



Counselling under Covid 19 Alert Level Two

This update addresses New Zealand's move to Alert Level Two. The key focus in this Level is on maintaining the state we have reached, as a result of the severe restrictions we have undergone under Levels Four and Three. The virus is not gone from New Zealand, a small number of cases will continue to emerge – the 'long tail' the epidemiologists talk about. We do not want to go backwards. Any risk you take yourself is potentially a risk to a great many others, given how easily this virus spreads. The keys to success at this point are careful management of social contact, widespread testing and thorough contact checking. It is going to be tempting for some to see the risk as over; we have only to look at the very small beginnings over the second half of March to see how quickly numbers can escalate.

It is useful both for you and your clients to be aware of the general requirements at this level. See the Government description of what Level Two entails:

<https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-system/alert-level-2/>

The Ministry of Health has issued instructions for those in allied health areas, which include counselling. It will be updating these guidelines and we shall notify you, when that happens:

<https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-resources-health-professionals/covid-19-advice-community-allied-health-scientific-and-technical-providers#level2>

Under Level Two you are able to return to your workplace. However, this does not mean that the norm now is to meet with clients face to face. Ministry of Health guidelines to the Allied Health Professions state "telehealth and virtual appointments are still the preferred option." **Your default position therefore needs to be to work remotely, either from your workplace or from home, wherever possible.** If your agency or employer is eager for you to resume face to face work, remember that the key ethical concern here is the health and safety of your clients, so engage in discussion about how best to meet varied client needs as safely as possible.

Agency and organisation employees will also have differing needs, according to their own health status, their age and any risk they could pose to those with whom they interact closely; these needs should be taken into account by employers.

We have all learned to be a lot more flexible over the last few weeks, let's not lose that resourcefulness to make things work, now life is a little closer to what we used to regard as normal. It may be helpful to have staggered work hours to avoid congestion, a mix of onsite and work from home, occasional trips to the workplace to complete onsite tasks or collect or deliver items, changed layouts or use of space etc. Think creatively.

If you do need to see clients in your workplace

The general instructions from the Ministry of Health for all social contacts follow. You will need to monitor most of these for your clients as well as yourself, your colleagues and your immediate environment:

- cough or sneeze into your elbow or by covering your mouth and nose with tissues;
- put used tissues in the bin or a bag immediately;
- wash your hands with soap and water often (for at least 20 seconds);
- avoid close contact with people who are unwell;
- don't touch your eyes, nose or mouth if your hands are not clean;
- clean surfaces regularly such as touch screens, petrol pumps, EFTPOS machines, conveyer belts and self-checkouts.

You will need to pay attention to the environment around your counselling facilities:

- Take responsibility for providing safe access to your counselling rooms, not just ensuring safe practices within them. This may mean you take into account the building's entry system (e.g. door handles, buzzers), lobby area, lift or stair use, landings, hallways, shared toilets and waiting areas etc.
- Play your part in keeping communal spaces in your building safe and make sure you have provided information to clients on safety protocols before they come. Also make sure there is signage around the building about expected behaviour.
- Take into account and discuss clients' transport options, if opting to meet with them, and think about parking arrangements, public transport issues, etc.
- Keep an eye on any changes to health advice about the use of masks. At present this seems possibly to have merit in preventing the wearer from spreading infection.

Within your work space:

- Always begin by checking if clients potentially have Covid 19 symptoms. If a client arrives unwell, do not work with them, recommend they get tested and send them home.
- Provide hand sanitiser and encourage clients to wash their hands, as well as doing this yourself regularly between clients.
- Keep a safe distance from clients (at least one metre) and avoid touching.
- Provide a lined bin for used tissues and empty it regularly, washing your hands thoroughly afterwards.
- Wash any cups, water glasses etc. in a dishwasher or very hot soapy water; and/ or suggest to clients that they bring a cup or water bottle with them, if they will want a drink.
- Time appointments so that clients have as little contact with others as possible. Avoid clients needing to wait. Space out the chairs in your waiting area.
- Be ready for some clients to be nervous about the physical risk in seeing you. Be prepared for some to want to re-organise the seating, wear a mask, and/or want you to wear one.
- Group work may be very difficult, or impossible if you lack the necessary space, and, if at all possible, should wait until restrictions are further lifted.
- Keep toilet and kitchen facilities scrupulously clean, make sure there is soap and regularly disinfect door handles through the day.

- If an EFTPOS machine is used for payments, make sure it is sanitised before and after every use.
- Encourage clients to cancel, if they feel at all unwell and, if relevant, waive any late cancellation fees.
- Do not come to work yourself if you feel unwell, however mildly, and go home during the working day if you start to feel unwell. Get tested.
- Keep clients informed verbally, in writing and/or through signage, of the strategies you are employing to keep the environment safe.
- Be prepared to challenge unsafe practices or decision-making with clients, colleagues and employers.
- Continue to be willing to work remotely with clients who are nervous about coming in.
- Keep a list of all the people you have contact with in a day, going to and from your workplace as well as within it.
- Discuss your management of Covid-19 risks in supervision.
- Remember that the police will be continuing to check on individuals and organisations that they are following the government's directives for Level 2.

Continuing to work remotely

- By now many counsellors will be very familiar with online work, do not let this lead to carelessness. If you are now working both remotely and face to face, make sure that your remote approach does not suffer, especially if you have not felt so at ease working this way.
- If not already read, there is a useful article on using e-technologies for supervision published in the New Zealand Journal of Counselling in 2017 by Flanagan et al, <https://nzac.org.nz/assets/Uploads/2.-Ethics-relationships-and-pragmatics-in-the-use-of-e-technologies-in-counselling-supervision.pdf> Also see 3.14, 'Online Practices' by Jeannie Wright in *Ethics In Practice: A guide for counsellors* edited by Crocket, Agee and Cornforth, which includes a checklist for ethical online practice and quotes an Aunt Ethica letter from 2007.
- If you have not read it before, the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association's guidelines for working with technology may also assist you with issues you have not thought about. See https://www.ccpa-accp.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/TISCGuidelines_Mar2019_EN.pdf
- Continue to pay good attention to contracting arrangements, since new clients are likely to be unfamiliar with this way of using their technology. Also, contracting is an ongoing process, not something that just happens at the beginning.
- Make sure you continue to attend to the privacy and security issues at both ends of the counselling conversation.
- Investigate the security risks of any online platform you use. NZAC has done some research and is providing you with resources for considering this issue but is not recommending any particular platform.
- 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 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 written 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.
- If working from home, either make sure you have access to the relevant notes system or, if necessary, transfer these later to workplace systems.
- If you have remote access to your work systems, ask questions about its security.
- Check out your ways of working remotely in your supervision, paying particular attention to any at-risk clients.

Working with children in Level Two

Whether you choose to work with children face to face or remotely, this work poses particular issues, about which the Ethics Office has received several queries.

Face to face work

- Social distancing will be difficult face to face, although children who have returned to school or early learning centres may be familiar with what is expected.
- Not touching may also be more difficult with children, especially if a young child becomes distressed. Work to use your voice tone and non-verbal communication to convey your compassion.
- Any materials used with children either need to be disposable or able to be sanitised after each use. The latter is also likely to require extra time between sessions.
- You may find it helpful to suggest that children bring their own toys, games or materials to use with you in counselling.
- Supervise hand washing and the use of hand sanitiser as necessary and pay attention to washing and sanitising your own hands regularly.

Working remotely

- Counselling is likely to work better using video systems than audio; many small children are used to communicating with family and friends via online video. For either system, sessions may need to be kept short, to match concentration spans.
- The ways in which you welcome and include caregivers, whanau and parents, when they bring their children to your office and when they pick them up afterwards, need to be replicated in a different form, when working online.
- Online contracting needs to be done carefully and thoroughly and including caregivers, whanau and parents in this process. If you want privacy for the child, explain why this is, discuss what materials you might like to have available, talk about what sort of communication you may have with caregivers after the session, reassure and explain about confidentiality, make suggestions about how to deal with any post-session distress.
- Where possible, be even more ready to recruit caregivers as your co-therapists, available 24/7, than you would when meeting face to face. Provide them with guidance and support in this role.
- In some situations, it may be more effective to work with the caregiver(s) online than the child.

Children's issues

- It is an unknown at present how the lockdown experience will have affected children. It is probable that few will have experienced traumatising consequences directly from the epidemic. However, how well their bubble has managed relationships, how age appropriate any explanation of the virus has been, what the impact of economic uncertainties has been on their caregivers and how children have managed isolation from peers and normal activities may all affect what they bring, or indeed avoid bringing, to counselling.
- Children who have been isolated in bubbles experienced as unsafe may have regressed and may be reluctant to re-engage with counselling until they know they are safe at home.

- Children who find it hard to trust attachments may have lost their attachment to their counsellors and patience may be needed for this to rebuild. Restoring attachment may take longer if you are working online.
- For some children it may not be possible to progress the counselling work, until their lives feel more settled. Support and safety monitoring may need to be sufficient for the moment.

Covid-19 issues for adults

- The move into Level Two may involve some changes in client issues, although the matters named before and included below are still likely to apply.
- Level 2 is likely to require further decision-making by individuals and 'bubbles'. This may still include: whether children should go to school; whether it is viable to continue working from home; whether a workplace is sufficiently safe; whether fellow workers or employees are functioning safely; whether to visit others; whether to undertake a recreational activity; whether to attend a hospital appointment; whether to travel; whether to agree to take annual leave or a pay cutetc. Counsellors should make sure they are familiar with Level 2 expectations, in order to assist clients to explore options. See <https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-system/alert-level-2/>
- As wage subsidies end and businesses consider cut-backs and closures, uncertainty and distress about employment and finance will increase. Keep well-informed, both about national provisions and local sources of help (for example, see MSD, WINZ, IRD and bank websites; know how to get in touch with local foodbanks, budgeting agencies and volunteer help). Be prepared to work on stress management, decision-making, career options, study decisions, budget management.
- The help counselling clients may need could also require advocacy or social work assistance, to address practical difficulties. Recognise that if you choose to help in this regard you are taking on multiple relationships, which may be appropriate but should be considered with care. Does taking on this role risk undermining the counselling relationship? Are you in fact the best equipped person to take on this role? How will you clarify with the client the different roles? How much input might this new role need? It may be wise to discuss all this in supervision.
- Complete lockdown was described by some as a 'hibernation' and, as such, some clients may have put longer term issues on hold. Clients may now be returning to a focus on these. While there may be new difficulties created directly by the pandemic and lockdown, it is much more likely that recent painful experiences will fit within or have exacerbated pre-existing themes of distress.
- Do not however assume that isolation under lockdown and removal from ordinary life will have been a difficult experience for all clients. Some will have enjoyed the opportunity to pay attention to some different aspects of their lives or will have benefitted from the reduction in distressing stimuli from the world outside, for example.
- It has been widely expected that worries about the virus will have caused or deepened anxiety. Make sure clients 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 encourage them to restrict attention to social media and

other sources of poor or inaccurate information. Be particularly aware of feelings of anxiety, guilt and powerlessness in relation to family or friends overseas, where the coronavirus experience is much worse than here.

- Some client groups may continue to 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.
- Boredom, isolation and fear may have led to the development of new difficulties with alcohol and drugs, online gambling, online pornography, video gaming, eating and exercise disorders, and sleep patterns. Be alert to the development of these and to clients' potential embarrassment in acknowledging them.
- Some clients may be flouting Level 2 expectations. Be courageous about discussing this with them. 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 let someone know. If so, notify the client 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.
- While we are all hoping that new infections will now be very rare, keep account of your own contacts just in case this information is needed, either because you, or someone you have been in close contact with, could be infected. Your contact list should include any clients with whom you met, you will not need to identify in what capacity you met them. If you have any concerns about the right course of action, phone the Healthline on 0800 358 5453; get tested if you have any doubts about your own health or that of a close contact.

For Supervisors

- You should expect to continue to spend time checking out the appropriateness of arrangements for working, either remotely or face to face.
- Be particularly attentive to arrangements for working with children, groups or those with special needs.
- Continue to check out any at risk clients and arrangements for managing these. It may be necessary to be available for brief consultations between sessions.
- Many counsellors will have their own financial and job security issues, as well as needing to help their clients with theirs. Be prepared to identify parallel process situations and help counsellors to recognise where they might need to focus on their own personal concerns.
- Some counsellors may be sufficiently anxious about maintaining an income or accruing hours for practicum purposes that they may lose sight of ethical considerations in their practice. This could involve working beyond their competence, continuing work with clients who are ready to finish, over-charging, engaging in client work where they have a conflict of interest, seeing clients more frequently than is therapeutically useful, inappropriate marketing, cancelling supervision sessions to limit costs, amongst other possibilities. Keep the Code of Ethics to hand and explore its relevance where necessary.
- If counsellors are struggling financially, it may be appropriate to recontract fees for supervision, if this will enable them to engage in sufficient supervision.

- In discussing supervisees' plans for their CPD, it may be helpful to take into account the likely impact of the emerging post-epidemic landscape, both in terms of their own personal circumstances and those of their potential clients in the year ahead.
- Counsellors have an ethical obligation to take care of their own health, in order to be available to their clients. General physical health, workload management, stress levels and mental wellbeing may be affected by the present situation and need discussion. Make sure you also discuss the relevant sections of their RAPC, before signing it off online.
- Supervisees may need 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 themselves, or may need to be encouraged to challenge clients who are doing so.

Employment

- Counsellors have ethical responsibilities to their colleagues and employers. With the return to workplace activity, there may be a need for ongoing discussions and decision-making on policies and procedures for staff safety, sick leave, staff self-isolation, unpaid leave, annual leave, client cancellations, fees, the management of work from home, online security systems, assistance with additional home internet costs, telephone rosters, client risk management, assessment difficulties, supervision arrangements etc.
- With heightened financial concerns, some employment settings may be inclined to make changes to policies and procedures that are unsafe or unethical for clients, trainees, volunteers, employees or contractors. Discuss these in supervision, challenge where possible and consult NZAC as necessary.

NZAC will keep in touch with members about 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