

Maximising well-being post COVID-19

Robyn Kannemeyer¹, Dean Stronge¹, Alison Greenaway¹, 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.

New Zealand mental health and well-being

In New Zealand the mental challenges of social isolation were recognised early in the COVID 19 lockdown and people were encouraged to talk about the challenges. However, talking about the effects of COVID 19 and the lockdown was not always easy, and different strategies were used to cope:

...it's probably one of the silver linings of COVID. [In] New Zealand [there] has been a recognition of isolation and the mental health challenges that come with social isolation and so people are maybe talking even more openly about those challenges than they were before. It's now okay to recognise that actually being socially isolated is quite hard, like how we were in COVID (MWB7).

I've seen a lot more I guess posters or advertisements, or those sorts of things around mental health and looking out for each other and yourself and that sort of thing. So, I think there's a lot more information out there for New Zealanders in terms of well-being (MWB36).

... to be honest we haven't really talked much about it in a deep way. Like how it affected each and every one and, you know, physically or mentally...because me and my friends, we're just, when we talk, we just try to lighten things up. So, during the time we were just still making jokes about things, serious things, but I know that it's affecting them quite a lot (MWB104).

There was an acute need to support each other during the COVID 19 lockdown, especially if there was existing mental illness in an interviewee's whanau. Some families made sure that vulnerable family members went home for support during lockdown:

So, to prepare for it [COVID 19 lockdown] I did that and was basically getting my son home because although he's an adult he has some mental health issues and I

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

thought I cannot relax as a mother knowing that he would be up in town possibly getting more and more depressed. That was my main concern... (MWB73)

While family and friends were typically the main support networks for people with a mental illness, increased levels of anxiety meant that providing this support was difficult at times for some people:

... family and friends are usually where I get my support from and I feel like I'm reaching out less, though I made a concerted effort during lockdown. I did have a roster in my mind of people that I should be calling and checking in on and I did some of that at least. But I do feel like – yeah, I do feel like it's becoming more and more abstract, that sense of support, yeah. And that maybe in proportion to the general sense of anxiety and instability in a global sense (MWB7).

Consequently, strong community and neighbourhood connections, and support were really important for improving people's well-being and reducing anxiety and stress during the uncertainty of lockdown:

I just think it helps build a stronger community and getting to know people that we actually see and that are around us. And I think that's, like, a huge part of people's well-being and mental health is actually having that sense of community and knowing your neighbours... (MWB36).

Overall, interviewees were pleased that the Government made the COVID-19 response a priority but there was concern that the long-term impacts of the response are not yet known – especially mental health and suicide rates, and long-term effects on children and younger people:

We've had the unemployment rates, but you wonder about the mental health issues and it may not seem like it's directly impacted but it has been. The number of people, for example, that might come out in the future in next year's mental health rate or suicide rate, and I think you cannot – people don't really know the impact and so we just have to keep being supportive and we have to keep being collective and collaborative on top of that more (MWB31).

The long-term mental health impact I don't think can be judged yet.... I don't think we will see the real mental health and social impacts, particularly on the children, for another 5 to 10 years until it's over... (MWB39).

So, my well-being, I'm fine, physically, probably mentally, but I'm aware of the pressure that we need to stop putting business interests first. I was just thinking about it today and thinking 'I'm pleased the...Government is saying we're still putting COVID first' (MWB35).

We're still protected, unlike some countries, but I know in the long run people might experience economic fallout from Covid-19 and that would affect people's mentality a lot. So, I think that's one area, one key focus that needs to be addressed in the long term... (MWB104).

Looking forward, interviewees spoke about the need for more awareness about mental health issues, noting that everyone experiences situations differently. Interviewees felt that while mental health and well-being communication has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic began, there is still a need to look out for each other and to continue to talk openly about the mental health challenges being experienced so they become normalised.