

Counselling under Covid 19 'Alert Level Two–Delta' update

The new situation under Level Two, Delta version, poses some different issues to what was required of us under Level Two previously. These guidelines have been constructed immediately, in order to provide the best advice we can as we begin this new level. If necessary we will update you later. We suggest you start by looking back to the advice provided in May last year for Level Two. This still applies, with the important additions and adjustments outlined in the guidelines below. See first therefore:

<https://www.nzac.org.nz/assets/Uploads/NZAC-Guidelines-Covid-19-Level-2.pdf>

You will need to use your professional judgement in making a series of decisions about how best to operate with each of your clients, bearing in mind that safety - for your clients, their whanau and you yourself - should be your prime consideration.

Ministry of Health guidelines for allied health professionals under Level Two continue to be **to work remotely wherever possible** and, if meeting in person, **to wear a mask**. See the Ministry's advice to allied health providers: <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-information-health-professionals/covid-19-advice-community-allied-health-scientific-and-technical-providers>

Counsellors qualify as working in a 'health care facility' and/or as part of a 'social service agency' under the new general Level Two guidelines: <https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-levels-and-updates/alert-level-2/#what-we-all-need-to-do-at-alert-level-2-to-stay-safe> A call for advice to the Ministry's helpline recommended counsellors also use: <https://covid19.govt.nz/business-and-money/businesses/doing-business-at-alert-level-2/> as a relevant source of information.

If choosing to work face to face

Taking into account that across the profession counsellors work in very different environments, it is safest to treat your work context as a 'public space', with its size, the number of people who use it, its communal areas and its ventilation systems all playing a part in its overall risk. Please remember, from last year, that you also need to take into account access to the building within which you work (doors, lifts, hallways etc) and the number of people entering and leaving it.

Masks

Advice provided to us is that masks should be worn. Counselling involves semi-close contact for extended periods of time in a closed environment with someone, who could already be carrying an infection and/ or who may recently have been in contact with a large number of strangers, for example in a supermarket. Delta has seriously increased the risks from

unknowing exposure. If either you or your client does not wish to wear a mask, then online sessions are appropriate.

Social distancing

We are required to take steps to ensure social distancing. When seated in your room, you and your client need to be at least one metre apart. Moving closer to the client, for example if they are upset, should be undertaken with care, even when wearing a mask. Waiting areas should allow a two metre distance between chairs, as has been done in doctors' waiting rooms and airport areas. Clients can be advised on how best to arrive and leave your premises, depending on other foot traffic; out and about members of the public are expected to maintain a distance of two metres from each other.

Contact tracing

Your organisation, agency or business must now keep a record both of all contacts who visit it and all those working there. A QR Code poster for this can be obtained from <https://covid19.govt.nz/business-and-money/businesses/get-your-qr-code-poster/> Alternatively you can keep a written record of all using the premises, making sure you log times in and out accurately, plus phone and/or email details. Do not leave a list for clients to fill in as they arrive and leave, as this risks breaching private information.

General safety precautions

Careful hygiene procedures remain important. Open windows, if possible, to air the room between clients. Provide hand sanitizer for clients and use it yourself. Clean surfaces regularly. Wash any glasses or crockery in hot water and do not use again until fully dry. Encourage clients to sneeze or cough into their elbows and do so yourself. Dispose of used tissues promptly. Wash your hands frequently, dry them thoroughly and, if relevant, encourage clients to do the same.

Discussions with clients

Communicate your expectations briefly and calmly at the beginning of the session. Setting clear boundaries will enable the work to get started without distraction but make sure you listen and address any concerns or queries the client may have first. Make it clear that you will not be coming to work if you are at all unwell and that you similarly expect clients to cancel if necessary. We recommend not charging for late cancellations if these are due to ill-health. Take into account that some clients will be more anxious about safety than others and reassure them by your words and actions. For example, you might need to sit further away from someone, or agree to change to working online instead.

If working online

You may find it helpful to revisit the guidelines from last year for working online. These are also part of <https://www.nzac.org.nz/assets/Uploads/NZAC-Guidelines-Covid-19-Level-2.pdf>

Why are we doing this?

Given the absence of Covid cases across the majority of the country, it is easy to wonder if the requirements now instituted are really necessary. It is worth remembering that just one initial case has led to 841 in three weeks and that the Delta variant has caused havoc in many other countries, due to its greatly increased infectivity and its potentially serious outcomes for all age groups. Here in New Zealand we are contributing to making sure that no cases that might unwittingly leave the Auckland region set off a wider outbreak, and also to helping to limit the amount of time Auckland itself has to stay in lockdown. Remember that in abiding by the new requirements you are not only keeping your clients and yourself safe, you are also modelling appropriate behaviour which may then impact their behaviours elsewhere. Never mind the inconvenience; do it for all of us!