



**COVID-19**  
*we are united*

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# Psychological First Aid

HE WHAKARAUORA HINENGARO

**for COVID-19 in  
Aotearoa New Zealand**

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# BACKGROUND

**This psychological first aid booklet provides a supplement to the New Zealand Red Cross Psychological First Aid (He Whakarauora Hinengaro) guide<sup>1</sup> by outlining ways of adapting psychological first aid for COVID-19.**

**As the COVID-19 pandemic develops, New Zealanders are experiencing increasing uncertainty and disrupted lives. Many are now also facing significant stressors such as income or job loss, health issues and concerns for whānau, friends and community. COVID-19 impacts all New Zealanders and most will experience some level of distress due to COVID-19.<sup>2</sup>**

Psychological first aid is based on an understanding that people affected by emergency events experience a range of early physical, psychological, emotional and behavioral reactions, which may interfere with their ability to cope. These reactions are normal and understandable.<sup>3</sup> In the same way that medical first aid provides initial basic support for physical injury, psychological first aid provides initial basic support for distress.<sup>4</sup>

Psychological first aid can help people cope by establishing a supportive human connection, reducing a person's level of distress, meeting current needs, promoting coping strategies and linking to further community or professional support if required.

**Psychological First Aid provides basic emotional and practical support to help reduce distress and enable a person to adapt, cope and recover.**

## HOW AND WHERE CAN PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID BE DELIVERED DURING COVID-19?

Generally psychological first aid can be provided anywhere that it is safe to do so. In the context of COVID-19, in order to remain safe the conversations between the helper and the affected person will usually take place by phone or online. The exception to this is front-line health and essential services workers or psychological first aid provided by household members to each other.

## WHO BENEFITS FROM PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID?

Any person experiencing distress can benefit from psychological first aid. This includes adults, children and young people, and community members from any cultural background.

Psychological first aid is not a one-size-fits-all approach. It is important to adapt how it is provided in order to be understandable, appropriate and relevant to the recipient.

**Some people may be at risk of more serious distress. For COVID-19 some of these risk factors may include:**

- Being at higher risk of contracting COVID-19, see [covid19.govt.nz/help-and-advice/for-everyone/vulnerable-people](https://covid19.govt.nz/help-and-advice/for-everyone/vulnerable-people)
- Have serious losses, e.g. of loved ones, livelihood, income
- Are already experiencing significant stress in their life;
- Have pre-existing mental illness
- Do not have a well-developed social network
- Are experiencing financial stress or uncertainty.

**Some people will need more support than psychological first aid. Know your limits, know who to refer on to for further medical or mental health assistance and know when to ask for help.**

<sup>1</sup> New Zealand Red Cross. (2015). *Psychological First Aid – He Whakarauora Hinengaro*. New Zealand Red Cross: Wellington.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Health. (2016). *Framework for Psychosocial Support in Emergencies*. Ministry of Health: Wellington.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

There are five essential elements which psychological first aid promotes – safety, calm, connectedness, self- and group efficacy (confidence in being able to help oneself) and hope.<sup>5</sup>

During the COVID-19 outbreak, emotional and practical ways in which you can promote these five elements when supporting someone may include:

### PROMOTE SAFETY

- Follow safe practices yourself and inform people about the safe practices for COVID-19 such as physical distancing, hand washing, cough and sneeze behaviour, etc. (which are described in more detail at [covid19.govt.nz/how-were-uniting](https://covid19.govt.nz/how-were-uniting)).
- Help meet basic needs – food and other essential supplies including medications, nappies and pet food.
- Encourage use of trusted sources of information and avoidance of rumours and sensationalistic news or gossip.

### PROMOTE CALM

- Be calm yourself.
- Speak slowly.
- Consider your posture & facial expressions (if face-to-face).
- Listen if someone wants to talk.
- Normalise reactions by reassuring that it's OK to feel distressed, anxious, worried, overwhelmed etc. They are perfectly normal reactions in this unprecedented situation.
- Reassure people about the supports available.
- Suggest setting limits for watching or listening to news, or engaging in conversation about COVID-19, e.g. checking news updates at regular times each day rather than all the time.
- Give information about breathing techniques and/or mindfulness Apps (see 'Further Resources' section at end of this booklet).
- Provide or link to information on mental wellbeing and coping with stress (see 'Further Resources' section).

### PROMOTE CONNECTEDNESS

- Encourage people to keep connected with those who are important to them in whatever way they can - phone, Skype, social media platforms, writing letters, making and/or sending cards etc.
- Offer on-going support if that is appropriate, or refer to organisations or phone lines which offer mental wellbeing support.

<sup>5</sup> Hobfoll. S.E., Watson, P., Bell, C.C., Bryant, R.A., Brymer, M.J., Friedman, M.J. (2007). Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: Empirical evidence, *Psychiatry*, 70, pp.283-315.

### PROMOTE SELF AND GROUP EFFICACY

- Acknowledge that there are things that are not under our control right now and encourage people to identify what they can control in their life.
- Encourage people to think about how they could meet any of their own current needs.
- Encouraging people to think of ways they can help others is also one of the most important ways of promoting efficacy.
- Assist in setting realistic goals and prioritising tasks.
- Promote the importance of self-care such as keeping to a daily routine, healthy food, good sleep, daily exercise and enjoyable activities.
- Encourage people to practice existing cultural, religious or spiritual routines that they are safely able to, or think about ways they can adapt these to their current situation.

### PROMOTE HOPE

- Reassure people that their feelings are normal.
- Promote a balanced view of COVID-19, recognising that many people recover well from the virus.
- Read, watch and share some good news stories, e.g. [tvnz.co.nz/one-news/new-zealand/good-sorts-lock-down-edition](https://www.tvnz.co.nz/one-news/new-zealand/good-sorts-lock-down-edition)
- Remind people that we're all going through this together.
- Be kind and show you care.
- Remind people they are not alone and that the virus will last for a period of time and not forever.

## USING PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID

### PREPARING TO PROVIDE PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID

The more prepared you are both emotionally and practically the more effective your support will be:

#### Be informed

Check the New Zealand government 'Unite against COVID-19' website [covid19.govt.nz](https://covid19.govt.nz) for the safety information and latest updates concerning the outbreak. You'll need this information in order to keep safe and to have current information on the various resources available and links to further support.

#### Check in with yourself

Ask yourself, 'Am I emotionally ready and able to support others at this time?' We all have different circumstances and considerations in our lives right now. It's OK to take a break from supporting others at times when you need to look after yourself. Remember, responding to and recovering from emergency events is a marathon, not a sprint.

# PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID IN ACTION

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has developed a framework consisting of three action principles to assist in the delivery of psychological first aid – **LOOK** (titiro), **LISTEN** (whakarongo) and **LINK** (whakapiri-tata-mai).

## PRINCIPLES



**LOOK**  
titiro



**LISTEN**  
whakarongo



**LINK**  
whakapiri-tata-mai

## ACTIONS

- Check for safety.
  - Check for people with obvious urgent basic needs.
  - Check for people with serious distress reactions.
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- Approach people who may need support.
  - Ask about people's needs and concerns.
  - Listen to people and help them to feel calm.
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- Help people address basic needs and access services.
  - Help people cope with problems.
  - Give information.
  - Connect people with loved ones and social support.

## ADAPTING THE ACTION PRINCIPLES FOR COVID-19



**LOOK**  
titiro

The **LOOK** action principle involves attending to safety needs, urgent basic needs and looking for serious distress reactions. How this is done in practice will depend on whether you are supporting someone in person, by phone or video call, or online.

### Check for safety

- Wash your hands regularly and follow the other simple hygiene guidelines to minimise the risk of spreading the virus see, [covid19.govt.nz/how-were-uniting/wash-your-hands](https://www.covid19.govt.nz/how-were-uniting/wash-your-hands).
- Know and follow guidelines for physical distancing, see [covid19.govt.nz/how-were-uniting/physical-distancing](https://www.covid19.govt.nz/how-were-uniting/physical-distancing) if you are providing PFA in person. Explain what you are doing, so that the person is aware of safe practice and feels safe, e.g. "I'm going to chat with you from two metres. We're both safe that way."

- To help the person you are supporting to feel safe with your support, remember the importance of taking time to establish a connection with them. Use a personal tone in your communication, find out their name and tell them yours, and say something about yourself and who you are.
- For your safety, if you are providing assistance over the phone, find out if you need to block your number to protect your privacy and emotional well-being.
- Follow your organisation's guidelines on whether it is appropriate to provide personal information. If not, provide the contact details for the organisation.

#### Check for obvious urgent basic needs

- Does the person think they have symptoms of COVID-19?
- Has the person and others in their household got enough food, water, soap or hand sanitiser, medication, cleaning products, pet food and other basic requirements for the next few days?
- Are they able to contact family, friends or services by phone or online? Do they need help with their phone or computer?

#### Check for serious distress reactions

- It's normal for people to be distressed due to COVID-19. There is a wide range of physical and emotional reactions such as worry, tears, feeling overwhelmed, agitation, anger, frustration, emotional numbness and many more. For most people these reactions will be temporary and will pass. If the person you are supporting is experiencing ongoing, overwhelming distress, or they are struggling to function in their daily lives then encourage them to **call or text 1737** to talk with a trained counsellor.
- If you become concerned that the person is at risk of harming themselves or others then **phone 111** for urgent support. If you feel that you are able to, stay with them on the phone or in person until help arrives.



## LISTEN

whakarongo

#### Approach people who may need support

- During this time be aware of those who may be more vulnerable to COVID-19. Check in regularly on the older people (and those with a compromised immune system or underlying health conditions) in your life and in your community.
- Be aware of other groups and individuals who may become vulnerable as time progresses, e.g. those who lose their income or job or those whose family, friends or colleagues become sick or die.

#### Ask about needs and concerns

- It's easy to assume what people need. Asking questions like the ones below can help you understand the person's main needs and concerns, which may be different from what you expected:
  - “Is there anything you need right now?”
  - “Are there things that you're particularly worried about?”

- “What's your main concern at the moment?”

#### Listen to people and help them feel calm

- Be confident that being a good listener helps. Whether we can provide someone with practical assistance or not, the emotional support that comes from being a good listener makes a huge difference to how supported a person feels.
- Reassure the person by letting them know that it's OK to feel the way they are feeling and that it's normal to feel distressed during a distressing event.
- Remember there are no 'magic words' that will make everything OK, so you don't need to have them. Just acknowledging how someone is feeling, listening to them tell their story and being present with them (whether that be on the phone or in person) will help them feel heard and supported.



# LINK

whakapiri-tata-mai

## Help address basic needs and access services

- If the person thinks they may have symptoms of COVID-19 they should call Healthline on **0800 358 5453**.
- Know what support you as an individual can provide and what links to other services you can provide (see 'Further Resources' section).

## Help people cope with problems

- Helping others to help themselves builds people's confidence and resilience during and after disasters. Encourage the person to remember how they've coped with challenging situations in the past and try to hold back from doing everything for them.
- Stress hormones can result in fuzzy thinking and it may be difficult to problem-solve and prioritise. You may be able to help by suggesting options and helping the person prioritise any actions they need to take.
- Encourage people to 'take notice' – observe the things that bring beauty, joy and wonder – and talk about the small things and simple pleasures with them.
- Recommend tips for looking after mental

health and wellbeing such as the Five Ways to Wellbeing, see [mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/covid-19/top-tips-to-get-through](https://mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/covid-19/top-tips-to-get-through).

## Give information

- The NZ government 'Unite against COVID-19' website [covid19.govt.nz](https://covid19.govt.nz) is the main source of information for all support services being provided. People who don't have access to a computer can phone the free government COVID-19 helpline on **0800 779 997** to ask for support.
- It may help the person to limit their exposure to information about the virus in order to reduce anxiety. Encourage them to set certain times of the day they access information and guide them to an official news source of accurate and up-to-date information.

## Connect people with loved ones & social support

- Encourage people to keep as connected as they can to their whānau, friends and community. It's really important that physical distancing doesn't mean social isolation.
- Encourage them to find new ways to connect safely while observing physical distancing

# BREATHING EXERCISE FOR STRESS

**This calming breathing technique for stress, anxiety and panic takes just a few minutes and can be done anywhere. You will get the most benefit if you do it regularly, as part of your daily routine.**

You can do it sitting in a chair that supports your back, or lying on a bed or yoga mat on the floor. Make yourself as comfortable as you can. If you can, loosen any clothes that restrict your breathing.

If you're lying down, place your arms a little bit away from your sides, with the palms up. Let your legs be straight, or bend your knees so your feet are flat on the floor. If you're sitting, place your arms on the chair arms. If you're sitting or standing, place both feet flat

on the ground. Whatever position you're in, place your feet roughly hip-width apart.

- Let your breath flow as deep down into your belly as is comfortable, without forcing it.
- Try breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Breathe in gently and regularly. Some people find it helpful to count steadily from 1 to 5. You may not be able to reach 5 at first.
- Then, without pausing or holding your breath, let it flow out gently, counting from 1 to 5 again, if you find this helpful.
- Keep doing this for 3 to 5 minutes.

# SELF-CARE FOR SUPPORTERS

If you are serious about wanting to support others well, the first and most essential step is taking care of yourself. It is important to identify what causes stress for you, to recognise your signs of stress and to be able to put in place strategies to reduce it.

The important issue for you as a supporter during COVID-19 is that you are living in, as well as working in, the COVID-19 environment. You may not be sharing the same physical environment as the people you are supporting (although in some cases you will be), but you are sharing the same psychosocial environment. COVID-19 impacts you too.

## PACE YOURSELF

- Try to keep reasonable working hours so you do not become too exhausted.
- Try to take time to eat, rest and relax, even for short periods.
- Consider, dividing the workload among helpers, working shifts during the acute phase of the crisis and taking regular rest periods. Speak to others about the challenges/obstacles and stresses. Acknowledge your own vulnerability and stresses.

## LOOK AFTER YOUR BODY

- Eat well, sleep well and be active. Keep to as many of your daily routines as possible.
- Minimise your intake of alcohol, caffeine or nicotine and avoid non-prescription drugs.

## RECOGNISE YOUR STRESS

- Know your own signs for when stress is building.

## KNOW WHAT YOU CAN & CAN'T DO

- People may have many problems after a crisis event. You may feel inadequate or frustrated when you cannot help with their problems. Remember that you are not responsible for solving all of people's problems. Do what you can to help people help themselves.

## CONNECT WITH OTHERS FOR SUPPORT

- Talk with friends, loved ones or other people you trust for support.
- Check in with fellow helpers to see how they are doing, and have them check in with you. Find ways to support each other.

### Acknowledgment

We would like to acknowledge the New Zealand Psychological Society, and in particular Dr Kerry Gibson, for their review of this supplement.

## DON'T HESITATE TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

- View seeking support as a sign of professionalism, not weakness, and encourage this viewpoint amongst fellow helpers.
- When the event and your role is over, you may feel the need to make sense of your experience. It may help to talk with others involved, or with a supervisor or mental health professional

# FURTHER RESOURCES

## USEFUL WEBSITES

- NZ Government Unite against COVID-19: [covid19.govt.nz](https://covid19.govt.nz)
- Mental Health Foundation: [mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/covid-19](https://mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/covid-19)

## NATIONAL HELPLINES

- COVID-19 Healthline – if you think you may have symptoms of COVID-19. **0800 358 5453**
- Government COVID-19 Helpline – if you don't know who to ask for help or are not sure about what assistance is available (8am – 1am, 7 days a week). **0800 779 997**
- For advice, support and general inquiries (8am – 8pm, Monday-Friday). **0800 22 66 57**

## SUPPORT WITH MENTAL WELLBEING

- **Text or call 1737** to talk with a trained counsellor for free. (24 hours a day, 7 days a week).
- Lifeline – **0800 543 354** or **free text 4357**
- Suicide Crisis Helpline – **0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)**
- Samaritans – **0800 726 666**
- Healthline – **0800 611 116**
- Mindfulness Apps – **Calm, Headspace, Smiling Mind**