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. Research[3] 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.

Mental health and well-being – individual perspective

The importance of people's mental health and well-being was highlighted by interviewees. COVID-19 created feelings of isolation, fear, and uncertainty for some interviewees:

> I did sort of a downwards spiral of mental health. Nothing dire but just feeling quite isolated and sad, and not being able to share things, the kind of grey mood, and I guess the fear of COVID-19 and what it would mean for people I loved and the country (MWB79).

> Mental well-being is probably the most important type of well-being for me…and I think those support networks are quite important, particularly for people who identify as having issues with their mental well-being (MWB80).

While some interviewees talked about their own mental struggles and anxiety during the COVID 19 lockdown, others described how they were worried about their family members, friends, or neighbours either in New Zealand or overseas:

> She [my mum] also has mental health issues as well. Depression – and so I think it's been really, really hard for her. She's actually currently not in a great space and I'm guess that's sort of partially Covid related a wee bit. No, she kind of struggled. And she decided to isolate by herself…so I think she found the isolation really tough, especially at the end of that (MWB101).

Financial hardship, living arrangements, employment situations (uncertainty of future work, working from home, or unemployment), and keeping a family going added to the stress and anxiety of the lockdown. Connections and relationships with family, friends, work colleagues, and neighbours provided support networks and enabled people to work through their challenges, but not being able to see people in person was extremely hard. Exercise, medication, and a good night's sleep were

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

strategies used to reduce anxiety and improve both mental and physical health. Participants commented that as swimming in public places (including the sea) was restricted during lockdown they had to find other ways to exercise such as cycling, walking, and running:

> *Because my partner was working nightshift, I was by myself for about 20 hours a day. So, that was the most interesting thing, I think. So, if I hadn't been working full-time, I think it would have been a really challenging time mentally for me…I think April I did 300 km between walking and running (*MWB57).

> *…it was a pretty intense test. Multiple things, like my own mental health, which at some points was really challenged, but having my husband right here was a saving element, to support me with the kids* (MWB71).

> *In general, my mental health, it's worse than it was before [COVID-19] and I'm aware of that…. I've got my brother and my wife and two very close male friends who I use for support, but that's about it. That's my principal support network….I cycled about three times a week and we walked every day at least once a day. Plus, I take antidepressants and stuff, I've had depression for nearly 20 [years]….So, things like walking is really good for your physical well-being because it promotes that endorphin thing and that gets the mental stuff into line as well* (MWB12).

> *My flatting situation at that time was pretty horrible and was not helped by the lockdown and having to stay in. And so that was quite a big struggle. But I've since moved out of that place. And now living with my sister and her husband, which has been awesome and a huge help I guess in terms of my mental health and well-being just being in a much more positive environment at home* (MWB36).

> *I know it's wise to have a network of people who are not your family when you have concerns about health and in particular mental health….So, I've really intentionally developed that over a number of years* (MWB40).

> *I really missed swimming in the pool a lot, because that's really good for my sleep and exercise, and mental balance….And really just not seeing friends and colleagues in person, is just a human need to see people in person* (MWB79).

> *It's a big part of my well-being … core fitness, mental well-being as well as physical. So, for me, the shutdown or the lockdown, the worst aspects of it were needing to get to food from the supermarket, and…all water activities were banned* (MWB8)

Interviewees also described some positive effects from the COVID 19 lockdown, such as a greater awareness about mental health, a sense of belonging, being more productive at home, and neighbours being more friendly:

> *I think because I was really aware of my mental health and the danger of – there was so many advertisements and so much news out there about staying mentally well, and we put a plan in place to make sure we went out for a walk every day and didn't become housebound. We discovered quite a lot of walking tracks around where we live, and everybody was in the same situation so there were a lot of people walking their dogs and people would smile and say hello and keep their distance and stuff but people seemed more friendly. I've lived here for 13, 14 years and never really felt that sense of belonging until now* (MWB53).