

COVID-19: This new path we find ourselves on is not easy

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Adjusting to a new reality can be challenging at the best of times – but when it is sudden, global and without a gradual transition or clear end point, it can stretch many people's resources. For many, this time of being at home in our bubbles involves sacrifices emotionally, physically, spiritually and interpersonally. I have seen some excellent articles which acknowledge that this is not just 'staying home on the couch' and I agree with this. Validating that this can involve a sense of grief and loss is really important; people need to be able to mourn the loss of how things used to be, and it is ok to be anxious about what comes next (not just once the rāhui has lifted, but as the world re-settles into something that may look quite different).

It is important to be kind to ourselves as we grieve for the way things were, try to find a rhythm for our new way of life, and manage our emotions and fears about how things will look in the future. Acknowledging this is new and challenging for all of us is important; being kind to ourselves and each other as we adjust is key. Sharing how we are feeling helps people to feel they are not alone, but it is important that people do not ramp up other's distress by catastrophising. Balancing your thinking (through accurate information) - so that we take this crisis seriously, but do not feel paralysed by anxiety and feel helpless - will enable us to engage in good problem-solving and reduce emotions to a manageable level. Looking to previous coping and resilience (as individuals, whānau, communities and nations) helps us to see our strengths that we can draw on in these times of uncertainty.

While many people are finding the novelty of lockdown means that they are adjusting pretty well in these first few days, as time goes on, challenges may start to emerge. Managing financial pressures, feeling a loss of choices and autonomy and strained relationships from close contact without a break means that for many, stress levels can start to rise as time goes on. These can start to show in feeling more irritable and on edge, feeling more anxious and worried, and wanting to either seek a lot of information or avoid thinking about covid-19 entirely.

This is affecting everyone in our bubble

On top of managing our own feelings, many of us are trying to reassure children, older adult parents, colleagues, and friends. In times of natural disasters and crises, images of parents searching for their children, and families desperately seeking to reunite are common. The situation we find ourselves in is similar; when the announcement came on Monday the 23rd March that New Zealand was heading for level 4 on Wednesday midnight, countless parents initiated urgent attempts to have their adolescent and young adult children come home from University and flats in other cities, and go through the lockdown with the rest of the family. Similarly, adults sought their older adult parents to come and stay with them or elected to go and be with them (sometimes with their own young children as well), rather than have them go through the lockdown alone. A natural human instinct to gather those we love around us in times of crisis and uncertainty.

I am sure many people had images in their minds of generations of family around the table at night, playing board games and sharing stories - enhancing and strengthening connections already made, and rebuilding connections lost. However, as the novelty of the lockdown wears off, the reality for many will be slightly different. *And that is ok.* While many cultures have established understandings and expectations of intergenerational living, for many New Zealanders, the idea of leaving home

upon completion of high school, going flatting, and launching into the world as an adult is the expectation. So, for many late adolescent and young adult (AYA) New Zealanders, they are losing their independence and autonomy by moving back into the family home during lockdown and that can feel challenging – for them, and for their parents. Parents will feel they have made sacrifices financially and practically that may feel unappreciated and overlooked by AYAs, who in turn may feel resentful of having restrictions placed on them as to when mealtimes, showers and loud music can be enjoyed. *And that is ok.* It is important that we understand that this is just as a result of developmental processes (identity development, independence and branching out) being interrupted and disrupted. Naming it and seeing it for what it is means that people stop feeling like failures or disappointed if the expected treasured time together feels patchy or not quite what they imagined. Add in financial stress, anxiety about what may be to come (and a sense of loss for what we are no longer able to do), people spending far more time together than they would normally do, and pent up energy through not being able to get out and about, and nerves can get frayed.

Similarly, moving in to look after your older adult parents, or having one or both come to stay can be really rewarding – but old family dynamics tend to come to the forefront when families get back together. When my mother was alive and I visited her, the first thing I would do is go and raid her fridge (she always had excellent treats for the grandchildren!) and I had to remind myself that I was an adult in my 30s, not some child she needed to look after. (Still, she made the best pikelets) Adult children can feel an urge to care for their older adult parents, who may have established routines and still be very independent and capable. So, older adult parents can similarly feel a sense of loss of autonomy if their independence is not recognised and respected, and (like AYAs) can feel resentful and want to rebel if not given the respect they deserve. There are memes about needing to ground older adult parents which, while amusing, have a grain of truth that roles can feel reversed or altered right now; this can lead to everyone feeling unsettled and not knowing the playbook to navigate such changes. Older adults can often have clear routines and patterns to their day which don't always meld with family life with children; instead of brief visits with grandchildren, people may struggle to adjust to living with younger children for weeks on end, with noise and activity levels being different to what they are used to. *And that is ok.*

Negotiating how to live as adults, recognising when old dynamics come into play, and talking about how you can live and function as a unit is vital to ensure that things get done without dirty resentful looks about who is going to hang out the washing, and disgruntlement about which tv channel to watch at night (or who gets to stream a show on their computer). Communication will increase the likelihood that people enjoy each other's company and be able to genuinely make some lovely memories during a difficult time. Name the problem as the problem (being in a unique and uncharted situation where you are having to live together out of step with expected paths) - and talk about it. Figure out what is helpful and keep checking that it is still helpful as time goes on. One of my favourite memories of my grandfather was when he was out in town with my mother (aged 80 and 48 respectively) and he reached down to hold her hand as they crossed the street. Some habits are hard to break – and these relationships are beautiful and to be treasured. You never stop being a parent, no matter how old your children are, and you are always your parents' child - but how you put that into practice can evolve as it needs to.

Assisting our children with their emotions

While managing our feelings (as well as navigating altered relationships with adult children and older adult parents), many people also have younger children to look after and support. Children and young people can respond differently in times of distress. This also varies by age and developmental

stage, with younger children having more magical and imaginative thinking, and older children having more awareness and knowledge of the issues our communities are facing (which brings up a lot of emotions for them). So, depending on age and temperament, children can show their distress and adjustment through different behaviours and emotions.

- they can become a bit clingier and need more attention
- others can become irritable, grumpy and on edge
- others may regress in their behaviour (such as start wetting the bed, wanting to sleep with their parents or talking in a more childlike way)
- some may be more anxious and express a lot of fear and worries, for their health and the health of others close to them
- others can try to seek a lot of information (ask a lot of questions, reassurance-seeking), in the pursuit of trying to understand and feel secure
- some may even pretend nothing is different (avoid talking and thinking about it) as it is too difficult and scary

All of these responses are attempts to feel secure, gain a sense of control, and manage emotions in the face of a very difficult situation for everyone. Noticing any changes in your child's behaviour, emotions and interactions with others is vital – pointing out that you have noticed a change, and asking more about it helps children know that in the midst of a crisis, there are adults paying attention to them, looking out for them, and keeping boundaries around them, which helps them feel more secure.

Validating children's emotions and empathising helps children feel understood and less alone which helps reduce their distress. This involves helping them name how they are feeling, understand that these feelings are in response to a very new situation, normalising those feelings and ensuring that people know no feeling is 'wrong' in this situation. But it is also vital that you keep some things predictable and consistent – including having chores, the same family rules and values, routines and consequences for behaviour. Validating and empathising with feelings does not mean children have free reign to behave as they please. Some testing behaviours can be a child's way of checking out whether the rules still apply and genuinely, they feel reassured to know that breaking the rules means the same consequences!

However, some flexibility is also key here, rather than rigidly sticking to how things have always been done. This is a situation none of us have found ourselves in before; so whereas you might have had clear limits on device use previously, understanding that this needs to be loosened somewhat to enable children to stay connected to their friends, teachers and things that are meaningful to them will help your (and their sanity)!. Keep communication and connection going by asking what they are doing online – ensure they are not looking at information that is inappropriate, or that they might find overwhelming or frightening. In the absence of information, children will fill in the gaps with their imagination or information that comes from less than reliable sources. If they have questions, you want them to ask you first, and if you don't know, then you look for accurate and helpful information together, rather than having them search the internet alone, or rely on friends for information. Young children will not require a lot of information, so don't overwhelm them with too much – just the basics (there is a virus in our community that can make people really sick, so staying home keeps the virus from being able to move around and helps us stay well). Give a piece of information, answer any questions and ask if there is anything else they need to know. Some reassurance, calmness, routine and familiarity in their day (and distraction) is key for younger children.

Don't get too caught up in keeping school hours during school term – there is excellent advice from educators around this, in terms of keeping things going, but also seeing other opportunities for learning that are more 'real life' (such as doing things around the home with you, like cooking), or involve learning together (such as watching documentaries together). Talk to friends about how they are doing things with their children and use your parent and school communities to share ideas and keep connected.

We all need to feel we have some degree of control – so think about this for your child in layers.

- Things they can do for themselves: wash their hands, stay close to home, listen to adults, keep their bodies as healthy as possible
- Things adults (especially their parents) can do to keep people well: parents listen to advice from the authorities (medical and government), ensure we stay within our bubble, and keep themselves healthy so they can take care of children. It can be helpful for children to know that there will always be adults to take care of them – so if one of their parents did become ill, there would be another adult(s) who will care for them. Children are pretty savvy at understanding what is going around, so saying “We won't get sick” will not work with children once they get a bit older as they know there cannot be any guarantees. It is better to say something like “the chances of getting the virus are small, but if we do, the chance of getting really sick is not high, as most people our age get it mildly and recover. But if we did get sick, you would be looked after by...” Many young people I know are aware of the risks for older people and those with underlying health conditions, so have fears for grandparents and older people in their whānau. So, feeling they are doing something useful by staying in their bubble is key. We want people to be able to accurately understand a situation, but not feel helpless or paralysed, that there is something meaningful and useful they can do to help.
- The Government is looking after us by listening to scientists, who are looking for vaccinations and treatments to fight the virus. **We have closed our borders so the virus has less chance to move around** – this messaging is key, as it makes it clear that **the virus is the problem/enemy, not people!** So, we stay home so that the virus cannot travel, and if it cannot move around, it will run out of places to spread.
- And remember, in times of crisis, there are always heroes, and children need to see those positive stories, and the stories of people who recover.

As the initial novelty of the situation wears off and people's tolerance wears thin, signs of distress or discomfort can emerge, and so keeping the lines of communication and connection going with your loved ones is really important – children may adjust well initially (with some excitement and even enjoyment of having extra time at home), but find it more challenging as time goes on. During times of crisis, children do need reassurance and calm reactions, so it is important adults are able to model good coping strategies.

Enhancing your wellbeing during COVID-19

Feeling overloaded as time goes on is something we all need to be mindful of, and it is a good idea to put into place some daily strategies to try to manage stress levels, build in some daily enjoyment into the day, and find ways to stay connected with things and people who are meaningful to us. Feeling like we have some control in a situation that is largely occurring *to us* helps us feel less stressed. Feeling a sense of some sort of control (through following the health messages and government guidelines) and retaining some familiarity in our days helps us gain a sense of direction and sends messages to our brain that some things are predictable and consistent, which helps to

calm us down. In the midst of many choices being removed for us, having some choices during the day is still important – even if it is what jersey you wear today, or what order you do your work in! Flexibility is important, as is balance – time to work, but remember that rest and self-care is just as important, and it is ok if we are not as productive as we might normally be. Don't get too caught up in keeping strict hours; have some overarching goals, but flexibility and creativity in achieving these is helpful right now. Remember, define success more compassionately right now – if everyone is fed, has achieved something meaningful during the day and has maintained their health and wellbeing, that is a good day! Reduce expectations to what is realistic and manageable and give yourself permission to prioritise and focus on what really needs to be done.

During times of crisis, there are some things we can do to manage our emotions and maintain things that are important to us:

- appropriate information seeking, from reputable sources, but also limited in time and quantity of information sought. This leaves more time for positive, meaningful activities with those we care about and less time for worry and rumination (thinking without any real solutions being achieved)
- looking after your physical self – eating well, keeping your body moving, sleeping well, keeping hydrated
- keeping in some sort of usual routine
- keeping your brain occupied – reading, music, work, tv programmes, YouTube
- keeping social connections going
- take some time to find a rhythm and balance between routine and flexibility.
- balance time apart and time to connect – it is normal to get one each other's' nerves a little without a break from each other!
- try to maintain the threads of your life (things that are meaningful and important) so they are easier to pick up again when we are able to. Life is like a rich tapestry and this is a time to reflect on things you can let go of that may not seem very important moving forward but it is vital to keep hold of the things you will need to carry on with and that are important to you, even if we hold those threads more lightly than we normally do.

Finally, if you are struggling, please remember to engage in good self-care, ask for support, talk to your friends and whānau and be kind to yourself. In order to help our whānau, you need to have the energy and resources to be able to respond to their needs and that means looking after yourself too!