

Covid Traffic Light Guidelines 19th December 2021

These guidelines have been developed in relation to what we can discern to date about the application of the traffic light system to counselling. They will be updated, as needed, as further advice comes to hand. It is important to take into account that there is flexibility, according to individual circumstances.

Considerations

Responsibility for hauora; health and well being

Our responsibility as counsellors is to facilitate hauora in all its aspects. This includes our responsibility to each individual client, their whānau and friends, our colleagues and ourselves, to keep everyone safe to protect and enhance wellbeing from an holistic viewpoint.

Vaccination is one tool in the fight against Covid. Mask wearing, physical distancing of at least one metre, hand and surface hygiene, room ventilation and contact tracing remain important at work. It may be useful to revisit all these aspects regularly. Remember that people project 'aerosols' while talking and the measures you take need to protect you and others from potential transmission through breath, physical touch and surface contact. Counsellors and work colleagues should stay away from work, if sick, and encourage clients to cancel, preferably not charging for this, if they feel unwell.

Where you are unsure, treat the situation with the same health and safety measures as you would high risk.

Responsibility to all clients

Whether a client is vaccinated should not determine whether they are entitled to have access to a counselling service. Rather, vaccination status should determine how a client is seen and by whom. All clients, whether vaccinated or not, need the protection of NZAC members having a full understanding of, and following public health measures, as well as following the Code of Ethics to do no harm.

We have a responsibility to tell clients, and any others we work with, our own vaccination status. You can indicate your status and that of any others working in the premises by making these clear, for example, with a pre session email, letter and/or information in your waiting area. Workplace information to clients can include that unvaccinated people will be seen by telehealth or at another site, if that is your decision.

In the current and future context of risk to health, we all need to assume responsibility for our safety and that of others. Clients will need to do the same according to their ability to do so.

Before contracting with clients, a risk analysis screen can be a good way to assess risk. Options include emailing a pre-session covid questionnaire or having a phone conversation. There is a sample questionnaire at end of this document.

Whether your workplace has opted to require vaccine passes or not, you are free to ask clients and others coming into your work space or attending meetings with you, if they are vaccinated. If you don't require vaccine passes, they have a right not to answer. You need to frame questions in such a way that it is comfortable for people to answer 'no' or to decline to answer the question, e.g. 'Could I just check whether ...', perhaps after disclosing your own vaccination status.

If a person chooses not to answer, treat them at the same risk level as an unvaccinated person, remembering that unknown risk should be treated with the same health and safety measures as high risk. If you opt not to work face to face with unvaccinated clients, or those whose status is unclear, you can offer online or telephone help, or referral to a provider, who will be able to see them. Make sure you have a process in place for doing this.

Under the Code of Ethics you are responsible for taking care of your own health and safety (5.1c), in order to remain available to your clients in general. Therefore, as well as taking into account the 'traffic light' operating in your area, you may consider your own health circumstances, those of your whānau, the nature of your counselling room, the waiting area and building access, as well as your preferred ways of working with clients. Your decision-making may also be influenced by a client's stance; a client who has chosen to be unvaccinated and is prepared to abide by other preventive measures will be less risk than one who refuses to wear a mask, declines screening and contracting-for-safety conversations or is ignoring the potential outcome of super-spreader events.

Managing counsellor reactions

Some clients may present views about Covid that you find challenging or upsetting. There is a tradition in the helping professions of needing to recognise when a client's beliefs trigger responses that are hard to manage, given the worker's own values. Historically this has for example been applied to client views on abortion, racial views, religious beliefs, attitudes to abuse, body dysmorphia, euthanasia, gender identity etc. If a counsellor's triggers cannot be addressed and set aside through personal reflection and supervision, the ethical response is to refer the client elsewhere (see the Code of Ethics 5.3a and 5.9c), in order for the client to receive an effective service.

Essential services

Some health services have been designated 'essential' due to their being partially or fully funded under particular government contracts. They are required to work with clients thus funded, whether the clients are vaccinated or not. The present list includes; the Ministry of Health; Oranga Tamariki/ Ministry for Children; the Ministry of Social Development; the Department of Corrections; District Health Boards; Family Court, Veterans' Affairs New Zealand; and the Accident Compensation Corporation.

In the case of counselling, this work does not necessarily require face to face on site. Workplaces can take into account the health and safety of individual counsellors as well as the risks posed by particular client interactions in deciding who can, and how best to, work with a particular client. In dealing with a mix of unvaccinated funded clients and others, it is important to pay thorough attention to the additional safety and health issues for all using the premises.

Requiring vaccine passes and working in 'close contact'

NZAC has sought advice in defining counsellors as health practitioners, because we deliver health services. The Ministry of Health has provided guidelines for allied health providers. Carry out your own risk assessments for your business or agency and your personal circumstances in order to decide what to do. See https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/pages/covid-19_protection_framework_guidance_for_allied_health_services.pdf

The guidelines for small businesses also provide a useful parallel to allied health work that is non-essential. See, for example, <https://www.al.nz/the-traffic-light-system-and-vaccination-mandates-for-hospitality-retail-gyms-and-close-proximity-businesses/> from the law firm, Anderson Lloyd.

You may want to think about whether your work is sufficiently similar to a 'close proximity service' to apply similar thinking. If you spend more than 15 minutes in an enclosed space with a client and may be closer than one metre apart for some of the session, for example in doing a drawing with a client, working closely with body movement, breathing or posture, looking at a website together, studying a diagram or moving closer to convey comfort, you may regard your work as 'close contact' and make use of the guidelines for hairdressers, massage therapists and nail salons. Like health services, both 'close contact' businesses and those requiring vaccine certificates need their workers to be vaccinated.

In general, as an agency or an individual or group practice, the site needs to function at the level of caution relevant to its most risky activity and/or its most vulnerable people - clients, employees, contractors and visitors. So while you may not class your context as 'close contact' you can still choose to require vaccine passes, based on those who may be present on the premises, including yourself.

You or your organisation may want to download a free app called the 'NZ pass verifier', to use before beginning counselling. This is provided by the Ministry of Health, see <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-vaccines/my-covid-record-proof-vaccination-status/nz-pass-verifier>

It verifies vaccination and exemption status under the orders, including the COVID-19 Protection Framework, and should be able to identify false passes. You may also check identity against other evidence, such as drivers' licences. If you take these precautions, take particular care not to damage beginning trust and confidence in the client's relationship with you. If available, reception or administrative assistance might be best to undertake the checking. Also take the usual care to preserve clients' privacy and confidentiality, bearing in mind the particular risks if you are using your phone for verification.

The Traffic Light System

The traffic light system is designed to provide greater protection for regions that are at greater risk. At present these are being assessed by considering vaccination levels, hospital facilities, accessibility to health care in general and present infection levels.

There are likely to be changes to these designations as circumstances change. When having any pre-screening or contracting conversations with new clients, you should be alert to the changing traffic light levels in your region. Also explain how any changes may affect the delivery of counselling services and keep existing clients up to date with the situation.

In constructing the guidelines below for the different traffic light levels, we have assumed that most counsellors will define themselves as working in a largely 'close contact' situation, if seeing clients face to face. If you are not working in an essential service and do not see yourself as working in 'close contact', you still have the right to require vaccine passes if you wish.

Negotiating the system

Red light

Where feasible, counsellors can choose to work remotely but double vaccinated clients may be seen on site, using masks and avoiding close contact (i.e. more than one metre apart at all times). Clients who are not fully vaccinated, or who do not wish to indicate their status, are best seen online, unless a required activity such as an assessment or review needs face to face contact; if so, use the full range of health and safety measures, plus contact tracing. Take care of the health and safety needs of the other clients and workers using the same premises (reception, waiting areas, entry and exit routes, as well as interview rooms).

Group work or training that may include unvaccinated members should be limited to 25 people and full protection and prevention measures taken. The physical space used needs to allow participants to remain a minimum of one metre apart. It may be advisable to work with those who are unvaccinated, or unwilling to indicate their status, individually or as a separate group. Schools will be open, so school counsellors should use the preventive measures for schools and take great care in both face to face and group work.

Orange light

Under orange, it is expected that you will go to work and see double vaccinated clients face to face with ongoing health and safety measures in place, although physical distancing is not required. It is still a choice to work remotely with unvaccinated clients, particularly if you identify as vulnerable. If it is impossible to work with unvaccinated clients online or by phone, you may choose to see them in person, but you should work in ways that avoid close contact and pay full attention to all the precautionary measures.

Green light

At green, life is almost back to normal. Double vaccinated clients can be seen in a close contact manner. You can work with those who are not fully vaccinated or who will not indicate their status, providing you all use masks and scan in; they also do not need to be physically distanced. Groups of up to 100 can meet, regardless of vaccination status.

Conclusion

In summary, the options are complex. You will need to consider carefully your obligations under public health and safety guidelines, in order to make practical decisions for your own practice. Your choice will depend on the particular circumstances that apply to your client-base, whether you are seeing government funded clients, the ways in which you work with clients, clients' capacity to engage in counselling online or by phone, the premises you work in, the safety of those who work there, including you, plus your whānau and the community context of your work. You also need to be alert to the impact of changes in any of these, open to adjusting your stance to suit and working with existing clients to make any necessary adjustments to how you function together.