

Maximising well-being post COVID-19

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KEY INSIGHTS

Much has changed in New Zealand since the New Zealand Government imposed a nation-wide lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on 26 March 2020. Research³ undertaken by social researchers from Manaaki Whenua – Landcare Research and the Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment provides insights into how people navigated their COVID-19 response and what that means for their, and New Zealand's, continued well-being.

Building a Sense of Community

Having a strong sense of community is important for the current and future well-being of New Zealand:

...a huge part of people's well-being and mental health is actually having that sense of community and knowing your neighbours and...having those sorts of connections and relationships (MWB36).

A common theme from our research was how the COVID-19 pandemic response had resulted in neighbours connecting with each other and communities coming together to look after and care for one another. Participants spoke of looking out for neighbours and the vulnerable in their communities (i.e. the elderly or people on their own) or receiving offers of support from neighbours:

Like the lady at the dairy, we've lived in the same area for 15 years and she's been there the whole time, and I've never known her name and now I [do] (MWB4).

...two neighbours who are on their own, they struggled a little bit. One in particular whose family members don't live nearby, her neighbour was wonderful and did her shopping and we did a little bit of extra cooking and things for her (MWB24).

When we were in the lockdown and everyone was checking on their neighbours and, in our situation, buying the groceries for their older people and things like that. It would be really nice if as a country we continued to...care about the whole community (MWB64).

...a younger couple,...left a note for us one day [which] said if we wanted help with anything, or if we wanted them to do shopping or anything like that to give them a ring. That was pretty cool (MWB67).

³ A background and methodology report is available from StrongeD@landcareresearch.co.nz

I think the way the country has come together, the community just come together and pulled through together has really set up the nation well into recovery emotionally, I would like to think so. That's how I feel in my community anyway. The neighbours are now closer. We look out for each other, feel more conscious about looking out for each other because we're now more aware of each other and I think it's been a great thing that came out of this whole lockdown response....[People] showed a sense of community, that they're not just doing it for themselves but they're doing this for their community, and I think the general feeling and the general sense of responsibility has really set a good foundation in terms of moving forward in terms of building emotional resilience and supporting one another in the community (MWB37).

While supporting each other was a message in the Government's COVID-19 response communications, people felt that this was already part of (although a potentially declining part of) the New Zealand psyche – being the norm in times past and during other times of crisis, such as the Christchurch earthquakes:

I grew up in a New Zealand where that was just normal, you knew all your neighbours, and we still do that (MWB12).

So, I think that the Hauora [Māori philosophy of health and well-being] has become the central part of the community again whereas probably it wasn't so much before that. It had lost a little bit of focus or had lost a little bit of kudos due to a couple of other things, and now it's definitely the central part of our community again (MWB31).

I quite liked...how it was managed, and that well-being and kindness and support New Zealand was promoted....That felt like a return to the community that I grew up in where you just did it. If someone needed help you just did it. We didn't need to be reminded in those days..., but I think we moved away from that (MWB73).

The COVID-19 pandemic has built or rekindled a sense of community throughout New Zealand, and this has important implications for the ongoing COVID-19 response. In particular, there is an opportunity for vaccination messaging to capitalise on this concern for each other:

...am I going to spread [COVID-19] I think is probably the biggest worry because I am probably fit and able and in the age group that's not going to be affected by it, but my neighbour isn't, and my parents aren't (MWB31).

Emphasising that by getting vaccinated people not only protect themselves, but also their family, their community, and the country, could lead to greater uptake of the vaccine. However, this relies on that sense of community and interdependence being retained. While participants hoped it would be, they also noted that it was already dropping off as life had become busy again after lockdown. Maintaining the potential societal well-being benefits that this ethos of care presents will require active investment and intervention by the Government:

...the beautiful Kiwi way we have of looking after our neighbours...that we've been losing in the last few years, I hope has been reclaimed. But...I seriously think they're going to need the government to actually invest in [this]....I feel like at the minute any investment in our community's well-being is going to reap a huge benefit. Whereas three years ago, you could have poured money into some of these social settings, and you'd have been severely limited in the response that you would have got. But now, at the moment, I feel like there's quite a lot of benefit that will happen straight on. I'm kind of excited about that (MWB63).