

Maximising well-being post COVID-19

Dean Stronge¹, Alison Greenaway¹, Robyn Kannemeyer¹, Chris Howard²
¹MWLR, ²MBIE

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.

Government Response to COVID-19

The global COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant effect on people's well-being. Our research participants described feelings of fear, terror, anxiety, uncertainty, and anticipatory grief following its arrival and spread in New Zealand. Participants were concerned about how things would unfold – noting the negative news reports and discussions with friends and family from overseas:

Going into lockdown I just I guess [wondered] how it would end, or what would happen. I guess how we would progress and where we would end up was...a concern at that point (MWB101).

I mean, at the time, at the beginning of that whole episode, nobody really knew how bad it was in New Zealand. We were certainly getting information from overseas, and the fact that it was a pandemic, not just localised was incredibly fearful, actually (MWB72).

People were initially worried that the Governments response would be inadequate and that the impacts would be devastating:

I was worried that the New Zealand Government wouldn't take it seriously enough. Which was why I was so relieved when they were, like, we're going into lockdown... (MWB68).

We could have...had the same COVID numbers [as America]. We could have had 200,000 deaths in New Zealand if the government hadn't acted quickly (MWB60).

However, a common theme from our interviews was how well the Government had handled the response and the positive effect that had on participants well-being:

[the response has] been very good. It's been amazing, really (MWB9).

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

I think the response was awesome, actually (MWB101).

...when we went into lockdown the second time that was a huge reassurance for me because I realised that the first time wasn't a fluke, that this really was what they were going to do, and this was what they were going to keep doing and I found that hugely reassuring (MWB47).

I think the response has been absolutely outstanding from the government and those involved, the health people and all the rest and everybody else, whether it's the police, the military or the grocery workers or the packers or the transporters. I think the response has been absolutely phenomenal (MWB10).

Central to this support was the Government's communications. Participants spoke of it instilling confidence and trust in the Government. The 1pm briefings were highly praised, as was the fact that the response and communication were grounded in science:

I think that trust in science, in scientists, has been a good thing (MWB41).

It gives me a lot of confidence when I know that case D got it from case C and that they've genome sequenced it and they can tell that is related, and yeah. I love that the detail is shared in a way that makes sense to me, and it's not some tripe blasé reassurance (MWB40).

We actually felt very reassured, I have to say, every day having the news, one o'clock updates, was incredibly reassuring, I think. The presentations by the constant presenters, the Prime Minister, and also by the Director General of Health, were superb. I think that was the best communication they could have done to reassure me and the rest of the public that where we were going was what they were planning, what was ahead, what could happen, and how we were coping with it (MWB24).

Being supportive did not mean being uncritical. Participants had concerns about border security, MIQ facilities, and the lack of clarity on masks, for example. However, they also recognised the amount of work behind the scenes that had to happen in implementing the response. They knew that mistakes would happen and expected constant review and improvement in the response process:

So, I had a few question marks, and then there were maybe some outbreaks or whatever...I had some nervousness about what about the ports, things like that...I do have a sense that obviously you can't get things right the first time, but every time something goes wrong those things get improved (MWB9).

I don't think people give enough credit to the government for what they did, and jump up and down on every error. Well, when you're dealing with unprecedented situations you are going to make mistakes. That's a given and no organisation would have gone through this without a mistake. And I think the response to the mistakes has been appropriate, it's been good, it's been quick, and we're going to keep going with that. And there will be mistakes. For God's sake, there will be mistakes. And all we've got to do is learn from those as you would, you would have a 'lessons learnt' after every project and you would see what you did right and what you did wrong. And that's the only way to go forward and to make sure that you don't make the same mistake twice (MWB10).

I think we've really been taken on the whole journey of this whole COVID response, and for that reason I think when things haven't gone to plan or something's happened that wasn't perfect, people have been more understanding of that (MWB4).