

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.

Social Connections

A common reflection on lockdown by participants was how it highlighted the importance of social connections and relationships to their well-being:

I think that people realise the importance of connection....Even just the little things that make a difference. So, we would go out and play with the soccer ball once a day for a while and even that just made us feel really good as a family, just little things like that and I think that maybe people have realised that buying stuff isn't so important as what they thought it was and it's that connection that really matters... (MWB68).

Positive well-being aspects raised by participants were that lockdown strengthened family units, relationships with partners, and with friends. Being able to spend time together as a family or couple was cited as a benefit of lockdown:

I think if anything it strengthened my relationship with my husband and my children. We realised we really enjoyed spending time together and we can get through it all no matter what. And my family, I think probably that's the important thing in life, really (MWB4).

The beginning of lockdown was quite intense, maybe the first week or so, especially the anxiety around not knowing how long it would last. But actually, when we got into our groove, we found it to be quite a relaxed and fun time. And we really enjoyed spending more time together as a family. ...post-the level 4 lockdown, I feel confident in our relationship and our immediate family and that we can get through these sorts of things (MWB71).

...me and my partner get on really well, so it was actually really nice just hanging out with him (MWB45).

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

However, there were also relationship difficulties that negatively affected people's well-being:

I still get quite frustrated with the people – like when I went back to work, for instance, [the boss] sent an email out to all staff and he said, “Oh, it was such a great time, and a great opportunity for families to come together,”...and it was, but at the same time, I was thinking of my family, when that was a time that I was splitting up with my partner and my family was coming apart sort of thing and just thinking of how hard it was and I just thought he's had no idea about how it was for other people... (MWB74).

I have recently actually lost a very valued long-standing [20 year] friendship and that was partly or maybe largely because of the gulf and our belief systems that appeared over the COVID pandemic. So I felt infuriated – really threatened and just totally puzzled by her insistence that COVID-19 wasn't likely a virus, that it may even be caused by something like 5G or – so she was right down what I think of as the conspiracy rabbit hole and I just – I found that very difficult...to engage with her and...there were these big silences opening up between us because there were things that we just couldn't easily talk about because we so disagreed on them. Yeah, and so she's recently called that friendship off (MWB7).

I was actually really worried about people in relationships and being stuck together and things like domestic violence, which went up. That was a real worry, that there was a whole lot of stuff going down that was people being bottled up together in not healthy spaces or relationships (MWB89).

The use of technology, such as video conferencing and apps, was a very important part of connecting and maintaining important relationships for participants over lockdown. However, participants noted that it wasn't as good as the real thing for people's well-being:

...even though technology connects us quite immediately I think there is this natural human need to want to be in close proximity to family just to know that they're there and that they're safe (MWB80).

Not being able to see family and friends in person over lockdown was a key issue for participants and for those with family and friends overseas this is an ongoing worry:

My own parents are in their 80s and I see them at least once or twice a week normally, but not being able to do that, to see them in person, that was quite tough (MWB4).

That was one of the biggest downsides of COVID,...that we didn't get to see [our grandchildren] and vice versa, and at 2 years old and nearly 5 they didn't really understand (MWB12).

My family are in Malaysia and the cases are quite bad, so I am quite worried... (MWB27).

The forced social isolation of lockdown brought home the importance of social connections to people's well-being. And although the current levels of social interaction and freedom of movement New Zealanders experience due to the Governments response is appreciated (see the key insight on Government response), there is a feeling that the privileged position New Zealand finds itself in may not be fully recognised by all New Zealanders:

The only other thing I'd mention around well-being is that all my family are overseas....So, I find that's quite stressful. [But]...I feel very lucky that we're here, [however] I don't think that a lot of my New Zealand friends actually realise how lucky we are. Because I speak to friends and family overseas all the time, so I hear their experiences, whereas a lot of my friends here wouldn't know anyone else overseas to compare the situation (MWB51).