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|  | **Lutheran Church of Australia and New ZealandCommission on Social and Bioethical Questions** |

# Briefing paper for LCA/NZ leadership

# COVID-19 Ethical Issues – Mental Health

## Context

It is widely acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic has raised the levels of anxiety and depression in the community in both Australia and New Zealand. At the height of the restrictions in New Zealand (Alert Level 4 in April 2020), there was a 40% increase in calls to ‘Need to Talk 1737’ (NZ Herald 2020). After having no active cases of COVID-19 in New Zealand for some months, around 12 August an outbreak of community transmission put New Zealand back to a higher alert. As at 3 September it was at Alert Level 2 with 115 active cases and approximately 10,000 people being tested each day. A number of active cases are related to overseas travel and are in quarantine.

In Australia, reports in May showed similar increases in contact made to Beyond Blue (40% increase over same time in 2019) and other help lines, and while 50% of psychologists had started using telehealth, it has been reported that less people had been accessing mental health services (Christine Morgan 2020). Australian states are at different Alert Levels with Victoria currently experiencing the highest level of restrictions. Since 2 August 2020, Level 4 was in place for Melbourne and Level 3 in place for regional Victoria. Many states had closed their borders with Victoria, and adjacent states had established border ‘bubbles’ to enable normal access to essential services in cross-border communities. However, there has been a reported significant level of non-compliance with restrictions, mandatory wearing of masks and curfews in place in Victoria, and some people not self-isolating after being tested but awaiting results (The Guardian 2020). A study by the Australian Childhood Foundation has found that a third of parents have felt isolated without adequate support and almost 40% were worried that their own stress and mental health was adversely affecting the wellbeing of their children (Tucci, Mitchell and Thomas 2020).

With the second wave experienced in Victoria, people have found it challenging. There have been increased presentations at emergency departments of people suffering stress, depression, and anxiety. More young people have presented with these symptoms at emergency departments in Victoria (Australian Government Department of Health 2020). There is also concern about social factors, eg alcohol and drug use, family and domestic violence, and the very real impact of financial stress and insecurity.

While the initial spate of hoarding had abated, the recent and ongoing increase in restrictions in Victoria brought another round of hoarding behaviour. There are psychological aspects to hoarding that drive some people to this type of behaviour when fearful and uncertain.

There is also concern about the impact of social media, spreading misinformation, rumours, stigma, discrimination and conspiracy theories, on the mental health and wellbeing of people already under stress (Md Saiful Islam et al. 2020).

**New Zealand Government Action:**

* Unite against COVID-19 website - <https://covid19.govt.nz/health-and-wellbeing/mental-wellbeing/looking-after-your-mental-wellbeing/>
* For support with anxiety, distress or mental wellbeing, call or text 1737 to talk with a trained counsellor for free, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. <https://1737.org.nz/>
* Mental Health Foundation: ‘Getting through together’, <https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/getting-through-together/>. Includes workplace wellbeing during COVID-19.
* For support for depression: see resources at <https://depression.org.nz/covid/covid-19/>

**Access to Mental health and addiction Services in New Zealand during Alert Level 2:**

* Inpatient and residential mental health and addiction services will operate as usual, although there may be fewer beds available, to reduce the possibility of infection.
* Community mental health service appointments will be online or by phone where possible. There may be some face-to-face appointments.
* Urgent and crisis community mental health services will continue as usual.
* There is a range of welfare, mental health and wellbeing programmes underway to provide support to New Zealanders.
* Visitors with no suspicion of COVID-19 will be allowed one-at-a-time, once a day. The number of visitors allowed per patient per day depends on where they are, and discretion may be applied on a case-by-case basis. Check with the DHB first.

## Australian Government Action:

* Head to Health – single source of the truth - <https://headtohealth.gov.au/>
* #GettingThroughThisTogether – new campaign launched August 2020 <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/GettingThroughThisTogether>
* #GettingThroughThisTogether has prioritised key at-risk groups including:
	+ Women and children who are living in unsafe homes and victims of family and domestic violence
	+ People struggling with financial stress and distress due to unemployment
	+ Young people, especially those who are undertaking year 12 and at university
	+ Women who shouldered a large share of the household burden during the first lockdown and are facing it once again
	+ People who are already vulnerable, living by themselves or have been disconnected from their community and support services
* The following issues were raised by Prime Ministerial Press Conference with **Christine Morgan**, National Suicide Prevention Adviser, in May 2020
	+ Working on a Mental Health Response Plan that crosses borders – across states and territories – In this together.
	+ Presentations to Emergency Departments are down at that time; but mental wellbeing is foundational to our creative resilience; increased calls to 1800 RESPECT line and to the Men’s Help Line.
	+ People are challenged by confined spaces – sense of loneliness – importance of being socially connected while physically distant.
	+ Worry over job security, housing security, employment security and general safety.
	+ Increased anxiety anticipated as restrictions are eased.
	+ Requests for all Australians to keep eyes alert for what may be needed - looking for ways to reach those Australians who are not currently coming for help.
* Recent Webinar (1 September 2020 - see Australian Government Department of Health 2020) briefing for mental health practitioners:
	+ Reinforce advice for those with existing mental health diagnosis – to stay in touch with practitioners.
	+ Medical Benefits Services – trend to face to face services except in Victoria; but when levels of stress and anxiety are high, the face to face is more effective and clients demanding it; Increased number of sessions available for clients of mental health services
	+ Now elevated use of all services in Victoria – digital and on-line; Demand from young people for Reach Out and eHeadspace is a lot higher; and also services for older Australians;
	+ Supports – Black Dog Institute; The Essential Network; and Smiling Mind App for health care workers;
	+ Some of the marginal and less visible groups are now being identified – eg those in group or share accommodation – and staff supporting these people- increased pressure on mental health;
	+ Looking for positives – we are becoming more familiar with talking about our own mental health.
	+ However, Bushfire season is imminent–ensure support is provided into those areas.
	+ Additional 15 Mental Health clinics in Victoria

**Australian State Government mental health services related to COVID-19:**

Each state or territory of Australia has been addressing the management of COVID-19 in their own way. That includes the approaches to mental health services:

Australian Capital Territory: <https://www.health.act.gov.au/services-and-programs/mental-health/mental-health-and-wellbeing-during-covid-19>

New South Wales: <https://nswmentalhealthcommission.com.au/mental-health-and-the-coronavirus>

Northern Territory: <https://coronavirus.nt.gov.au/community-advice/wellbeing-support>

Queensland: <https://info.qmhc.qld.gov.au/covid19-and-mental-health>

South Australia: [https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/public+content/sa+health+internet/conditions/infectious+diseases/covid+2019/community/mental+health+support+-+covid-19/mental+health+support+-+covid-19](https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/public%2Bcontent/sa%2Bhealth%2Binternet/conditions/infectious%2Bdiseases/covid%2B2019/community/mental%2Bhealth%2Bsupport%2B-%2Bcovid-19/mental%2Bhealth%2Bsupport%2B-%2Bcovid-19)

Tasmania: <https://coronavirus.tas.gov.au/keeping-yourself-safe/mental-health-support>

Western Australia: <https://www.thinkmentalhealthwa.com.au/mental-health-and-covid-19/>

Victoria: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/mental-health-resources-coronavirus-covid-19>

The Victorian website also provides some fact sheets with information on mental health suitable for varying ages and for those in isolation. They recommend that information provided to people, particularly seniors, be from their own state, not from elsewhere and not from social media.

## Possible church actions:

* Raise awareness of normal reaction for members and employees of the Church to be feeling anxious or depressed, even though they may not have been diagnosed with mental illness in the past.
* Strategies to keep in touch with church members to identify and help those struggling with isolation, loss of work, financial stress, tensions from being in close confinement with family members, (and perhaps for some young people) anger or grief over the loss of their anticipated future etc.
	+ Encourage online and regular connections and bible studies – and a return to face to face gatherings provided they comply with physical distancing laws which apply in each state – these change over time. Not all members will be confident to return to face to face – acknowledge this.
	+ Encourage members with children or grandchildren to assist their children to understand and cope with feelings of anxiety.
		- Encompass Christian Counselling’s book “A little scribble spot” deals with understanding emotions <https://encompasscounseling.org/2020/a-little-scribble-spot/>
		- Children’s book “Birdie and the virus” may help to alleviate COVID-19 related anxiety in children <https://www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au/covid-19-birdie-virus/>.
		- The Australian Childhood Foundation <https://professionals.childhood.org.au/covid-19/> has a range of free parenting resources and tools to assist parents as they face the challenges of parenting in the time of coronavirus. For their illustrated story “Understanding Coronavirus for kids”, see <https://professionals.childhood.org.au/app/uploads/2020/04/Talking-to-Children-COVID-19-Social-Story.pdf>.
* Acknowledge and respond to mental trauma associated with restrictions on accompanying the sick and dying and on ‘grieving properly’, i.e. in the embrace of our families and friends.
	+ How do we do this sort of pastoral care when there are still restrictions on gathering and physical contact?
* Take the opportunity to reach out (or reach in) to people who perhaps for the first time are seriously contemplating their own mortality, or the mortality of their parents.
	+ What forms might this take?
* Prepare church members to face the threat of this virus into the long term,
	+ e.g. because it resists eradication, it mutates frequently enough to make vaccines hit and miss, because immunity turns out to be short-lived etc.
* Provide information for employees and members on how and where to get help (Help lines and GPs/Psychologists), particularly if symptoms of depression continue for more than a couple of weeks.
* Provide general information noting:
	+ In Australia: the six areas that are listed to assist in improving mental health: sleep, nutrition, social connectedness, physical activity/exercise, stress management and avoiding risky substance use.
	+ In New Zealand: the top ways to look after mental wellbeing: stay connected, acknowledge your feelings, stick to routines where possible, check in on other people who might need help, and limit your time online.
* Encourage engagement with God’s creation (engaging with nature improves mental health) – including gardening, regular walks in parks and reserves, as well as views of nature through windows.

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