

## **COVID-19 Guidelines**

Counsellors have been contacting the NZAC office for advice on handling the present Covid-19 situation. Here are some suggestions for the present. NZAC will contact you again if the advice needs to change.

NZAC will also be looking at whether the criteria for counselling practice hours in relation to membership applications need to be temporarily revised.

Ethically we have a responsibility to keep clients safe, as well as to keep our contract to work with them as best we can. At present it is ok to see clients face-to-face, providing you take precautions, although this may change as things progress. Some clients, however, especially those who see themselves as being at particular risk, may prefer to meet with you online or by phone, as also might you.

### **Working face-to-face**

At present working face-to-face is still acceptable, providing precautions are put in place. These may include:

- Providing hand sanitiser, if possible, and/or providing the opportunity for clients to wash their hands, as well as doing this yourself.
- Keeping a safe distance from clients and avoiding touching.
- Providing a pedal bin for used tissues and emptying it regularly; washing your hands afterwards.
- Washing any cups, water glasses etc. in a dishwasher or hot soapy water; and/ or suggesting to clients that they bring water bottles with them.
- Working to time so that clients do not have to wait in enclosed spaces with others.
- Keeping toilet and kitchen facilities scrupulously clean, making sure there is soap and regularly disinfecting door handles.
- If counselling children, ensuring they wash their hands, and that all play-materials used can be thoroughly cleaned or disposed of after use.
- Encouraging clients to cancel, if they feel at all unwell and, if relevant, waiving any late cancellation fees.
- Not working yourself if you feel unwell, however mildly.
- Keeping clients informed, verbally, in writing or through signage, of the strategies you are employing to keep the environment safe.

- Checking with new clients whether they have recently returned from overseas, and, if so, working with them at a distance. You may also know of existing clients who should be in self-isolation and may similarly need to connect with you remotely.
- Exploring with clients strategies for working together or staying in touch, if you are no longer able to meet face-to-face. This should include consideration of the means to be used, the type and extent of contact that might be needed, how to manage privacy, etc. - see below.
- Discussing your management of Covid-19 risks in supervision.

### **Working remotely**

Some clients may presently feel safer working with you online or by phone. In the near future it is likely that larger organisations will increasingly be wanting workers to work from home and this may also become the only option for all of us for a while.

- Read Section 13 of the Code of Ethics, bearing in mind that Sections 1 - 8 of the Code all still apply as well.
- You may also find the Canadian Counseling and Psychotherapy Association's guidelines for working with technology has some sections that raise issues you have not thought about. See [https://www.ccpa-accp.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/TISCGuidelines\\_Mar2019\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ccpa-accp.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/TISCGuidelines_Mar2019_EN.pdf)
- Contracting arrangements need to be done more carefully with distance work, since clients are likely to be unfamiliar with this way of using technology.
- Privacy and security issues should be a particular focus.
- Investigate the security risks of any online platform you use.
- 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.
- 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 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 or messaging. 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 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 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 sets up remote access, do what you can to check out its security.
- Check out your ways of working remotely in supervision, paying particular attention to any at-risk clients.

### **Covid-19 counselling issues**

- Some clients' anxiety may be exacerbated by the impact of the virus on their lives. Make sure they 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/advice-for-public>) and can restrict attention to social media and other sources of poor or inaccurate information.
- Some clients may face increased financial pressure and/or may lose their jobs. Be prepared to work on stress management, decision-making, career options and be well informed about what other services may be of assistance and where information can be obtained on available resources (for example, see MSD, WINZ and IRD websites).
- At this time some client groups may 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.

## **For Supervisors**

- You should expect to spend time checking out the safety of face-to-face work and the appropriateness of arrangements for distance work.
- It may be necessary to be available for brief consultations between sessions about at-risk clients; counsellors may have greater difficulty in determining risk, with distance work.
- Counsellors have an ethical obligation to take care of their own health, in order to be reliably and effectively available to their clients. Supervisors should monitor this, not only in relation to Covid-19, but also regarding general physical health, workload management, stress levels and mental wellbeing, all of which may be affected by these abnormal circumstances.

## **Employment**

Counsellors have ethical responsibilities to their colleagues and employers. They may need to participate in discussions to establish policies and procedures for staff sick leave, staff self-isolation, unpaid leave, client cancellations, fees, the management of work from home, online security systems, assistance with additional home internet costs, telephone rosters, client risk management, 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](mailto:ethicssecretary@nzac.org.nz)