

COVID-19 Guidelines: Level 3

The NZAC Office is continuing to provide advice on handling the present Covid-19 situation. This update addresses the move to Alert Level Three.

Our ethical responsibility remains to keep clients safe, as well as to keep our contract to work with them as best we are able. The Government's expectation under Level Three is that workers should work in the same way as under Level Four, wherever possible. This means that counsellors will routinely be expected to continue working remotely. Only in exceptional circumstances might this differ. The main focus for Level 3 is to enable those parts of the economy that are now safe to restart to do so, not to begin to return to normal life, so face to face contact remains very limited.

Working remotely

- Continue to pay attention to abiding by Section 13 of the Code of Ethics, bearing in mind that Sections 1 - 8 of the Code all still apply as well.
- There is a useful article on using e-technologies for supervision published in the New Zealand Journal of Counselling in 2017 by Flanagan et al, <https://nzac.org.nz/assets/Uploads/2.-Ethics-relationships-and-pragmatics-in-the-use-of-e-technologies-in-counselling-supervision.pdf> This may be of particular relevance at present given that we are all likely to be providing and receiving supervision this way. Also see 3.14, 'Online Practices' by Jeannie Wright in *Ethics In Practice: A guide for counsellors* edited by Crocket, Agee and Cornforth, which includes a checklist for ethical online practice and quotes an Aunt Ethica letter from 2007.
- If you are in the process of consolidating your online work, and have not read it before, the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association's guidelines for working with technology may also assist you with issues you have not thought about. See https://www.ccpa-accp.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/TISCGuidelines_Mar2019_EN.pdf
- Continue to pay good attention to contracting arrangements, which need to be done more carefully with distance work, since clients are likely to be unfamiliar with this way of using their technology. Remember that contracting is an ongoing process, not something that just happens at the beginning.
- Make sure you attend to the privacy and security issues at both ends of the conversation.
- Investigate the security risks of any online platform you use. There have been some worrisome examples of uninvited 'guests' appearing in Zoom meetings, for example.

- With phone or online contact, check out at the beginning of a counselling communication whether the person is in a private situation and ask them to let you know if that changes.
- Make sure you also can guarantee privacy during the communication and that your device is protected by a strong password.
- You may be able to increase privacy at your end by using a headset with a microphone, and can suggest to clients that they do the same. This can counteract the tendency to talk loudly, as well as rendering the voice at the other end inaudible to others.
- It may be advisable to check out what level of password protection the client has, who else has access to their device, and whether someone unwanted might be able to trace the contact.
- Before setting up the contact make sure that both you and the client have Wifi or will have sufficient data availability for the length of the contact.
- Make a precise appointment time for the contact and establish how long it will last.
- Clarify together before beginning whether this is ongoing counselling, support or monitoring of safety. Some clients may not want or be able to engage in full counselling at a distance.
- Beware of drifting into the sorts of non-professional conversations that clients are more used to having on phones and devices. Establishing and maintaining emotional connection can be more difficult at a distance.
- If using audio only, be aware of the need for audible indications that you are listening. Ask for information about what may be happening in any pauses or silences.
- With texting, messaging, 'chat' or email, discuss security and privacy issues before beginning. Remind clients that a record of your interactions could be accessed, even if deleted.
- Some clients may only be available via texting, messaging or 'chat'. Use these with great caution, as the communication easily lends itself to misinterpretation, provides very limited access to real emotion and may involve serious gaps in information. These methods will likely be limited to providing support and safety monitoring. Do not hesitate to call the crisis team or police if you have serious concerns for safety.
- Asynchronous communication via email (or even 'snail mail' at present) can be used, and some clients can actually prefer this to face-to-face connection. Contract clearly with clients about how this will work - fees (if relevant), length of time you will spend replying, how soon they can expect a reply and when you would next expect to hear back from them.
- Make sure you schedule times for your written responses and set up a space in which to work that reflects your professional self, if you are doing this from home. Bear in mind privacy and security issues.
- You may wish to respond to emails by inserting responses within the client's writing, or by writing a separate full response. This may depend on style - yours and theirs - as well as on the type of need.

- Make sure to keep notes, as usual, if necessary transferring these later to work systems.
- If your workplace has set up remote access, do what you can to check out its security.
- Check out your ways of working remotely in your supervision, paying particular attention to any at-risk clients.

Covid-19 issues

- The move into Level Three may involve some changes in client issues, although the original matters included below are still likely to apply.
- Level 3 requires more decision-making by individuals and ‘bubbles’. This might include: whether children should go to their school; whether to return to a workplace or continue working from home; whether a workplace is sufficiently safe; whether to be expecting more of fellow workers or employees; whether to visit an elderly relative; whether to undertake a recreational activity; whether to attend a hospital appointment; whether to agree to take annual leave or a pay cutetc. Counsellors should make sure they are familiar with Level 3 expectations, in order to assist clients to explore options. See <https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-system/alert-level-3/>
- There is also likely to be increased uncertainty and distress about employment and financial issues. Again, it will be useful for counsellors to be well-informed, both about national provisions and local sources of help (for example, see MSD, WINZ, IRD and bank websites; know how to get in touch with local Foodbanks and volunteer help). Be prepared to work on stress management, decision-making, career options, study decisions, budget management.
- The help counselling clients may need could also require advocacy or social work assistance, to address practical difficulties. Recognise that if you choose to help in this regard you are taking on multiple relationships, which may be appropriate but should be considered with care. Does taking on this role risk undermining the counselling relationship? Are you in fact the best equipped person to take on this role? How will you clarify with the client the different roles? How much input might this new role need? It may be wise to discuss all this in supervision.
- Level 4 has been described by some as a ‘hibernation’ and, as such, some clients have seemed to put longer term issues on hold. As they move into beginning to envisage a reconnection with their former lives, clients may return to a focus on these issues. While there may be new difficulties created directly by the pandemic and lockdown, it is much more likely that recent painful experiences will fit within or have exacerbated pre-existing themes of distress.
- Do not however assume that isolation under lockdown and removal from ordinary life will have been a difficult experience for all clients. Some will have enjoyed the opportunity to pay attention to some different aspects of their lives or will have benefitted from the reduction in distressing stimuli from the world outside, for example.
- It has been widely expected that worries about the virus will have caused or deepened anxiety. Make sure clients know how to obtain reliable health information

(e.g., <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus> or <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>) and encourage them to restrict attention to social media and other sources of poor or inaccurate information. Be particularly aware of feelings of anxiety, guilt and powerlessness in relation to family or friends overseas, living in contexts where the coronavirus experience is much worse than in New Zealand.

- Some client groups may continue to be more vulnerable than others; for example, those with addiction difficulties, violent family dynamics, conflicted family relationships, obsessive-compulsive issues, chronic depression, loneliness and those confined to institutions. Be particularly attentive to increased risk with such clients.
- Some clients may be flouting Level 3 expectations. Be courageous about discussing this with them, rather than doing nothing or reporting them. If you think they will be continuing to put others or themselves at risk, then the Code of Ethics requires you to set safety matters above confidentiality and you may need to let someone know. If so, notify them that this is what you are going to do and reassure them that you will not need to disclose the nature of your relationship with them.
- We are hoping that new infections now will be rare. If however you are diagnosed with CV-19 yourself, you will be required to self-isolate and name all the people you have been in contact with since contracting the virus, including the names of any clients you have seen, as 'safety' again needs to over-ride 'confidentiality'. You will not need to identify in what capacity you met with them.
- Similarly, if you are identified as a close contact of someone who has caught CV-19, you also need to self-isolate immediately, will get monitored and tested. You should also make a complete list of the people you have had contact with since you were with the infected person. You do not need to hand this on to anyone, unless you then test positive yourself. You may however want to notify your own contacts, including any clients, that you have been in contact with an infected person and suggest to them that if they have any concerns they should phone the Healthline on 0800 358 5453. This advice was provided by the Healthline.

When to return to your workplace

- Unless you are employed in a service that has been classed as 'essential', you should continue to work from home (your bubble) and with clients who are situated in their bubbles too. Private practitioners cannot deem themselves to be providing an 'essential service'.
- Essential services in our field are 'mental health and addiction services that support high risk and vulnerable client groups' and 'emergency and crisis support for people who feel unwell or are unsafe (eg, Funded helplines, refuges and family violence services, sexual violence crisis services)' (<https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-current-situation/covid-19-essential-services-health-and-disability-system>) The Ministry website goes on to state 'Services are prioritised to those people most at risk of

harm if those services were not provided. Each provider delivering these services must immediately identify those people most at risk.'

- You will know if your organisation has been designated as essential and it will have strict policies in place to manage this. You will have permission to go to and from your office, but may be working online, possibly from home, wherever possible.
- There may be rare instances where an individual practitioner has been unable to work from home because of poor access to clients online, via email or using the phone, or because they could not ensure confidentiality from within their bubble. You MAY be able to return to your workplace if you can ensure absolute safety in relation to, for example, door handles, kitchen and toilet usage, lift or stair access, contact with others in the building, etc; check first with the Police. You must not however then work face to face with clients, but should counsel them remotely from your office.
- ACC has recently written to its suppliers about when it might be necessary to meet directly with clients. The core message remains to work online wherever possible and its Level 4 'telehealth provisions' are extended into Level 3. The updated guidelines sent out apply to all the services ACC covers and focus mainly on the parameters for managing urgent physical care. It is unlikely that these conditions will apply to sensitive claims clients. Where clients are at physical risk, to themselves or from others, they should be referred to relevant essential services. See the Ministry of Health's website <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-resources-health-professionals/covid-19-advice-all-health-professionals> and also the 'provider' section of the ACC website.
- With schools now opening for those pupils whose parents need to return to their workplaces, school counsellors may be unsure whether they should be onsite. This needs to be negotiated on a case by case basis as each school addresses its unique circumstances. The rule of thumb however is that if it is at all possible to work from home, do so. School counsellors may find pastoral support for their teaching colleagues and administrators an important part of their work in the next months, as well as possibly seeing an increase in pupils with study worries, difficult family dynamics and family financial stress.
- Counsellors have been reporting difficulties in conducting online assessments with new clients, where these are required by their agencies. This is not an argument for meeting face to face however, but needs discussion, understanding and management by the agency.
- Where you sense that you cannot gauge a client's physical safety through online contact, this does not mean you should meet with them. Instead it suggests you need to contact police, mental health services or another essential service. Discuss this with the client, if possible.

- The police will be continuing to check on individuals and organisations that they are following the government's directives for Level 3.

For Supervisors

- You should expect to continue to spend time checking out the appropriateness of arrangements for working remotely.
- Ask supervisees about any at risk clients and what arrangements they are making. It may be necessary to be available for brief consultations between sessions about any such clients; counsellors may have greater difficulty in determining risk, with distance work.
- Many counsellors will have their own financial and job security issues, as well as needing to help their clients with theirs. Be prepared to identify parallel process situations and help counsellors to recognise where they might need to focus on their own personal concerns.
- Some counsellors may be sufficiently anxious about maintaining an income or accruing hours for practicum purposes that they may lose sight of ethical considerations in their practice. This could involve working beyond their competence, continuing work with clients who are ready to finish, over-charging, engaging in client work where they have a conflict of interest, seeing clients more frequently than is therapeutically useful, inappropriate marketing, cancelling supervision sessions to limit costs, amongst other possibilities. Keep the Code of Ethics to hand and explore its relevance where necessary.
- If counsellors are struggling financially, it may be relevant to recontract fees for supervision, if this will enable them to engage in sufficient supervision.
- Now will be a good time for discussing professional development activities and supervisees' reports and plans for their CPD, in the light of the emerging post-epidemic landscape.
- Counsellors have an ethical obligation to take care of their own health, in order to be available to their clients. Supervisors may need to monitor general physical health, workload management, stress levels and mental wellbeing, all of which may be affected by the present situation. Supervisees may need supervision time to discuss their personal circumstances.
- The 'normative' function of supervision requires supervisors to monitor the appropriateness of counsellors' communication and actions. Some counsellors may be inclined to ignore government directives, or may need to be encouraged to challenge clients who are doing so.

Employment

- Counsellors have ethical responsibilities to their colleagues and employers. They may need to continue involvement in discussions and decision-making on policies and procedures for staff sick leave, staff self-isolation, unpaid leave, annual leave, client cancellations, fees, the management of work from home, online security

systems, assistance with additional home internet costs, telephone rosters, client risk management, assessment difficulties, supervision arrangements etc.

NZAC will keep in touch with members about any developments and recommendations as needed. If you have any suggestions to assist us, or queries regarding the above, please contact the Ethics Office. ethicssecretary@nzac.org.nz