

COVID-19: Experiences and strategies of secondary school counsellors in the 2021 Auckland lockdown

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Abstract

This article reports the findings from a facilitated peer group discussion among secondary school counsellors on 4 October 2021 during the most prolonged lockdown in Auckland since the worldwide COVID-19 outbreak. With the first author as facilitator, four participants (co-authors of this paper) discussed the psychosocial effect of the lockdown on the wellbeing of secondary school students. These included increased anxiety and constant low mood, issues related to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the use of devices for education and communication, complex dynamics at home, and the different challenges and demands on counsellors that resulted from these effects. The participants also shared counselling strategies they had used in lockdown to work as effectively as possible for their clients. These included intentional therapeutic approaches that were flexible and creative, resilience building, and collaboration with the wider community of care. The counsellors also reflected on their self-care strategies to prevent burnout and the silver linings they perceived from COVID-19.

Key Words: school counsellor, secondary school students, lockdown, COVID-19, counselling strategies

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This article reports the findings of research conducted on 4 October 2021, during the extended Auckland lockdown in New Zealand when COVID-19 had transformed the nature of life in countries across the world. This pandemic has affected family life within the confines of homes, has caused school and workplace closures, and has resulted in economic, social and psychological challenges.

Auckland has endured four lockdowns in 2020–2021. Due to the number of active cases of COVID-19 in the region, it stayed in lockdown longer than the remainder of the country during the fourth of these, which started on 18 August 2021 and continued for more than three months. Anecdotally, there were growing concerns that the fourth lockdown had become even more stressful than the last three, and there seemed to be a profound sense of helplessness and frustration in the community. Prolonged school closures were causing stress for young people and families, and teachers were under pressure to provide distance learning, while counsellors had to adjust to online counselling. Research into the experiences of school counsellors working with young people during this unprecedented time seemed necessary.

The first author invited four secondary school counsellors to participate in a peer group discussion via Zoom on 4 October 2021 (lockdown Day 48, Week 7) to explore their experiences of the Auckland lockdown and their views on its effects on secondary school students. The intention was to capture concerns arising from the lockdown to inform wider conversations in the professional counsellors' community. Although a considerable amount of research was already available on the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects worldwide, little was published about the Auckland experience. Hence, this research explored these counsellors' perspectives on the effects of the lockdown on the wellbeing of students, the counselling strategies they used in lockdown, their self-care strategies to prevent burnout, and their perspectives on silver linings from COVID-19.

Literature on the impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted normal activities, thereby increasing levels of stress and anxiety and compromising mental and psychosocial wellbeing across the world. Changes include working and studying from home, moving education online, and other restrictions involving multiple losses and evoking many forms of grief (Mazza et al., 2020; Qiu et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2020).

Young people and school closures in lockdown

School closures in lockdowns have significantly affected young people and their families, and the deterioration of children and young people's mental and physical wellbeing is concerning (UNESCO, 2021). Several international studies have indicated an increase in a range of symptoms such as depression, anxiety, fatigue, grief, irritability, restlessness, inattention, frustration, boredom, fear of infection, disturbed sleep, nightmares, headaches, poor appetite, and agitation, amongst many others. Stressors have included increased isolation due to a lack of in-person contact with classmates, friends and teachers; lack of personal space at home; stressful home environments; parental work-related stress and job loss; family financial struggles; the death or illness of family members; exposure to frightening daily newsfeeds; uncertain futures; difficulty with time management; physical inactivity; much longer screen time; disruption of routines and sleep schedules; and less favourable diets (Asanov, 2021; Brooks et al., 2020; Hoffman & Miller, 2020; Imran et al., 2020; Karvounides et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020; G. Wang et al., 2020).

Students lacking self-regulation skills have found distance learning more demanding and stressful than regular, in-person schooling, and have struggled to complete their many assignments in the face of such dramatic changes of pedagogies and the ecology of schooling (Cerović et al., 2021; Pelikan et al., 2021). They respond differently to online education based on their proficiency in using online tools, their ability to access online courses technically, and teachers' methods in learning activities (Brooks et al., 2020).

Digital inequality due to poverty (Khan et al., 2020) including limited access to high-speed internet and home computers has adversely affected adolescents from lower-income households (Anderson, 2018). COVID-19 added more sources of anxiety and grieving to the already vulnerable population of migrant families and communities

(Falicov et al., 2020). Migrant children are more likely to have difficulty accessing Wi-Fi, smartphones, or computers, or suffer overcrowding and lack of privacy.

In times of cumulative stress, young people's protective factors such as physical activities and contact with close friends are restricted (L. Wang et al., 2021). Girls perceive that the pandemic has affected them more negatively than boys in their day-to-day lives, academic performance and mental health. Consequently, their depressive symptoms have increased more than boys (Halldorsdottir et al., 2021). Young people with special needs have encountered increased challenges during lockdowns as some experience an intolerance of uncertainty when under enforced restriction and their routine is broken (Singh et al., 2020).

Lockdowns and abrupt school closures have also caused significant confusion and stress for teachers, who have been under pressure to suddenly provide remote teaching while dealing with their own personal challenges such as home-schooling their children, caring for vulnerable family members, managing their own mental health, and uncertainty regarding the reopening of the schools. Worrying about vulnerable pupils, stressed teachers have also expressed concerns about the loss of relational aspects in education (Kim & Asbury, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

Impact on families

Home confinement could potentially offer an opportunity to enhance parent-child relationships and strengthen family bonds. Parents could play an essential role in modelling healthy behaviour (Perrin et al., 2016; G. Wang et al., 2020). However, there is a growing concern in the international research about significant pandemic-related parental stress, tension, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, due to school closures, working from home, job losses, financial difficulties, and parents being forced into the role of educators (Calvano et al., 2021; Hiraoka & Tomoda, 2020; Hoffman & Miller, 2020; M. Wang et al., 2021; World Health Organization, 2020). An increased number of children have witnessed domestic violence and experienced verbal and emotional abuse (Usher et al., 2020).

Parental burnout leads to an overwhelming sense of exhaustion, emotional distancing from children, a loss of fulfillment in the parental role, and a reduction in confidence and self-esteem (Aguiar et al., 2021). High levels of parental burnout, deteriorating psychological wellbeing, and hardship consequently increase children's stress-related behaviour and affect their wellbeing (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020; Kerr et al., 2021). Families in low socio-economic groups

facing economic hardship and employment issues experience particular risk to their wellbeing. Increased parental depression and anxiety, and deterioration in the quality of parenting and co-parenting, are more prevalent in those families (Feinberg et al., 2021).

The adverse effect on parent–child relational dynamics consequently undermines the emotional wellbeing of both (Singh et al., 2020; M. Wang et al., 2021).

Impact on counsellors

Counsellors have been equally exposed to the effects of the pandemic and adversity in their lives, and a sense of despair, anxiety, and uncertainty can also prevail for them. In this regard, practitioners are constantly engaging with high levels of client stress that could overwhelm their professional and personal selves, while they are restructuring their practice and skills to rapidly adapt to online therapy (Joshi et al., 2021).

While online counselling can be effective in treating issues such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress (Poletti et al., 2020), there are many potential challenges (MacMullin et al., 2020). These include lack of competency in using technology; limited adaptability of therapeutic interventions; lack of relational aspects with clients; miscommunications and misunderstandings due to the reduced context relative to face-to-face communication; ethical and legal concerns including anonymity, online security, client verification and crises; and maintaining boundaries with clients.

More than ever in the COVID-19 era, the client–counsellor relationship is intrinsically linked to what is happening in the systems of a client’s family, community, and society. Hence, the pandemic invites health care professionals to continue to reflect on therapeutic approaches that could most effectively meet clients’ changing needs (Vostanis & Bell, 2020).

Existential anxiety is common in times of adversity like the pandemic and lockdowns, and an openness to engage in existential questioning and conversations on the meaning of life can increase life satisfaction and enhance post-traumatic growth (Tomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2020). Counsellors can utilise and facilitate clients’ resourcefulness, creativity, and resilience to develop clients’ own self-generated coping, problem-solving, and health-enhancing solutions (Selekman, 2021). In lockdown, schools have an essential role in connecting students with counsellors whose services support young people in coping with mental health challenges (G. Wang et al., 2020).

This new paradigm of online therapy necessitates training as well as support in supervision, as counsellors may be experiencing a sense of helplessness alongside a strong sense of professional responsibility to care. The importance of the wellbeing of healthcare professionals as they try to facilitate hope and a sense of meaning while working with profound suffering, losses, and adversity in the lives of clients has been highlighted (Selekman, 2021; World Health Organization, 2020).

Methodology

Participants

For the purpose of this study, the first author invited four counsellors (three female and one male) to take part in a peer group discussion that she would facilitate. The counsellors were personally known to her and were selected as they met five criteria: 1) they were qualified and experienced professional counsellors; 2) they were working in a secondary school in paid employment; 3) they represented different areas of Auckland (East, South, North, and Central to South); 4) they were providing counselling to students from diverse ethnic backgrounds in lockdown; and 5) they were themselves affiliated with different ethnic groups.

Table 1

Demographics of the Participants in the Peer Discussion

Name	School	Ethnic background
Elahe Khaleghian	Rosehill College, Papakura	NZ Middle Eastern
Kim James	St Kentigern College, Pakuranga	NZ European
Paumea McKay	Tangaroa College, Otara	NZ Māori
Tillie Lima	Carmel College, North Shore	NZ Pasifika
Hyeeun Kim (Facilitator)	Lecturer, Laidlaw College	NZ Korean (Kowi)

Procedure

Prior to the meeting, the group discussed and agreed on the purpose of the facilitated peer group discussion, the topics, and the structure of the meeting. They also consented to be video-recorded on Zoom. No formal ethics approval was sought as there were no immediate risks or ethical concerns for professionals participating in a peer group discussion. However, the participants followed the New Zealand Association of Counsellors *Code of Ethics* (NZAC, 2020) with due diligence when discussing sensitive, privileged, or confidential information. No personal details of clients, school staff, or family members were identified.

A two-hour-long, semi-structured discussion was held, and the recording was then transcribed for analysis and analysed by the first author. The counsellors who took part received the transcript and the summary of emerging themes, and they also had an opportunity to review this research and contribute their feedback. Their insights and perspectives were integrated into the final report.

A qualitative approach was most appropriate for this research. It offers researchers an opportunity to enter a field with an open mind and allows them to examine people's experiences in detail (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Hennink et al., 2011). Thematic analysis was the method selected to analyse the data, as it is useful in "capturing the complexities of meaning ... [to] move beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data. That is, themes. . . ." (Guest et al., 2012, pp. 10–11). There were six phases of analysis: familiarising oneself with the data, generating an initial list of ideas, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the research report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results and discussion

It was evident from the data collected and the resulting themes that the COVID-19 pandemic had unsettled the lives of secondary school students and counsellors in Auckland. Four pertinent topics were discussed: 1) the psychosocial impact on the wellbeing of secondary school students; 2) counselling strategies in lockdown; 3) self-care strategies the counsellors had personally used; and 4) silver linings from COVID-19. A number of themes emerged from the conversation on each topic; these are examined in the material that follows.

1. Psychosocial impact: How the lockdown has affected the wellbeing of secondary school students

The counsellors reported four areas of concern regarding the wellbeing of the students in lockdown: increased anxiety and constant low mood; issues related to information and communication technology (ICT) and devices used for education and communication; complex dynamics at home; and challenges in counselling those students as clients.

Increased anxiety and constant low mood.

It seemed that the novelty of the first few lockdowns had disappeared, and the fourth lockdown was more challenging than previous ones. Students experienced low mood, which was difficult to shift and no longer up and down.

Previous overseas research identified similar issues of low mood and depressive symptoms (Halldorsdottir et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020).

Just low moods, and the anxiety that students have carried through all four lockdowns have progressively worsened. (Tillie)

A lot of students said, “I just feel really low, and I can’t shift this”. It is just a constant low mood. It is not an up and down anymore. (Kim)

Increased anxiety was apparent for those students with pre-existing anxiety issues, learning disabilities, and different learning needs. Restricted access to learning and face-to-face support, and reduced contact with peers also added stress. The immediacy of accessing support had become especially critical, and their anxiety intensified when it was delayed or unavailable. These experiences appear to be consistent with previous research that young people with special needs encountered increased challenges during lockdown because of their intolerance of uncertainty (Singh et al., 2020).

It was really difficult for students if they were anxious already. This has just been heightened anxiety ... [for] our students with learning disabilities or different learning needs. They couldn’t access the support that they were used to. A lot of frustration and a lack of motivation. (Kim)

All of that really boils down to reduced contact and not having the anxiety responded to quickly or catered for as quickly as when they are at school. They [used to] have access to teachers, to tutor teachers who play a magnificent role in settling these young people, and the counselling team, the learning department. ... However, they have lost access to those human sources of feeling connected and learning. (Elahe)

International fee-paying students struggled with anxiety, uncertainty and homesickness.

The uncertainty, and whether or not they could see their families, whether or not they can go home over the summer break, has made them feel really anxious. Our international students were really reaching out for more support than probably normal. (Kim)

However, some students experienced the lockdown as a relief from anxiety because it offered respite from the issues they had faced at school. This became concerning, nevertheless, when they used it as an escape and had withdrawn themselves from interacting with school and learning.

For some clients dealing with anxiety before the lockdown, lockdown is kind of like a holiday where they aren't confronted with the things that set off their anxiety. ... But it also makes it easier for them to get into an unhelpful habit of burying their head. (Paumea)

Senior students (Years 12 and 13) experienced intense anxiety about their academic workload, requirements for credits, and the high levels of uncertainty in planning for tertiary education.

“Will I get there? Do I have enough credits?” That is really what most Year 13 students are grappling with. “The government requires fewer credits in some areas and what does it look like, does it happen in my subject area, how much work do I need to do to get there?” So, the questions are left in the air, and nobody says “this is the outcome.” This causes a lot of anxiety for older senior students. There is no clarity for individual students. (Elahe)

Future planning. A lot of them feel stuck. ... Those planning to go down to the South Island ... they are not so sure they want to be that far away from their families if they are prevented from coming back. Students looking at studying in Auckland are saying, “I don't want to study in Auckland because I could get stuck in a hostel online learning anyway.” They are in this uncertain world that they don't know which way is a better option. (Kim)

Some experienced added stress and anxiety because they were the first in their family to go to university. Their families had high expectations for their success but lacked understanding of the hardship students studying online in lockdown were battling.

“I will be the first in my family to go to university.” That is a huge thing to have weighing on a kid. What have parents and grandparents left behind [as migrants], what have they sacrificed? ... A lot of weight of expectation and a gap where the parents don't always have a clear picture of what it is going to take for the student to go to university. ... They [parents] are like “what have you got to be stressed about? All you have to do is an online class. It's so easy.” (Paumea)

Among multiple losses that counsellors perceived students as grieving, some young people also felt a profound sense of disconnection from their community and cultural groups.

[There is] a sense of disconnection from their community and cultural groups, they haven't been able to meet like they would normally, and that is a huge part of their life ... gather together for church, birthdays, special traditional ceremonies, or the things they do together as family and whānau. Living in this one household, it is such a different way for them to live. (Kim)

Teaching staff were also stressed under the pressure of supporting students to achieve, following the school curriculum. Teachers' stress could, in turn, affect students, a concern that has also been raised overseas (Kim & Asbury, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

[Teachers] are trying to get their students through. The teachers are stressed and trying to meet their deadlines, and that kind of filters onto students. We [the school community] are all trying to work this thing together, but just the hardship of being able to bring in a good balance for all parties involved was quite hard. (Tillie)

Information and communication technology (ICT): Use of devices for education and communication.

Lockdown forced school systems and students to change to distance learning quickly, and ICT and devices have become a central platform for education. However, this shift generated challenges for students who had limited, or no, access to the technology or the internet, or who lacked digital confidence. Some missed out on learning time and were unable to meet the deadlines for assignments if they lived in a large household with a limited number of devices or no Wi-Fi access. Hence, the quality and accessibility of distance learning varied considerably. Similar concerns have been raised internationally about adolescents from lower-income households and digital inequality (Anderson, 2018; Brooks et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2020).

The students who didn't have access to technology or Wi-Fi needed further assistance with their learning [and] ... were given special attention by our learning department. ... Even though there was a question of the government providing Wi-Fi or access to technology, it took a few weeks. There was a delay in attending to these matters. Those early few weeks were very difficult for those young people. (Elahe)

Those that weren't really good with computers and trying to get online and [having] no internet. ... Households filled with more than your status quo of bedrooms and maybe having eight people in a household for a two or three-bedroom home, weighed a lot on students. Maybe the computers or laptops that were available were for parents to do their work. All the schools tried to distribute laptops to students. But if you have got more than three siblings at the same school and all of you have to share a laptop, that became hard because everybody had to be online and get [their] assignments. They still had to meet demands and hit assessment dates. The stress and anxiety levels of those students climbed. (Tillie)

Interacting with friends is usually a key part of everyday life for young people, and it is crucial to their mental wellbeing. In times of stress, contact with close friends has been identified as a protective factor (L. Wang et al., 2021). However, the lockdown severely curtailed face-to-face contact. Now the device was the only access to the outside world. Hence, families experienced parent-child conflicts when parents considered the wellbeing of their children and set time limits on the use of their devices. Some parents struggled to understand and balance the needs of their children.

For some of those students, that [device] is their lifeline at the moment because they can't have normal social connections with friends. When parents take their phones off them, they don't know how to manage ... because all of a sudden, their way of connecting with people has also been taken away.... Parents have to realise this is their social lifeline at the moment. ... It is coming to a good balance, allowing your young person to have that social connection, but also making sure they are not on it 24/7 as well. (Kim)

Complex dynamics at home.

Counsellors observed that lockdowns had placed considerable strain on families. Suddenly having too much time together in a confined space amplified pre-existing issues in family relationships.

Whatever dynamics were in the home before the lockdown, they are now under the microscope, like you are in each other's face all the time. (Paumea)

Similar concerns were raised overseas, including pandemic-related parental stress and its negative impact on young people (Calvano et al., 2021; Hiraoka & Tomoda, 2020; Hoffman & Miller, 2020; Usher et al., 2020; M. Wang et al., 2021).

Finding learning time could also be challenging when students carried family responsibilities at home.

If the young person belonged to a larger family with responsibility for grandparents or [younger] children and cousins, they could not say no to the request of helping with family affairs and did not have another space to go to. That has been difficult for some of them to access learning time. (Elahe)

Socio-economic factors posed additional stress within disadvantaged communities. Some senior students were under pressure to leave school and financially contribute to their families due to the pandemic-induced financial crisis and parental unemployment.

A lot of parents lost their jobs, and it is cheaper to hire a teenager. ... [For] families that have some financial pressure, it is harder for the teenager or the student to stay just teenager and student. An increased pressure to leave school and take up work so that the family can keep making ends meet. (Paumea)

Some were under more academic pressure than usual. Parents were able to monitor them more closely in lockdown. They often had a limited understanding of the challenges and difficulties of online study and were anxious about children's academic progress in uncertain times.

Even if they need five minutes to adjust, sometimes parents can come down a lot harder because "back in my day, this happened. All you have to do is sit on a computer." Those kinds of pressures weigh them down. Also, parents policing their children while they are studying online, making sure they are on there. (Tillie)

Expectation and questioning can be far greater when they [students] are visible. Even if they take too many little breaks to go and get a snack, it seems that they are off-task more often than they really are. (Elahe)

Challenges in counselling practice.

The pandemic has demanded that counsellors reflect on and re-evaluate their approaches in order to meet the changing needs of their clients most effectively, as the client–counsellor relationship has become embedded in the new ecology of the client's family, community and society (Vostanis & Bell, 2020). Indeed, the Auckland lockdown required substantial adjustment to different modes of practice. The only portals for meeting clients were online, e.g., Zoom, email, Microsoft

Teams (communication platform), and Google classroom (<https://classroom.google.com>), as well as telephone and texting on mobile phones. Counsellors have wrestled with new challenges with online relationships as their clients were no longer in the room with them. Contracting with a new client and building rapport online were difficult, including establishing an understanding of confidentiality:

The most difficult thing about not being face-to-face is how you discuss confidentiality and exceptions to confidentiality with students who are new to counselling. (Elahe)

Reading visual cues became problematic when clients did not want the camera function on.

I have had a Zoom session, but without their camera feed on. It is really difficult to have a session where you can't see any reaction, and you are not even sure when to come back into the conversation or when to offer a question because you can't get any cues from your client other than what you are hearing. (Kim)

Finding an appropriate counselling environment was a challenge in lockdown when the familiar sense of the therapy space was unavailable. Providing a suitable therapeutic environment online when working from home has been identified as an extra demand that requires special consideration. The anxieties of clients when relating in this unusual situation are a significant factor (Inchausti et al., 2020). The counsellors in the group reported that both the counsellor and the client had to establish a designated space for counselling. There were no visual cues for separation between therapeutic space and personal space at home.

I have got to dedicate a space for counselling to get into the spirit of it. Normally, I have got an hour to drive to work and that is part of me preparing to be in my counsellor role at work. That is part of the reason why the counselling room needs to be separated from a classroom block. They know that this is a different environment and the work that we do here is different. And some of those markers are visual. ... But we are not able to do that [in lockdown] ... the competing demands of being at home are literally in your face ... also not being in the room with someone is a challenge. (Paumea)

Some clients had difficulties finding time and space for privacy if they lived in a crowded home.

All I saw for the entire conversation was just her forehead. She was hiding under a blanket, and that was simply because of privacy. She had five cousins in the room, and while she was talking, I could hear the girls going, “who are you talking to, is that your teacher, can I look at her?” (Tillie)

Accessing clients could be a challenge for the counsellors. Counselling is a foreign concept for some cultures and parents may be unsure of the counsellor’s role. They may have doubted the safety of the “stranger” (the counsellor) with their children and the stranger’s understanding of their values and beliefs.

Pasifika families are worried that I am not going to understand or value their spiritual beliefs. ... Counselling for Pasifika and Māori and possibly other communities can be this foreign concept. “This guy [counsellor] who is not related to me is going to talk to my teenage child about some personal stuff and it is going to be confidential.” (Paumea)

2. Counselling strategies in lockdown

Counsellors who took part in this research redefined their roles under lockdown. They learnt through experience to manage the unique circumstance of online counselling, they adjusted their approaches, and developed new strategies that could work effectively with clients under these unprecedented circumstances.

Intentional therapeutic approaches: More flexible and creative.

The creative approaches counsellors drew on and adapted emphasised building resilience and included a vital component of effective collaboration with the wider school community. Many aspects of their approaches echoed overseas research (Inchausti et al., 2020) that recommended a tailored and personalised approach that had ethical integrity and was creative and flexible to meet the changing needs of individual clients in online therapy.

When beginning a counselling relationship, the counsellors allowed time for more casual conversation than usual to build rapport. They communicated with students in emails or messages to build relationships until they were comfortable joining an online, face-to-face session.

“If you want to chat, I am more than happy to meet with you—Zoom, text, call.” I open it up to them to decide which avenue they want to connect with. ... I keep it real. I don’t call it sessions. “Let’s get together and have a chat.” (Tillie)

We have a real good discussion about building rapport and the way that I practise in my counselling practice ... having explicit conversations where I say out aloud about what my role is and address the power dynamics. (Paumea)

These counsellors understood their clients’ context in crowded homes and chose times that would work best for the privacy of the clients.

I have learnt to work differently. ... Because young people prefer to talk when nobody is around. So, talking at an unusual time is sometimes necessary. It is based on their urgent need. Having the silence in the house, we can talk for a long time. (Elahe)

They ensured they had an explicit conversation with each client about their counselling goals to be certain that they focused on what was important to them. They were respectful and intentional in being client-centred.

“I wouldn’t expect you to totally tell your life story. I’m a stranger over the phone, we have never met face to face ... I respect your wishes not to dig on that particular topic and how about we just talk about talking. What is the point of talking, is there something we might get out of it?” ... acknowledging the young person’s power and acting with integrity. (Paumea)

They [clients] are in the driver’s seat. ... I always use that analogy and say “I’m a passenger. You drive me where you want to drive” and then we talk about “anything real along the way that you want to talk about.” They can turn the camera off. They can email you and give you instructions. They can text you, they can WhatsApp. If you have all these tools, they have choices. (Elahe)

Counsellors highlighted confidentiality to ensure their clients felt at ease to talk when they seemed nervous about the privacy of online conversation.

Part of my initial discussions with the Pasifika students is [to explain] “I’m not like Auntie, you can tell me whatever you want to tell me and it doesn’t leave this room.” ... That breaks a lot of the ice and builds a new kind of trust. (Tillie)

Cultural sensitivity and competency in their practice were discussed by the counsellors. They showed respect for each client's beliefs and cultural practices, seeing them as "the educators in the room", and acknowledged a client's culture and power in the space of online counselling.

In my position with my cultural background, with my age and gender, working with every single soul is cross-cultural counselling. Unless I learn about them and from them, I can't move forward. Whatever they bring is up to them and educating me is what I invite them to do. I can't say two Māori students are the same. I can't say two Pasifika are the same ... Each one comes from a different generation, and they carry certain protocols and understanding of life, and hopes and aspirations. Everything we do is cross-cultural, and we start from zero. They are the educators in the room. (Elahe)

In regard to whoever comes in, they bring whatever they want to bring. Even having New Zealand Europeans come into the room, they are very different in regards to each household as well as age, diversity and even social standing ... we meet them wherever they're at and our chats lead to open doors and to see where that leads. (Tillie)

When it comes to cultural considerations, I often get the sense that Pasifika families are worried that I am not going to understand or value their spiritual beliefs. That is something I am mindful of. ... What I like to do is talk about the values of those supports. ... "I think it is important that whatever supports you have used in the past that are important to you, keep doing that." (Paumea)

The counsellors respected the ways clients wanted to meet and accommodated their needs by making the environment as relaxing and friendly as possible—especially when a change of the alert level allowed a meeting in an open space.

I have had the opportunity to have face-to-face [sessions]. You are allowed to meet in an open space. We wear our masks, sit two metres apart, find a quiet area in school ground ... there are areas that no one goes to. We sit there and have a conversation. (Elahe)

They allowed a support person or friend to join their online counselling if the client was new or nervous about their first counselling session.

“If you [client] want to bring a friend, we can make a space for anybody.” I have done a few group chats [in Zoom], and then once they are comfortable with me, we’ll do a session too. (Tillie)

Counsellors also spoke of providing a personal approach to helping clients feel more relaxed by sharing aspects of their own lives and inviting clients to share theirs.

[The session is] about seeing what they [clients] are doing in their day, and some of them are artists, so they bring on their whatever they have done lately, or they play a song. (Tillie)

I believe that acts of service to others can be meaningful and bring joy to their hearts. I share with them [clients] where I am with each blanket [that I make for charity]. I ask their opinion. I invite them to think about how they can serve their family, friends and neighbours. Counselling becomes two people talking about life, which has made it a lot easier for them to come on Zoom and go on Google without any hesitation. (Elahe)

They also had explicit conversations about power dynamics and counselling concepts with their clients.

Discursive empathy means that you empathise with someone, and you are aware of what discourses they might be coming into the counselling room with. ... It is important to have explicit conversations [about it with clients]. I’m aware that I’m not Cook Island Māori. ... I don’t have a lot of experience with that culture. I have got to be aware that there are going to be some gaps. ... Those explicit conversations are important. I’m aware that I’m older, and there is a cultural aspect to it. Because I’m a male, I can come with authority. ... So having that discursive empathy [with] young people, but also [with] their parents as well. (Paumea)

Building resilience.

Attention to facilitating clients' resourcefulness, creativity, and resilience can generate coping, problem-solving, and health-enhancing solutions when faced with the constraints of the pandemic (Selekman, 2021). The counsellors participating in this research recognised the importance of resilience-building and changed the language from "mental illness" to "mental wellbeing strategies".

Part of the solution is about the change of language too. Instead of mental illness, we talk about mental wellbeing. We talk about the strategies that are resiliency enhancing. (Elahe)

They facilitated conversations about hope and opportunities in times of hopelessness and powerlessness, helping clients to make meaning of the pandemic and lockdown experience, and encouraging them to create joy and fun in their confined spaces. In fact, existential anxiety is common in times of adversity, and conversations on the meaning of life are recommended to help facilitate growth in times of hardships like lockdown (Tomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2020).

Part of [the counselling] relationship is about creating joy. It is about connection, acceptance of what we cannot control, but giving hope to what is possible, and when one door closes how do we open other windows and doors, and to reframe perceptions. We talk about world issues ... the little tiny virus connecting the world in the best and worst ways. What could we do about it, what do we tell our children or grandchildren or their great-grandchildren about this period? ... Most of the time, they take on the pain their parents are feeling about losing their job, about the control over their movements. Help them to recognise, there will be a history to look back, and realise no matter how difficult this time is, it will pass. (Elahe)

Counsellors also developed and gathered extra resources to provide to clients.

We are not able to cover as much as we would normally cover. Also thinking about handouts and other resources that are available to students normally, are not so available. I quite like sending my students resources ... after a conversation. ... Then the next time [after sending the resource] I might chat with them about it. ... I can gather and offer them [resources] as other ways of increasing their wellbeing. ... I do love having a bit of time during the lockdown and getting some of these resources together too. (Kim)

Social media served young people's interconnectedness with family and friends. However, constant newsfeed on COVID-19 from social media triggered stress and anxiety. Counsellors therefore introduced strategies for reducing anxiety.

Turning the TV off for those with anxiety ... they were experiencing high anxiety that night [when the government] discussed [if] we would go from level 4 to 3. So I've been saying, "steer away from discussions, stay in the present and do what you need to do. Keep yourself safe and well." (Tillie)

Counsellors attended to the community of care at home for students, helping them identify the support available to them within their bubble—their family unit in lockdown.

Talking to them about the people that they share physical spaces with. Is there someone that they can talk to? Particularly if they are having a real struggle. ... One student said, "Oh I have worked out this code with my Mum. I send her an emoji for letting her know what kind of day I am having." (Kim)

Collaboration with the wider community of care.

The holistic approach of "a Whole School, Whole Community, and Whole Child model" (Pattison et al., 2021, p. 6) can help position a school community well to address the changing needs of student care. The counsellors in this research valued a holistic approach and worked closely and widely in collaboration with school staff to identify students in need of support.

A whole school strategy ... I have really enjoyed. I have a meeting with our head of guidance, and we see how each other is. ... We are also part of the weekly pastoral care meeting with the deans and deputy principals. We see which students are struggling online or anything that the students might be struggling with at home. These are all communicated at the meeting. (Tillie)

They purposefully reached out to those who were silent, not engaging or going unnoticed.

A lot of what we relied on before lockdown is still applicable, but you've got to turn it up. For example, I was contacting a student who withdrew from family, wasn't coming out of the room, wasn't attending online and wasn't handing in work. (Paumea)

We have an App that we started last year called Pulse [www.educatorimpact.com/frameworks/student-pulse], and it is good for those that are under the radar ... those that are sitting in the “I feel negative”, if they have ticked that box maybe three times then I will follow up with that student. (Tillie)

They understood the urgency of clients’ needs in lockdown and offered a designated phone number or email address in the guidance department for immediate access to support.

[Students] learning from the first lockdown, we created one email and phone number with the help of the school to give immediate access to counselling to students and parents. This enables quick communication between counsellors, parents, teachers and students. They hear from the counsellors within the same day. (Elahe)

3. Self-care and silver linings: What counsellors did to sustain themselves

The lockdown posed enormous challenges to school counsellors who endured the stress of lockdown alongside others while continuing to serve their clients from online platforms. The counsellors in this research recognised the significance of self-care (e.g., Selekman, 2021; World Health Organization, 2020), and used self-generated coping and health-enhancing strategies to sustain themselves.

In their own families they were aware of the strain they experienced in a confined environment and allowed each other space.

We do have to separate ourselves because we can get on each other’s nerves around the house as well. (Tillie)

Creating new daily rituals and reinventing family traditions can maintain powerful family and other connections and create times of reflection during lockdown (Imber-Black, 2020). The counsellors in the group did just that. Valuing their families, they intentionally spent time with them to build deeper relationships, doing things together: cooking, fun games, walking, gardening, and watching TV.

We have been intentional in spending time with them [sons] and the things that they enjoy doing ... they have come up with card games and board games. (Kim)

Allowing tuakana teina. My older boys might take the younger ones for a walk or help [with] their school work. ... The boys have gotten closer. ... It is looking for those silver linings of more quality time together and what the lockdown allows for. (Paumea)

We come together at certain times. Someone will cook dinner. We'll sit in the kitchen and chat, watch the news, have done the board games and jigsaw puzzles. (Tillie)

They used online technology to connect with friends and family outside of the current bubble in times of social isolation.

We have lost a number of family and friends due to COVID overseas. Instead of being upset that I could not attend the funeral of my loved ones, I appreciated the opportunity to celebrate their life online. All these devotions have been online. But as family, as friends, we can come together. (Elahe)

Doing Zooms with my friends, having wine catch up with whoever wants to catch up. (Tillie)

They also looked for silver linings in lockdown.

One of the things that has helped with self-care has been looking for silver linings. Lockdown, we all know it is not enjoyable. It is not our preferred place. But I found a few silver linings. Having more time with my boys has allowed for more opportunities for deeper conversations. Because I'm not as time pressured, I'm generally in a better state for those conversations. ... That is one of the major silver linings, having more time and less pressured time. (Paumea)

Exercise and physical activities like a walk, family games and sport or gardening seemed critical for their wellbeing.

Off screen activities. We played the improv game where you pick everyone's name in a bowl, and someone picks out a name, and someone picks out an activity, and we all take turns doing impressions of what that person what their [manner]isms are. So that was real fun. (Paumea)

I also care for my dad and ... he has got a beautiful garden. So, I spend time with him in his garden. (Tillie)

The boys [sons] have been out on their bikes, and we have been bike riding with them. (Kim)

Getting back to hobbies like sorting out photo albums and knitting were helpful for some.

I've been getting into my photograph albums, and I realised this is something really practical, creative and something that was filled with happy memories. (Kim)

I was knitting a blanket, that is what our school does. Every table in the staff room has knitting needles, and staff knit these little squares, and they all become blankets for those who have small babies, young teenagers who have babies. (Elahe)

Doing things that were meaningful and enjoyable included professional development training online for Elahe.

Lockdown has allowed me to do PD online. They are all on Zoom. ... Learning gives me a lot of joy. ... Some of them are in New Zealand, some of them are across the world. (Elahe)

Keeping to the school routine was helpful, and intentionally separating their workspace from their personal space.

Keeping school days like school days. One of the signs that I was starting to get a bit lost was not knowing what day it was. "Is it Tuesday or Wednesday?" (Paumea)

It is keeping to routines through the school term. I wake and get ready for my day, and I have a space where I come and do my work. ... I unplug at the end of the day. ... I close down my working area and go off and spend time with family. (Tillie)

As Tillie indicated, they knew when to switch off work as the boundary between home and work was blurred in lockdown.

When I notice I'm starting to feel a little bit low myself, that is my sign to call quits to whatever I'm doing ... that is a sign to get outside, get on my walking shoes and get around the block. I can come back in a much better space." (Kim)

Silver linings: What we can take from COVID -19.

During a webinar that Kim attended in lockdown, the trainer posed a question to the audience: “Recognising that COVID-19 has taken things away from us, what can we take from COVID-19?” Our research group addressed the same question. The answers from the counsellors indicated resilience and positivity in the face of adversity:

Making technology my friend. This has been an opportunity to upskill and build new knowledge and information. (Kim)

Actively look for silver linings. (Paumea)

Being more intentional in regard to spending time with people at home and online. (Tillie)

Accept what you can’t change and look for the possibility and opportunities to be creative and do even more. (Elahe)

Conclusion

This study reveals concerns for increased anxiety and constant low mood that Auckland secondary students are currently experiencing in the lockdown. Increased anxiety is particularly challenging among those students with pre-existing anxiety, learning disabilities, and different learning needs. International fee-paying students are desperate with homesickness. Uncertainty of the future has brought significant stress to senior students. Some of them are under pressure to leave school to support their families, which is disheartening. Others find academic pressure and the daily monitoring of their parents too intense. While social isolation is encouraged in the current society, young people experience a profound sense of loss of their community and cultural connections.

ICT devices have become lifelines to education. However, a high level of stress for teaching staff was observed, and the counsellors were concerned for their wellbeing and the potential effects on their class. Digital inequality is a serious concern due to limited accessibility in some parts of Auckland. Young people are desperate to connect with their peers and reach the outside world; balancing their needs and too much screen time has generated significant conflicts between parents and children.

The counsellors are concerned about the considerable strain that lockdown has placed on some families. Confined space in homes has amplified pre-existing issues in family relationships. Young people naturally seek independence and autonomy, but parents too closely monitor their children's academic achievement in lockdown.

Counsellors are faced with online counselling and its barriers to important aspects of therapy. It is challenging to build rapport, especially with new online clients. The counsellors feel deeply for those without the privacy to fully engage in a counselling session. Finding appropriate counselling space is necessary, but it is often difficult for both the client and counsellor. Accessing clients requires a delicate approach if counselling concepts are foreign to families.

Surrounded by such challenges, the counsellors have quickly adapted to the unique circumstance of counselling in lockdown. They took time to readjust to online counselling and the new ecology of client care. They are resourceful in providing flexible and creative strategies, demonstrating their adaptability and resilience amid intense stress.

Some of their approaches may come across as unconventional. However, they have carefully carried core, person-centred values (Rogers, 1951) into the sacred space of their work in this time of human suffering. They understand the importance of meaning-making as they recognise a profound sense of hopelessness and powerlessness in lockdown and a yearning for hope to navigate the aftermath of COVID-19. They show an extraordinary sense of respect, sensitivity, cultural competency, and understanding for the the young people. They diligently listen to how each client wants to meet in their therapeutic space. They give extra attention to protecting privacy and confidentiality and are mindful of power dynamics in online counselling relationships. They recognise the shift in family dynamics in “bubbles” (the family unit in lockdown) and its effects on their young clients. They practise holistic care and work collaboratively with the wider school community.

Their self-care strategies highlight their professionalism as well as the demands and stress of their work. As previous research has highlighted (Inchausti et al., 2020), ongoing professional development and supervision are even more critical now, while counsellors work to adapt and face the new challenges of the pandemic paradigm.

We cannot stress enough the need for the care of vulnerable people, including migrant families and underprivileged low socioeconomic groups requiring special attention in our work (Falicov et al., 2020; Ioane et al., 2021). This research reminds us of the NZAC *Code of Ethics* (2020) for therapeutic approaches that are culturally appropriate, socially inclusive, sensitive to diversity, ethically sound, and accessible to those in need.

This small-scale collaborative research offers insights into the impact of lockdown on secondary school students and the implications for us as their counsellors. We offer these reflections to create a space where we can start a wider conversation. Elahe shares her thoughts on the importance of future research:

It would be really valuable for the long-term wellbeing of young people that there is formalised support for research where we sit with others and find out what else is happening, because what we know is only what we know. Yet, we see the world we work in and where young people live as a lot bigger and more profound than that. So, it always sits with me, the voices of the silent.

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