

COVID-19 Guidelines - Level 4

Our ethical responsibility remains to keep clients safe, as well as to keep our contract to work with them as best we are able. The great majority of you are no longer allowed to see clients face-to-face, so all work needs to be conducted so that counsellors and clients can stay in their 'bubbles'.

Working remotely

- Read Section 13 of the Code of Ethics, bearing in mind that Sections 1 - 8 of the Code all still apply as well.
- You may also find the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association's guidelines for working with technology has some sections that raise issues you have not thought about. See https://www.ccpa-accp.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/TISCGuidelines_Mar2019_EN.pdf
- Contracting arrangements need to be done more carefully with distance work, since clients are likely to be unfamiliar with this way of using technology.
- Privacy and security issues should be a particular focus.
- Investigate the security risks of any online platform you use.
- With phone or online contact, check out at the beginning of a counselling communication whether the person is in a private situation and ask them to let you know if that changes.
- Make sure you also can guarantee privacy during the communication and that your device is protected by a strong password.
- You may be able to increase privacy at your end by using a headset with a microphone, and can suggest to clients that they do the same. This can counteract the tendency to talk loudly, as well as rendering the voice at the other end inaudible to others.
- It may be advisable to check out what level of password protection the client has, who else has access to their device, and whether someone unwanted might be able to trace the contact.
- Before setting up the contact make sure that both you and the client have wifi or will have sufficient data availability for the length of the contact.
- Make a precise appointment time for the contact and establish how long it will last.
- Clarify together before beginning whether this is ongoing counselling, support or monitoring of safety. Some clients may not want or be able to engage in full counselling at a distance.

- Beware of drifting into the sorts of non-professional conversations that clients are more used to having on phones and devices. Establishing and maintaining emotional connection can be more difficult at a distance.
- If using audio only, be aware of the need for audible indications that you are listening. Ask for information about what may be happening in any pauses or silences.
- With texting, messaging, 'chat' or email, discuss security and privacy issues before beginning. Remind clients that a record of your interactions could be accessed, even if deleted.
- Some clients may only be available via texting, messaging or 'chat'. Use these with great caution, as the communication easily lends itself to misinterpretation, provides very limited access to real emotion and may involve serious gaps in information. These methods will likely be limited to providing support and safety monitoring. Do not hesitate to call the crisis team or police if you have serious concerns for safety.
- Asynchronous communication via email (or even 'snail mail' at present) can be used, and some clients can actually prefer this to face-to-face connection. Contract clearly with clients about how this will work - fees (if relevant), length of time you will spend replying, how soon they can expect a reply and when you would next expect to hear back from them.
- Make sure you schedule times for your responses and set up a space in which to work that reflects your professional self, if you are doing this from home. Bear in mind privacy and security issues.
- You may wish to respond to emails by inserting responses within the client's writing, or by writing a separate full response. This may depend on style - yours and theirs - as well as on the type of need.
- Make sure to keep notes, as usual, if necessary transferring these later to work systems.
- If your workplace sets up remote access, do what you can to check out its security.
- Check out your ways of working remotely in supervision, paying particular attention to any at-risk clients.

Covid-19 issues

- Some clients' anxiety may be exacerbated by the impact of the virus on their lives. Make sure they know how to obtain reliable health information (e.g., <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus> or <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>) and can restrict attention to social media and other sources of poor or inaccurate information.
- Some clients may face increased financial pressure and/or may lose their jobs. Be prepared to work on stress management, decision-making, career options and be well informed about what other services may be of assistance and where information can be obtained on available resources (for example, see MSD, WINZ, IRD and bank websites).

- At this time some client groups may be more vulnerable than others; for example, those with addiction difficulties, violent family dynamics, conflicted family relationships, obsessive-compulsive issues, chronic depression, loneliness and those confined to institutions. Be particularly attentive to increased risk with such clients.
- Some clients may be flouting government CV-19 directives. Be courageous about discussing this with them, rather than doing nothing or going behind their backs. If you think they will be continuing to put others or themselves at risk, then the Code of Ethics requires you to set safety matters above confidentiality and you may need to report them. If so, notify them that this is what you are going to do and reassure them that you will not need to disclose the nature of your relationship with them.
- If you are diagnosed with CV-19 yourself, you will be required to self-isolate and name all the people you have been in contact with since contracting the virus, including the names of any clients you have seen, as 'safety' again needs to over-ride 'confidentiality'. You will not need to identify in what capacity you met with them.
- If you are identified as a close contact of someone who has caught CV-19, you also need to self-isolate immediately, will get monitored and tested. You should also make a complete list of the people you have had contact with since you were with the infected person. You do not need to hand this on to anyone, unless you then test positive yourself. You may however want to notify your own contacts, including any clients, that you have been in contact with an infected person and suggest to them that if they have any concerns they should phone the Healthline on 0800 358 5453. This advice was provided by the Healthline.

'Essential services' and accessing your clients

- Unless you are employed in a service that has been classed as 'essential', you must work from home (your bubble) and with clients who are situated in their bubbles too. Private practitioners cannot deem themselves to be providing an 'essential service' and work from their offices.
- Essential services in our field are limited to 'mental health and addiction services that support high risk and vulnerable client groups' and 'emergency and crisis support for people who feel unwell or are unsafe (eg, Funded helplines, refuges and family violence services, sexual violence crisis services)' (<https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-current-situation/covid-19-essential-services-health-and-disability-system>) The Ministry website goes on to state 'Services are prioritised to those people most at risk of harm if those services were not provided. Each provider delivering these services must immediately identify those people most at risk.'
- If your organisation has been designated as essential, it will have strict policies in place to manage this. You are able to go to and from your office, but may be working online, possibly from home, wherever possible.

- The police will be checking on individuals and organisations that they are following the government's directives.
- If you have poor access to your clients online, via email or using your phone, or you cannot ensure confidentiality from within your bubble, you must suspend work with clients or transfer them to another practitioner, if you believe them to be at risk.
- Bear in mind that clients also need to be able to ensure confidentiality in their bubble, if you are to continue counselling them.

For Supervisors

- You should expect to spend time checking out the appropriateness of arrangements for working remotely.
- Ask supervisees about any at risk clients and what arrangements they have made. It may be necessary to be available for brief consultations between sessions about any such clients; counsellors may have greater difficulty in determining risk, with distance work.
- Now may be a good time for discussing professional development activities and supervisees' reports and plans for their continuing professional development
- Counsellors have an ethical obligation to take care of their own health, in order to be reliably and effectively available to their clients. Supervisors should monitor this, not only in relation to Covid-19, but also regarding general physical health, workload management, stress levels and mental wellbeing, all of which may be affected by the present situation. Supervisees may need to use some supervision time to discuss their personal circumstances.
- The 'normative' function of supervision requires supervisors to monitor the appropriateness of counsellors' communication and actions. Some counsellors may be inclined to ignore government directives, or may need to be encouraged to challenge clients who are doing so.

Employment

- Counsellors have ethical responsibilities to their colleagues and employers. They may need to participate in activities to establish policies and procedures for staff sick leave, staff self-isolation, unpaid leave, client cancellations, fees, the management of work from home, online security systems, assistance with additional home internet costs, telephone rosters, client risk management, etc.

NZAC will keep in touch with members about any developments and recommendations as needed. If you have any suggestions to assist us, or queries regarding the above, please contact the Ethics Office. ethicssecretary@nzac.org.nz