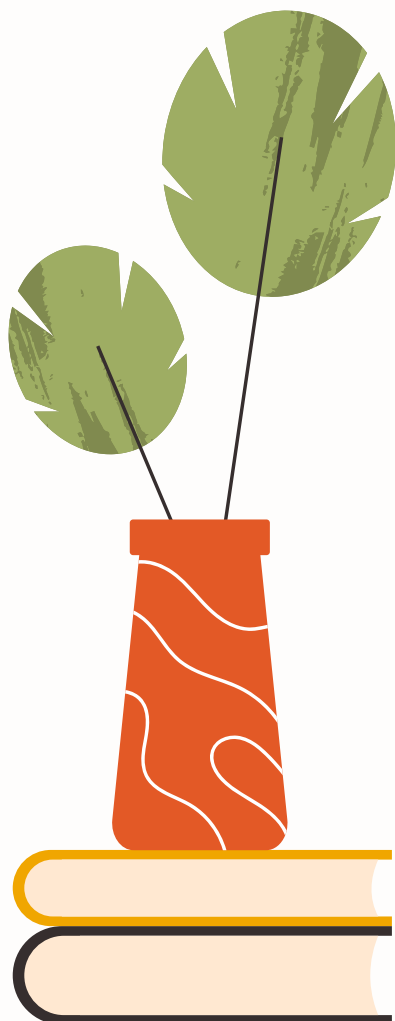
The importance of phrasing

That awareness shapes the way she frames conversations with farmers. Instead of asking about “wellbeing”, which can feel vague or uncomfortable, she keeps phrasing down-to-earth and relatable:

- What helps you switch off after a long day?
- What gives you energy back after a tough week?
- What would make it easier to ask for help?

Her vision is simple but powerful: a farming sector where neurodivergent individuals are supported, valued and recognised for the unique perspectives they bring.

“Every trait has two sides. Where some see impulsivity, I see courage. Where some see chaos, I see creativity. Farming thrives on diversity, and that should include the way our brains work, too.”



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Strengths neurodivergence brings to farming

Without proper support, the valuable qualities that neurodivergent individuals bring to farming businesses can be overshadowed by stress or burnout. Strengths include:

- Attention to detail – such as spotting early signs of crop disease or animal illness.
- Creative problem-solving – thinking differently when faced with machinery breakdowns or resource shortages, for example.
- Resilience and focus – such as committing deeply to seasonal work like lambing or harvest.

The gap in support

The standard advice to “talk to someone” doesn’t always work. While it can be highly beneficial for some, others find it challenging to put their emotions into words or may struggle to recognise when they’re overwhelmed. Silence doesn’t mean someone is fine; it often means they don’t have the words.

Finding the right therapist – one that is neurodiversity-aware and experienced at working with those who are not neurotypical – is key. But employers, families, charities and communities can also make a difference. Support doesn’t have to be complicated – it just has to fit different communication and working styles.



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SHARON MAY, KINGSCLERE COUNSELLING SERVICE

On a working farm, psychotherapist and counsellor Sharon May runs a multi-therapist counselling practice that serves her local community. The setting isn't incidental – the rhythms of rural life, alongside her own “very neuro-spicy household”, shape the way she works.

That mix of lived experience of dyslexic, ADHD and autistic traits alongside her clinical practice gives Sharon a grounded perspective on what neurodiversity looks like in farming families and the workplace.

Many people she sees are carrying years of low self-worth, high anxiety or relationship conflict, much of which can be traced back to the experience of trying to live in systems designed for neurotypical people. “People spend their whole life feeling like some sort of failure because they struggle with things that others seem to find easy, and tell themselves it must be something wrong with them.”

A large proportion of Sharon's work comes from those who are struggling with either personal or professional relationship dynamics. Small clashes – like leaving tools out or other items that need putting away – are often interpreted as laziness or disrespect, when in fact the person doesn't see a problem. Over time, these misunderstandings erode self-esteem and fuel conflict.



Tools that make a difference

Sharon draws on both established therapies and more creative approaches, depending on what a client needs in the moment. Part of her work involves helping people recognise and manage their emotional state before they reach burnout.

She teaches clients to identify whether they're in the green, yellow, or red zone. “If you're asking somebody to do something while they are in red, it's not going to work.”

When words are difficult, she leans on non-verbal methods. Drawing, sand trays, photographs, or even a walk around the farm can open up conversations that feel safer to have than when sitting face-to-face. Sometimes a farm map or a favourite place becomes a way to indirectly explore memories, values or trauma.

Even the basics of therapy, such as intake forms, can be adapted to be more inclusive and accessible. Rather than sending paperwork for clients to complete alone, Sharon offers to sit alongside them, reads questions aloud, or factors in extra time. These small adjustments ensure that the process itself doesn't become another barrier.

Farming families

Much of her work comes from spouses and partners who are struggling in their relationships. The challenges aren't usually about malice or bad character, she explains, but about mismatched expectations. Over time, those misunderstandings chip away at trust and feed low self-esteem.

Because neurodivergence often runs in families, the picture is rarely straightforward. Traits can echo across generations, meaning parents and children may be misunderstanding each other in similar ways. What one person experiences as carelessness or stubbornness may, in fact, be a difference in perception or processing. Without the correct language to explain what's happening, tension multiplies quickly.



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Practical steps for employers

The moral case is that everyone deserves support, while the business case for facilitating change in the workplace is that it retains skilled workers, unlocks personal potential, and builds resilience in farming businesses.

Farming has already changed how it discusses mental health, and the next step is to include neurodiversity in those daily conversations. So, where to start?

1. Clear and simple instructions

Farm tasks are often assumed to be obvious. A job like “sorting livestock” or “fixing a fence” might sound clear, but it can mean different things to different people:

- Break jobs into step-by-step instructions
- Write them down or use photos/diagrams on a whiteboard
- Walk through a task once and check for understanding rather than assuming.

Example: Instead of saying “check the sheep”, consider breaking down the task further:

- Count the flock
- Look for limping or injuries
- Refill the water trough
- Send me a message when done.

2. Predictability in a chaotic job

You can’t control the weather, broken machinery or the next piece of new legislation, but you can control communication in the workplace. Adding predictability to a working week, where possible, reduces stress. Some ideas might include:

- Sharing daily or weekly task lists
- Flagging changes early – for example: “We’ll start baling an hour later tomorrow because of rain”
- Using a wall calendar for lambing, spraying or harvest days so everyone sees what’s coming.



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3. A calmer work environment

Noise and unpredictability can be draining and overwhelming, but soon ease with a bit of thought:

- Provide quiet spaces – a cabin, tractor cab, or breakroom corner
- Allow the use of noise-cancelling headphones when safe
- Build in short pause breaks rather than expecting 12-hour, non-stop shifts.

4. Meetings and conversations

Not everyone processes spoken instructions quickly. Consider the following:

- Keeping conversations clear, direct, and avoiding slang
- Sharing written follow-ups (texts, WhatsApp messages, or voice notes)
- Letting workers know the purpose of meetings before they start – for example, before gathering the team in the yard, text: “5-minute meeting at 10am: spraying order for the day and safety reminders.”

5. Building a respectful culture

Neurodivergent workers often bring unique strengths such as problem-solving, memory for detail, and a strong focus on repetitive tasks:

- Notice and acknowledge these strengths
- Share successes during coffee breaks or team meals
- Avoid labelling someone as “difficult” when it may just be a communication difference.



TIPS FOR NEURODIVERGENT WORKERS

Know what helps you

- Prefer written lists? Ask for them.
- If loud machinery drains you, use ear protection.
- If changes stress you out, request early notice where possible.

Use tools and strategies

- Set phone reminders for daily tasks.
- Create checklists for seasonal jobs (vaccination days, lamb marking, calving prep).
- Use visual labels in sheds or tool stores.

Take breaks

- Even five minutes in the cab of a tractor or by a gate can reset your energy.
- Build short breaks into your routine, especially in busy seasons.

Ask for what you need

- Small requests make a big difference – “Can you text me the list instead of just telling me?” is enough.
- If talking is hard, write it down.



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Mental health toolkit

The usual positive mental health toolkit – for example, self-care, exercise, mindfulness, balanced sleep, and connection with others is hugely beneficial. However, it can be particularly difficult for neurodivergent people – especially if routines, sensory environments, or executive function challenges get in the way.

The key is to start small. Instead of overhauling everything, add one supportive habit at a time – a five-minute walk, a short grounding exercise, or one evening routine tweak. Sustainable changes matter more than idealised routines.

Practical self-care

1. Routine with flexibility

Many autistic or ADHD individuals thrive on structure, but rigid routines can backfire if broken.

- A loose framework works better – for example, a morning routine might include movement, then breakfast, then plan the day rather than “must jog 2 miles at 7.15am”.

2. Exercise that fits

Exercise doesn't have to mean gyms or group classes.

- Options include walking in quiet areas, cycling, yoga at home, and farm jobs reframed as exercise.
- Doing it alongside someone, in person or virtually, can be effective if motivation is hard.

3. Mindfulness

Traditional meditation can be frustrating for people with racing thoughts or sensory sensitivities. Some alternatives might include:

- Active mindfulness: gardening, woodwork, walking, or even repetitive tasks like stacking logs
- Sensory grounding: carrying a smooth stone, using noise-cancelling headphones, focusing on five senses in the moment
- Guided apps or short practices that are a few minutes instead of 20-minute silent sits.



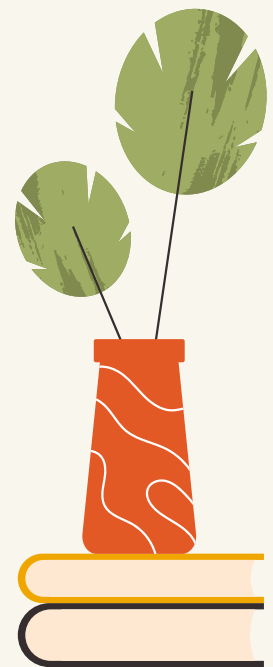
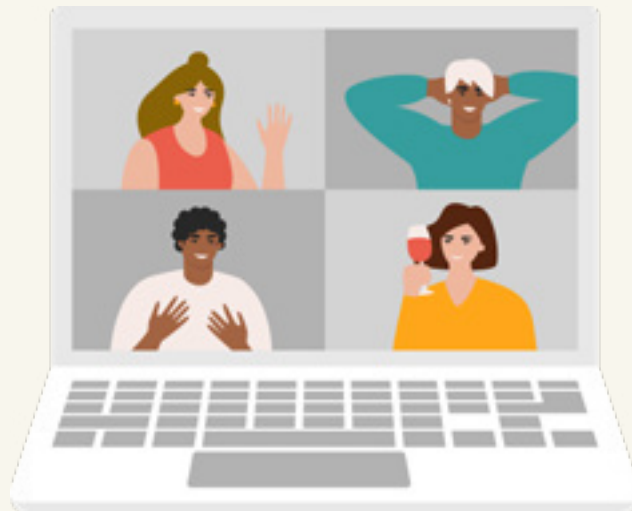
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4. Managing overload

Neurodivergent people often experience sensory or social overload, which escalates stress. Self-care here is about prevention as much as it is about recovery. Try to:

- Build recovery breaks into the day (quiet time, music, headphones)
- Recognise early signs of overload and step back before burnout hits.

5. Connection

Socialising can be draining, but isolation worsens mental health. Try:

- Smaller groups or one-to-one connections rather than big gatherings
- Online communities where interaction is typed and paced
- Peer support networks where neurodivergence is understood.

6. Sleep and rest

ADHD and autism often disrupt sleep. Instead of trying to force a “perfect 8 hours”, think about:

- Creating a wind-down routine (low light, calming activity, same order each night)
- Using weighted blankets, blackout blinds or white noise if helpful
- Prioritising rest – even if it’s lying quietly, not sleep.

EATING WELL

Food fuels both body and brain, and the following can help in making sound, easy choices.

- **Prep in bulk when you can.** On quieter days, batch-cook stews, casseroles or soups and freeze them in portions. That way, healthy meals are easily ready.
- **Keep grab-and-go options on hand.** Cheese, fruit, boiled eggs, oat bars or sandwiches are quick options that are better than relying on biscuits or skipping meals.
- **Lean on routine.** Having a default breakfast like porridge, yogurt with fruit, or toast and eggs removes decision stress first thing in the morning.
- **Balance, not perfection.** Aim for a balance of protein, carbs and vegetables/fruit at each meal, but don’t beat yourself up if some days it’s chips in the tractor cab. Consistency matters more than perfection.
- **Respect sensory preferences.** If certain textures or tastes are a no-go, focus on what does work for you.
- **Hydration counts.** Keep a big water bottle in the cab, yard or by the gate; dehydration alone can worsen stress and fatigue.



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What support do national charities offer?

National charities offer specialist advice and resources on facilitating positive mental health. Employers and workers in agriculture can leverage these opportunities to build healthier, more inclusive workplaces.

ADHD UK

A charity run by people with ADHD for people with ADHD, with a mission to help those that have the condition or people close to them – family and friends, employers and co-workers.

How they can help

- **For employers:** Resources to support staff with ADHD, including management training and employee coaching, workplace posters and toolkit.
- **For individuals:** Events, support groups and drop-in sessions, and links to free mental health support via the Able Futures government programme.

Why it matters for farming

- Flexibility and clear feedback help ADHD farmers to thrive.

Website: adhd.uk

National Autistic Society (NAS)

A pioneering charity for autistic people and their families, NAS has campaigned for over 60 years to improve understanding of autism and reduce barriers in education, work and daily life.

How they can help

- **For employers:** Training on autism awareness, toolkits for inclusive recruitment, and advice on practical adjustments such as flexible communication styles, quieter spaces, or predictable routines.
- **For individuals:** Guidance on coping with autistic burnout, anxiety, and navigating disclosure at work.



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Why it matters for farming

- Predictability and clear communication reduce stress.

Website: autism.org.uk | **Phone:** 020 7833 2299

YoungMinds (ADHD and mental health)

YoungMinds is a charity fighting for children and young people's mental health, providing trusted resources and support for families navigating ADHD, anxiety, depression and more.

How they can help

- **For employers:** Advice on how ADHD affects focus, routines and stress, with practical tips like breaking tasks into steps or keeping work plans clear.
- **For individuals:** Resources on managing self-esteem, coping with anxiety and staying organised in high-demand environments.

Why it matters for farming

- Younger workers thrive when given structure and direction.

Website: youngminds.org.uk | **Phone:** (for parents) 0808 802 5544

British Dyslexia Association (BDA)

The BDA is the national charity representing people with dyslexia and co-occurring differences such as dyspraxia, dyscalculia and ADHD.

How they can help

- **For employers:** Simple workplace adjustments such as using verbal instructions alongside written notes, allowing extra time for paperwork, and promoting assistive tech (text-to-speech, spellcheckers).
- **For individuals:** Guidance on managing anxiety linked to dyslexia, plus access to their helpline for tailored advice.

Why it matters for farming

- Small changes in paperwork and record-keeping reduce stress for dyslexic staff.

Website: bdadyslexia.org.uk | **Helpline:** 0333 405 4567



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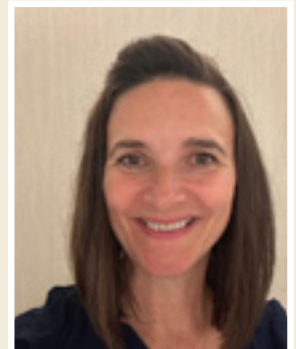
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DR GEORGINA TAYLOR-ADRIAANSEN AND RUTH RYDEN, MINDSTHRIVE

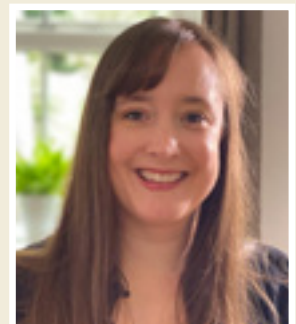
MindsThrive founders Ruth Ryden and Dr Georgina Taylor-Adriaansen are both counselling psychologists with decades of frontline NHS experience. Georgina has dyslexia, with significant ADHD traits, and is also the parent of a severely autistic child. Ruth has spent years supporting people whose needs never quite fit into the systems that were supposed to help them.

“When you live it yourself, you see how much the world isn’t built for brains like ours,” Georgina reflects. “It made me want to do my part in creating a culture where neurodiversity isn’t just tolerated, it’s celebrated.”

For years, Ruth and Georgina noticed how incredibly difficult it is to find clinically safe and reliable information when you’re struggling. “Distilling truth from opinion can be challenging,” reflects Ruth. “And when you do find the courage to reach out, therapy waiting lists are long, and private options can be costly.” MindsThrive was born as a direct response. “We wanted to create something that filled the gap between a self-help book and a full course of therapy,” Georgina explains.



Ruth Ryden



Georgina Taylor-Adriaansen

Resource library

Together, they created an accessible, affordable and high-quality resource library featuring mental health-related videos, audio recordings and guides that people can access anytime, anywhere. “It’s not about replacing therapy,” says Ruth, “but if we can get someone’s distress down from a 10 to a 7, suddenly they can breathe again. That’s powerful.”

The library is shaped by more than 40 years of combined clinical practice, contributions from other professionals, and the lived experiences of people navigating mental health challenges themselves. The content covers depression, anxiety, burnout, sleep, grief, autism, ADHD and more, and is all broken into bite-sized, relatable sessions.

“Most psychological therapies are written by and for neurotypical minds,” Georgina explains. “We reimagine them into formats that work for everyone. Neurodivergent people often learn best in small chunks, so that’s what we do. Ten minutes, practical tools, and a real-life application at the end.”

Accessibility and quality sit at the centre. The platform is designed for use at home and at work. Their media team helps ensure the resources are professionally produced, while Ruth and Georgina bring warmth, humour and openness to every session. “We’re not polished,” admits Ruth, “and we don’t want to be. What people connect with is honesty.”

An annual subscription costs less than a single private therapy session, opening the door to high-quality support for individuals and workplaces who may otherwise never access it.

Why farming?

With suicide rates worryingly high, particularly among men who are often the least likely to seek formal help, MindsThrive’s model provides a lifeline, offering resources that can be accessed privately, without stigma, at whatever time suits.



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“You can be out on the tractor for hours, stuck with your own thoughts,” Georgina says. “That’s when rumination creeps in. Small worries spiral into something much bigger. We want to give farmers tools they can use in those moments to steady themselves, to reconnect, to feel less alone.”

For neurodivergent farmers, the challenges can be even sharper. Clear communication, predictability and understanding are essential for effective collaboration.

“If you’re managing someone who’s autistic or dyslexic, be precise, write things down, and don’t assume,” says Ruth. “And don’t force unnecessary socialising. It’s exhausting for some people. Instead, focus on creating environments where everyone feels safe to be themselves.”

A different approach

What makes MindsThrive unique is how it blends science with story. Each video is rooted in clinical evidence, but presented through the lens of lived experience, often with Ruth and Georgina sharing their own struggles.

That authenticity is what builds trust. “One person came up to me and said, ‘I feel like I know you because you talked about your car crash,’” Ruth recalls. “That’s the connection we’re after. People shouldn’t feel like they’re on their own in this.

“We can’t change the weather or the demands of the job. But if we can offer people even small steps that make life feel more manageable, that’s worth everything.”

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SOURCES AND EXPERT INPUT PROVIDED BY

- National Autistic Society
- National Library of Medicine
- NHS Dorset
- Karen Fisher, Coaching for Rural Workplaces
- Sharon May, Kingsclere Counselling Service
- Dr Georgina Taylor-Adriaansen and Ruth Ryden, MindsThrive