

## Psychology Tips on coping with Covid-19

These tips have been compiled by Pare Harris & Tahlia Kingi, registered Clinical Psychologists.

The spread of this pandemic can be both physically and emotionally stressful. Heightened levels of stress compromises our immune system, so it's especially important in times like these that we're looking after our wairua (spirit), our hinengaro (mental health) and our tinana (physical health). There is a lot of advice available on the internet about how to cope at this time, and it can be hard to determine what advice to take and whether or not it is effective. Information overload can be overwhelming, and cause confusion and additional anxiety.

We can't stress how important it is for us all to care for our mental health at the moment. Research has found that self-isolation increases the risk of depression, irritability, stress, insomnia and fatigue, even symptoms likened to a response to trauma. (See for Brooks et al, 2020, rapid review of the literature on the psychological impact of quarantine).

For our tamariki (children), this time can be really upsetting. If they are old enough to understand what is going on, they can feel unsettled and out of control. Tamariki are observant, they absorb what is going on around them. Now is the time for our grown-ups to model positive and effective coping skills, as this will assist our tamariki to cope during a crisis. Our tamariki are incredibly resilient, and can adapt to these uncertain times when their foundations are secure. We can do this by keeping calm, having reassuring conversations, focusing on the controllable, maintaining a positive and proactive mindset, and demonstrating appropriate coping behaviours.

### 1. Look after your mental health

It's normal for whānau to experience stress and anxiety in times like these. Simple tips for managing stress & anxiety include:

- Getting outdoors and engaging with nature, get some fresh air and sunshine.
- Regular kori tinana (exercise) has huge benefits for mental health. Anything from a simple hikoi around your whare, to body weight movements in your living room, or even a high intensity workout in your backyard can help you to get a sweat up and get your blood pumping. This then releases endorphins that can boost your energy and mood.

Whakaaro/Tip: Make your housework fun. Have a relay outside with your tamariki. Nominate a referee. Winner gets to nominate a whānau member to do a certain chore. Or, work on chores together as a whānau and insert squats or burpees or star-jumps between tasks. Kei a koe! Get creative whānau mā.

- Sleep hygiene is important; ensure you get enough good quality moe (sleep) and stick to a regular sleeping routine by going to bed at your usual time and waking at your normal time.
- Deep breathing into the puku (belly) and not the chest can help calm the tinana when you're feeling stressed, as it activates the parasympathetic nervous system,

sending signals to your tinana that you are safe, and all is ka pai. Deep breathing is slow whānau, minimum 3 seconds in, pause, 3 seconds out.

Whakaaro/Tip: Find a comfortable place to lay down (on the couch/floor/bed/the grass outside, even better!) and place something on your puku (a book/cushion/pōtae). With every breath in, your puku should fill up with air like you're blowing up a balloon, and the item on your puku should go up – not your chest. With every breath out, your puku should deflate like a balloon, and the item on your puku should drop down.

GAME: First to 5 deep breaths in and out via the puku wins. If your chest goes up instead of your puku, you've got to start back from one again. Practice makes perfect and this is a great calming strategy for any situation or emotion.

- Relaxation activities

Whakaaro/Tip: Write a list of relaxing activities to do at home or outside, stick it up on your fridge, or tear up into individual activities and place into an activity kete/bowl. Activities can range from 5 minutes to all day – kei a koe! It's up to you! Try to do at least one relaxing activity per day. It may be meditating, colouring, drawing/painting, listening to music, writing or creating waiata/poetry, planting flowers, we'll let you get creative with the rest.

- Keeping a gratitude journal or just taking the time to note things you are grateful for.

Whakaaro/Tip: If you're at home you can step outside, stand in a line, and do a gratitude walk. One person at a time takes one step forward and says aloud something that they're grateful for in that moment. Then the next, and the next, until you reach the point you are walking to. This may be from one couch to another, or one side of the lounge to another. One step and kōrero at a time ☺.

- Limiting screen time and spending more 'unplugged' quality time with whānau in your space or relaxing activities as per above.
- Connecting with friends and whānau. This may be via online video calling, phone calls, texting, or at appropriate physical distances (2m).
- Mindfulness and mindfulness-based stress reduction (see below).

If you currently have or have had a history of anxiety, depression, trauma or other mental health difficulties then this time may be even more trying for you. You will need to draw on skills you've learnt in therapy previously, or knowledge within your whānau about how to manage through this time. If you're really struggling, seek help from the professional services available within your region. See the bottom of this document for services available nationwide.

There are some of us for whom this time isolated at home will not be a good thing. If your current home situation isn't safe for you, please reach out to whānau or

appropriate community agencies (e.g. Oranga Tamariki, Women's Refuge) for advice and support.

## 2. Managing intense emotions

Emotions may be high for many, and the longer we're in this situation, the more likely they are to become overwhelming. Work together as a whānau, and have strategies for managing stress, anxiety and anger at the ready. When we work with whānau with emotional difficulties the first step we take is to help them understand their own warning signs. For example, what things make you vulnerable to your emotions? How do you know when you're angry? Stressed? Anxious? Depressed? If you recognise your early warning signs for the onset of intense emotions and have some strategies in place to manage them, it makes it easier to manage during tough times. Going outside, taking deep breaths, calling a support person. Find ways that work for you that don't involve taking it out on those around you or turning to drugs or alcohol to avoid those emotions. Use some of the tips highlighted above.

Le Va has released a great resource called #CatchYourself: Respect your Bubble, with practical resources and information on how we can manage our frustration or anger and maintain respectful relationships, particularly while we stay at home in isolation due to Covid-19. See <https://www.leva.co.nz/our-work/catchyourself> for more info, including a four step process for managing stress.

## 3. Managing stress using mindfulness practices

Mindfulness is simply about being in the present moment. Often when we are stressed, anxious, depressed etc. our thoughts are caught up in the past, or worrying about the future. Taking time out to give our mind a break from all of these thoughts and just be in the present moment is a powerful tool for boosting our mood. This can be done simply by taking moments in your day to pause, look around you and observe.

- What is one thing you can see? Cast your gaze around the room and observe objects around you.
- Close your eyes, what can you hear?
- With your eyes closed, what sensations can you feel? The weight of your feet on the ground, or your back against the seat. Rather than thinking about the feeling, just feel it...

Other ways to practice mindfulness include mindful colouring, stretching/moving, and doing "mindless" activities such as jigsaw puzzles and knitting or other crafts that allow you to switch off your brain. There are also formal mindfulness practices you can do, such as awareness of breath, and others, on apps such as headspace and calm. Be sure to find ones that explain the purpose of mindfulness. Also a word of caution that mindfulness may not be helpful for some people and some may find it distressing and confronting to engage in mindful activities. If you find this is you, you may want to stop and seek professional advice or support alongside your mindfulness practice.

## 4. Try and do something that helps to keep a sense of normality.

In times of crisis it can feel like our world has turned upside down, so to combat this, do at least one thing each day that helps you to feel normal, because we know that this helps to increase mental resilience. And this is helpful particularly for tamariki, because keeping a routine can provide a sense of calm during times of stress. Even our pepi benefit from knowing what is going to happen and when.

A lot of people think that routines are dull, boring, and it can be tempting to spend the next four weeks living in our pyjamas, sleeping when we feel like it, eating when we feel like it, and watching Netflix all day every day, but routines are really good for our mental health. Try to go to sleep and wake up at the same time each day, eat at regular times, etc. Keeping a routine will help you to manage your days and adjust when life starts to go back to normal.

In saying that, your tamariki may have sensed that things are really uncertain at the moment and may be feeling uneasy and anxious, so spend time calming and grounding yourself & your whānau; take as much time as you need to manage that stress and anxiety, be with your tamariki, connect with them. And when you're ready, then start to get back into your usual routine. You know yourself and your whānau best, so do it when you're ready, knowing that routines are really going to help you & your whānau maintain a sense of normality over this time in lockdown.

We can help to cope in this time of isolation by looking for one shred of normalcy that you can continue even when life feels anything but normal. Spend some quality time together planning & adjusting to this new normal.

#### **5. Distraction from information overload**

Our thoughts have an impact on pain and stress. It may be tempting to be glued to the TV or social media during a crisis. However while it's important to stay informed, a constant 24/7 approach can create additional and unnecessary stress. Try to limit your screen time, including news and social media. An hour in the evening to catch up on everything could be enough. And for the rest of the day, spend your energy wisely by engaging in activities that enhance your wairua, things that you enjoy doing. As mentioned earlier, reducing stress and replacing this with positive and meaningful activities, whether alone or at home with immediate whānau can help immensely during times like these.

#### **6. Plan how you will get through this with your whānau.**

Sit down together with your whānau & plan how you're going to approach this time together. What routine will you keep? If in isolation, everyone's going to be home, which means more mess & more dishes, washing, etc. If this is usually left to one person, have a plan or a roster so that the load is shared. Set some goals to make the most of this time. Are there books you've been meaning to read? Knitting you've been meaning to finish? Always wanted to try baking? Our lives are usually so busy, see this as an opportunity to take forced reprieve from all of that.

#### **7. Communicating with tamariki**

Tamariki will likely be aware that things are changing, and can sense that the grown-ups around them are uneasy. Lack of information can lead to tamariki imagining the worst case scenarios. It is a good idea to be prepared to have this kōrero, but to let

them initiate it. By you initiating the conversation or continuing to raise the topic it may create or increase their anxiety. So allow the conversation to happen, and let them in on the conversation but at an appropriate level. How you explain this to your tamariki (child) will depend on their age. Be clear and have a kōrero with them in a calm manner, and ensure that your information is factual and correct. Validate any thoughts and feelings that they express without judgment or criticism. For more information, see the stuff article written by Clinical Psychologist Jacqui Maguire (link in references).

#### **8. Control the controllables**

When it feels like the world is spiralling out of control it is important to focus on what is controllable in our life. We can all do our part to minimise the spread of COVID-19 by following recommendations around social distancing (or physical distancing while maintaining appropriate and safe social contact), and ensuring adequate hygiene practices. This is important to communicate to tamariki; focus on the things that they can do. Talk with your tamariki about how they can manage their own health as well as that of the wider community can give them a sense of empowerment when they may feel like they are losing control.

#### **9. Mindset during isolation – Taha Hinengaro**

Self-isolation can have quite profound impacts on our mental health. Mindset is important. One thing that can help is to encourage whānau to adopt a positive mindset about their situation in that by self-isolating, they are saving lives especially those of our most vulnerable – including our Kaumātua. This is as opposed to getting angry about feeling as though it is forced on you - we know that people who take that approach increase their anger and resentment, and when in situations like that can lead to increased psychological distress and suffering.

#### **HELPLINES**

- 1737 – Free call or text 1737 any time for support from a trained counsellor.
- Lifeline – 0800 543 354 or free text 4357 (HELP)
- Youthline – 0800 376 633 or free text 234
- Samaritans – 0800 726 666
- For mental health and addictions crises, all District Health Boards (DHB) across the country have Crisis Assessment Treatment (CATT) Services. You will need to contact your local DHB for the phone number of the CATT team in your region.

#### References

Brooks, S. K., Webster, R. K., Smith, L. E., Woodland, L., Wessely, S., Greenberg, N., & Rubin, G. J. (2020). The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence. *The Lancet*.

CARE model by Jacqui Maguire:

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/coronavirus/120488108/how-to-take-care-of-your-kids-during-covid19>.