

# SELF-CARE DURING COVID-19

Practical, positive, & proactive  
strategies for coping with Covid-19  
aka  
“The Stupid Virus”.

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A O T E A R O A

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# Table of Contents



Psycho-education	3
Understanding the amygdala hijack	3
Self-care during Covid-19	6
Calming your brain and body	6
Limit your exposure to media	7
Maintain positive connections with other people	8
Get busy	8
Practise gratitude and self-compassion	9
Exercise	9
Focus on what you can control	9
Making time for positive emotions	10
Look where you want to go	11
Underlying mental health conditions	13
Remember - we are designed to adapt	14
Resources	15

As Covid-19 puts us all into social isolation, I'd like to offer suggestions on how you can support yourself and loved ones at this time.

By way of background, I've been a registered psychologist for 20 years. My work involves preparing people for adversity and caring for those who have experienced trauma. In 2018 I completed my PhD investigating how first responders (police officers, firefighters, and paramedics) maintain their wellbeing. I'm passionate about giving people the tools to cope with trauma and adversity.

The attached document provides evidence-based information and advice about how to self-care during Covid-19, or as I call it "Stupid Virus". I begin with psycho-educational details to help you make sense of the anxiety that many of us are feeling right now. I then provide some practical advice about how to manage difficult emotions and keep calm. Throughout the document, I provide links to the types of online resources that I provide my clients, friends, and family.

## Psycho-education

### Understanding the amygdala hijack

When we feel safe in our brain and body, we can access the full capacity of our brain. We can work and learn effectively, maintain positive relationships, and develop resilience. However, when exposed to a threat or danger, our amygdala activates the body's stress (fight, flee, or freeze) response.

The stress response is great when a bear is hunting us. The hormones released (adrenalin and cortisol) help us to fight the bear, run away, or play dead (freeze), aiding our survival.

The whole ordeal is over fairly quickly.



However, our stress response is not so great for long-term coping. The survival mechanism of the amygdala means we react to things before the thinking brain has time to mull things over.

This is why, when we're stressed or upset, we can't think straight. The amygdala shuts down the thinking part of the brain (i.e., our pre-frontal cortex) and we lose access to short term memory. Right now, we're focused on surviving the bear, not on invested in shares or wondering what's for dinner.



Unfortunately, the news around Covid-19 continually exposes our brain to danger; it's like bears are hunting us hundreds of times a day. Because of the brain's natural tendency to focus on the negative, we start to scan the world for danger<sup>1</sup>. This is called an amygdala hijack<sup>2</sup>.

**"Your brain is simply built with a greater sensitivity to unpleasant news."  
Estroff Marano.**

We can lose higher-order functioning, such as perspective<sup>3</sup>. We become rigid in our thinking, and we start to worry. The stress response can lead to out-of-character behaviour. Some people will respond to Covid-19 with a fight response (e.g., blame, anger, frustration, belligerence), others with a flight response (e.g., panic, fear, worry, anxiety), and others with a freeze response (e.g., dis-engaged, quiet, withdrawn).

Today, we are so used to controlling our external environment to feel better. People have forgotten how to control their internal environment and sit with discomfort. I've seen people (including myself) exhibit the fight response (e.g., this virus is so annoying, I don't want to cancel my Abel Tasman trip, I'm not cooking every meal for everyone the next four weeks, I want to go for a walk, GROWL). I'm used to controlling my environment to make myself feel better, but now I'll have to dig a bit deeper than usual to cope with Covid-19.

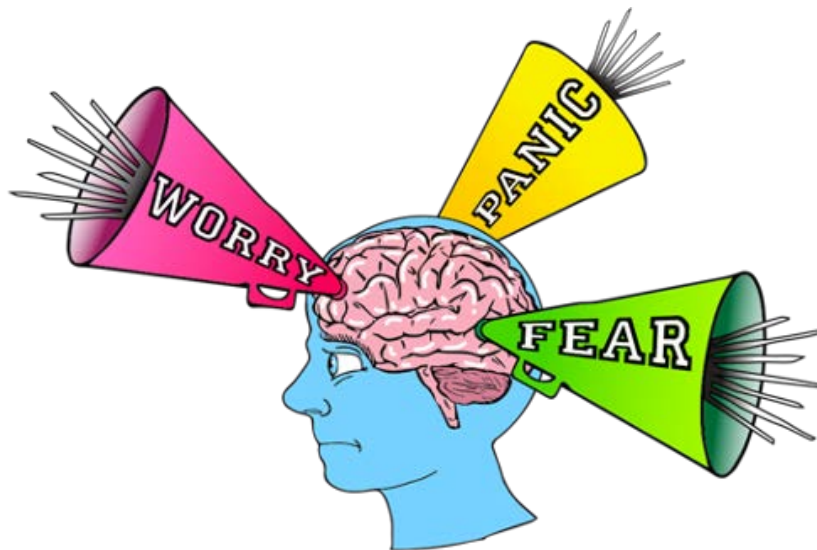
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<sup>1</sup><https://positivepsychology.com/3-steps-negativity-bias/>

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEHwB1PG\\_-Q&t=24s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEHwB1PG_-Q&t=24s)

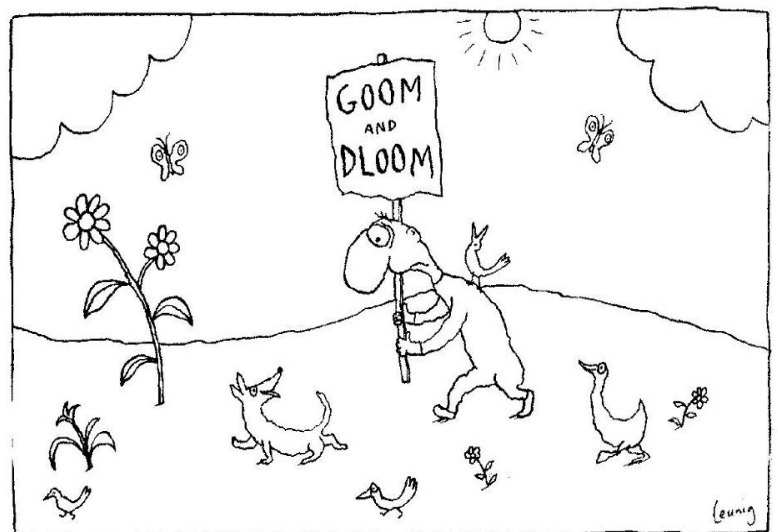
<sup>3</sup> I refer to the three perspectives: the ability to take another's perspective, the ability to maintain perspective, and the ability to take a positive perspective.

We all respond differently to stress and trauma, which depends on our previous history with stress and trauma<sup>4</sup>. Sometimes our behaviour can be out of character during an amygdala hijack. It's the reason we're seeing so much panic buying. You can't reason with people who are deeply scared because they've lost access to the thinking part of their brain. It can happen to the best of us<sup>5</sup>.



If we are caught in an amygdala hijack, we will be more prone to worry and panic. Worry promotes “what if” thinking (e.g., what if they run out of food, what if we lose all our customers, what if I lose my job, what if the zoo can't look after the animals, what if I want a divorce after spending 4 weeks with my husband).

Worry also promotes cognitive distortions (e.g., catastrophizing – the whole world is in chaos; predicting the future – we're going to die; discounting the positive – everyone is out for themselves)<sup>6</sup>. Because humans fear the unknown, these times are perfect for anxiety.



<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95ovlJ3dsNk>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/files/attachments/51483/handling-the-hijack.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://psychcentral.com/lib/15-common-cognitive-distortions/>

Our brain is designed for short bursts worry, not the kind of ongoing panic we are seeing today. Hence, we are more likely to get over-stressed, overwhelmed, and over-Covid-19!

It is critical that we all take steps to manage the stress response.

In doing so we can re-gain perspective and deploy our resources to coping rather than worrying.

## Self-care during Covid-19

### Calming your brain and body

Healthy coping begins with knowing how to de-activate our stress response. One of the best ways to calm your body down is through diaphragmatic breathing<sup>7-8</sup>.

Calm, steady breathing, focusing on nothing but your breath for a count of six breaths in and six breaths out. I always encourage people to visualise themselves, breathing into their diaphragm like they are trying to blow up a balloon. The breath out is like deflating the balloon. The main focus is on achieving a slow, steady breath out. You can try breathing out through your lips to slow the exhalation breath down.

The main goal is to focus on nothing but your breath. Let go of any thoughts, emotions, images, sensations, sounds, that distract you from your breath. Easier said than done. Sometimes I have to let go of hundreds of distractions before I settle into my breath. So much so my Mum sent me this birthday card for my 35th birthday (ok, it was my 46th birthday).



<sup>7</sup><https://www.heartfoundation.org.nz/your-heart/post-heart-attack/relaxation-techniques>

<sup>8</sup>[https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what\\_focusing\\_on\\_the\\_breath\\_does\\_to\\_your\\_brain](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_focusing_on_the_breath_does_to_your_brain)

Mindful breathing is an excellent way to induce a feeling of calm into your body. You can't be relaxed and stressed at the same time. I would encourage you to set an alarm for set times during the day. No matter what, stop and do a guided meditation or breathing for at least five minutes.

There are excellent apps that can guide you through this process<sup>9</sup>. If you find it too challenging to begin, then I suggest you consider progressive muscle relaxation<sup>10</sup>. Progressive muscle relaxation offers a way to focus on something physical as you breathe.

It's time to start practising these essential skills. Either you're going to use them to help you get through the next four weeks, the next four months, or for the rest of your life. You have everything to gain by learning how to induce a sense of calm into your body.

### **Limit your exposure to media**

Minimise your exposure to news about Covid-19. We have access to all the bad things that are happening all around the world. The overload of bad news can trigger the negativity bias and an amygdala hijack<sup>11</sup>. Also, thanks to the design of our social brain, stress is contagious<sup>12</sup>. So that means you can take on the emotions of other people, particularly those with whom you can relate. Overall, it's a good idea to avoid as much news and social media about Covid-19 as you can.

Consider watching the news once a day. Or if you have significant anxiety issues, don't watch the news at all. Ask family and friends to notify you if anything changes. Also, limit your time on social media. I noticed my son's dance teacher recently put up a post saying, "Can people please stop forwarding me virus related messages in PM Facebook messenger. Images, texts, videos and voice recordings. I don't want to see any of it . Don't tag me either. Everything I want to know I can look up myself thanks".

It's a good idea!

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<sup>9</sup><https://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/apps/m/mental-health-and-wellbeing-apps-overview/>  
<https://samharris.org/contact/waking-up-app/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihO02wUzgkc>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kv6HkipQcfA>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/stress-cues-from-others#1>

## Maintain positive connections with other people



Another way to dis-engage the amygdala is by connecting with someone you love and trust. Given the stress people are under now, positive connections won't always be easy. I suggest you make a strategic wellbeing plan with loved ones. Sit down together and decide how you are going to increase positive emotions into your household. Positive emotions dampen down the stress response, increase creative and expansive thinking, all of which are great for problem-solving and resilient coping.

Use the time that you would spend travelling to work, or ferrying kids around to activities, to connect in with family and friends. Make time to play games, tell jokes, play charades, catch up for a virtual coffee date, or make an online dinner with friends. I've asked my family to write a card to each other, saying what they are going to do to increase positive connections with each other over the next four weeks.

Carefully consider how you communicate with people; we must have hopeful rather than fearful conversations. That might include, "yeah we're in scary times, but we live in New Zealand, we're going to look after each other". Don't get sucked into fearful conversations with others.

**Sometimes you may not feel like taking the extra steps to connect with other people. But you must do. Positive connections are the foundation of all our wellbeing.**

## Get busy

Our brains like to feel in control. Each time we achieve a goal, tick off something on our to-do list, learn something new, we give our brain a dopamine hit. Dopamine is one of the hormones associated with happiness.

Give the following a try: write a list of all the things you need to do around the house, read a book you've meant to, research a new hobby. Your brain will love you for it. You can use the dopamine hits to do the things that are not so pleasant, which is the chores or helping with maths homework for me.



## Practise gratitude and self-compassion

I've asked my family to journal their experience, focusing on three things that they are grateful for each day. To overcome the brain's natural tendency to focus on the negative, we have to train ourselves to notice the positive. We can build positivity into our brain, but it requires quite a bit of regular practice and effort<sup>13</sup>.

There is abundant research showing the benefits of practising daily gratitude to our wellbeing, happiness, and resilience<sup>14</sup>. Equally, there are abundant excellent exercises for increasing gratitude into our daily lives<sup>15</sup>.

Equally brilliant for our brains is compassion, to ourselves and others. Abundant research shows the positive effects of compassion on mental and physical health. Kristin Neff is a leading researcher on the benefits of compassion and has loads of great physical and mindfulness exercises that you can practise<sup>16</sup>. You can even take a test to see how self-compassionate you are<sup>17</sup>.

## Exercise

Exercise is a non-negotiable during times of stress.

Half an hour of moderate exercise a day can metabolise stress hormones and stabilise your mood<sup>18</sup>.

Get creative. I plan to get my kids to organise an obstacle course that we can time ourselves doing. The fastest person gets a prize.

## Focus on what you can control

We can't control the future, other people, or even our thoughts. The best we can do is focus on what we can control. Right now, this means things like self-isolating, creating routines at home, and keeping ourselves physically and mentally healthy.

Once we've put into place all the things that we need to for our safety and wellbeing, we need to let go of things we can't control, like the stock market.

**Plan for the worst and hope for the best.**

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<sup>13</sup><https://positivepsychology.com/neuroplasticity/>

<sup>14</sup><https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/pdfs/GratitudePDFs/2Wood-GratitudeWell-BeingReview.pdf>

<sup>15</sup><https://positivepsychology.com/gratitude-exercises/>

<sup>16</sup><https://self-compassion.org/>

<sup>17</sup><https://self-compassion.org/test-how-self-compassionate-you-are/>

<sup>18</sup><https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/exercising-to-relax>

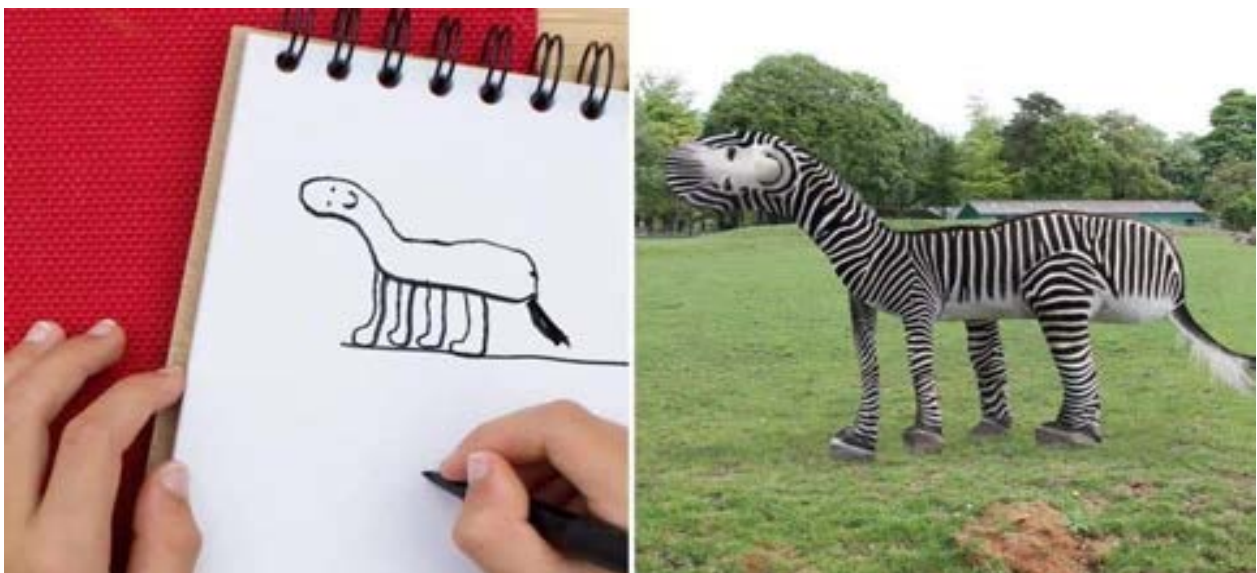
During difficult times I sometimes find my mental health improves. I know that I can't control the uncontrollable, so I focus instead on one step at a time, enjoying each moment for what it is.

I often use the serenity prayer is to guide my clients and my behaviour.

**GOD GRANT ME THE  
SERENITY  
TO ACCEPT THE THINGS  
I CANNOT CHANGE  
COURAGE  
TO CHANGE THE  
THINGS I CAN AND  
WISDOM  
TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE**

### **Making time for positive emotions**

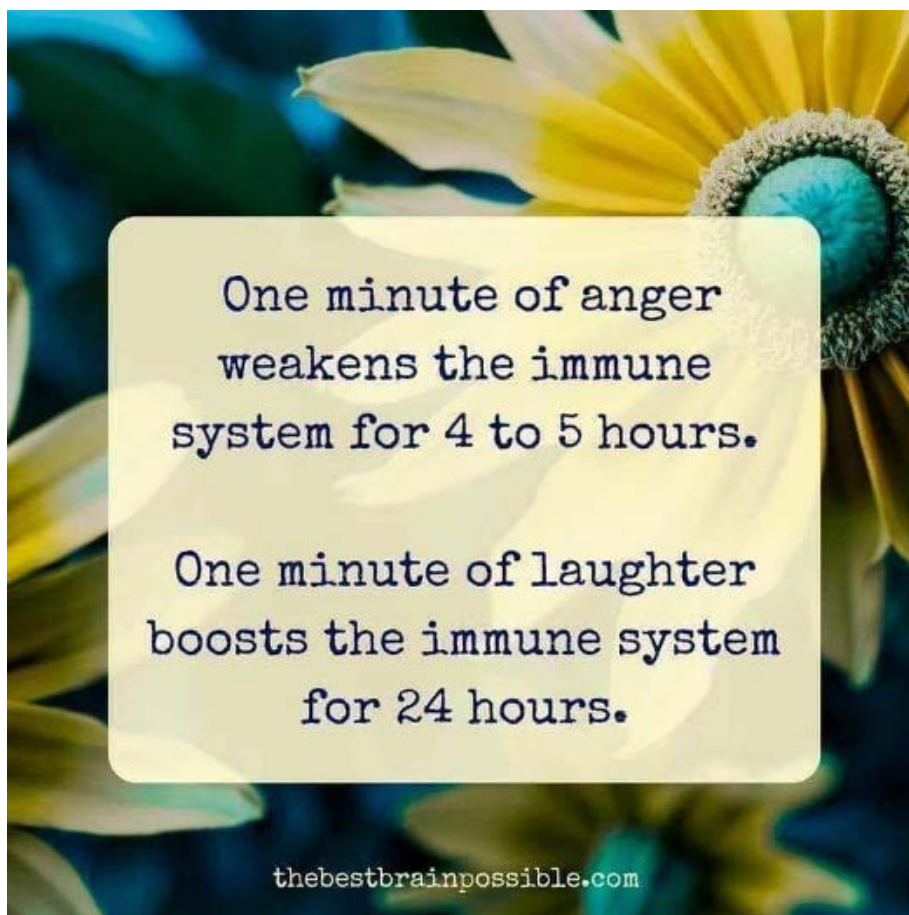
Scheduling time for positive emotions and fun is critical to your health and wellbeing. To overcome the negativity bias, and therefore reduce anxiety, we need to up our dose of positivity. Watch funny movies, get your kids to show you things they find funny. I especially like a father who has used his photoshop skills to make his children's drawings real<sup>19</sup>.



<sup>19</sup><https://twentytwowords.com/man-imagines-what-childrens-drawings-would-look-like-if-they-were-real/>

Speak to a friend or family member who you know always lifts your mood, or watch an inspiring TED video. You may not feel up to certain activities, so consider taking some opposite actions<sup>20</sup>.

To lift people's depression or anxiety, we sometimes ask them to do the exact opposite of what they feel like doing. The technique is especially helpful when an emotion is stopping people from doing things that keep them well (e.g., exercising, stopping social media, hanging out with the kids, reaching out to a friend). But it's often these exact actions that can make us feel better. So rather than waiting for your mood to improve on its own, sometimes you need to nudge it along.



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<sup>20</sup><https://www.sunrisertc.com/opposite-action/>

## Look where you want to go



If your thoughts and emotions are difficult right now, then it means you're coping just fine. These are tough times, so tough feelings are normal and expected. However, if you notice any particularly negative and unhelpful thoughts and emotions, then you must learn how to let them go.

I liken the concept of accepting difficult emotions to snowboarding. When I learnt to snowboard my instructor said,

**“Don't look where you don't want to go,  
look where you want to go”.**

I noticed that fear made me look at the rocks, and my body followed. I ended up at the exact place I was trying to avoid, in the rocks. Instead, by focusing on the safe downward slope, I ended up snowboarding to where I wanted to go.

The same applies to our lives. Sometimes we need to notice difficult emotions, but not act on them. If we can self-care (breathe, distract ourselves, think of more positive thoughts) until the fear, anger, shame, etc, settles, then we open up our options for more positive action. We give ourselves a chance to behave in a way that moves us towards what is most important to us, such as saving money rather than impulse buying, not working too much at home and playing with the kids, taking time to exercise and self-care.

I recommend Russ Harris sushi train metaphor, to learn a technique for letting go of unwanted negative thoughts and emotions<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzUoXJVI0wo>

I also recommend that you keep a check on where your behaviours are during the day. Kevin Polk's Act Matrix can help us to remain focused on the actions that will ultimately keep us mentally and physically well and our relationships strong<sup>22</sup>.

Although the ACT Matrix doesn't include Keanu Reeves :( it does teach us how to sit with difficult emotions (bottom left) rather than act on them (top left). Instead, we focus on acting in a way that moves us closer to who and what is important to us (top right).



### Be careful if you have an underlying mental health condition

Experiences, where we feel helpless and hopeless, are not good for our mental health. People who have been fortunate enough to develop resilience through their lives will cope better at this time. However, others are less fortunate. Mental health conditions, poverty, violent relationships, prior trauma exposure, and physical illness, can prevent people from developing resiliency.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/DrKevinPolk?app=desktop>

If you notice that Covid-19 stress exacerbates any underlying anxiety or depression, it is crucial to reach out to a trusted friend or family member for support.

If you have a diagnosed anxiety disorder such as OCD, you may notice that certain activities (e.g., handwashing) may trigger further anxiety. If your usual tools for coping are ineffective, you may need to reach out to a mental health professional.

Contact your health professional or find a psychologist, social worker, or counsellor in New Zealand. Many mental health professionals, including myself, are going online. You can now request telepsychology with almost anyone in New Zealand<sup>22-23</sup>.

### Remember - we are designed to adapt

Remembering, us humans are a fairly resilient bunch, especially if we feel socially connected and supported.

I think the key to surviving Covid-19 is to be prepared. Start your wellbeing and resilience action plan now. Build activities into your day that will promote your resilience and wellbeing. We are all going to need a bit of a buffer over the next few weeks. If you need help in organising a plan for you and your family then contact a mental health provider, many of us are going online so finding support should not be too difficult.

Find some further inspiration watch Bréne Brown's TED talk or any one of her books, especially *The Power of Vulnerability*.

**Kia Kaha kiwis, we've got this.**



<sup>22</sup><https://www.nzccp.co.nz/for-the-public/find-a-clinical-psychologist/>

<sup>23</sup><https://www.talkingworks.co.nz/>

## Resources

- [justathought.co.nz](http://justathought.co.nz)
- [depression.org](http://depression.org)
- Need to Talk? – Call or text 1737
- <https://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/>
- Woebot – <https://woebot.io/>
- Lifeline – 0800 543 354 or (09) 5222 999 within Auckland
- Youthline – 0800 376 633, text 234, email [talk@youthline.co.nz](mailto:talk@youthline.co.nz) or online chat
- Depression Helpline – 0800 111 757
- Suicide Crisis Helpline – 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)
- Your local Emergency Department, General Practitioner, or Practice Nurse.
- Balance Aotearoa: Peer Support and Advocacy – 06 345 4488
- Your organisation's Employee Assistance Provider
- Family Works – 04 473 5164
- Jigsaw – 06 345 1636
- Problem Gambling Foundation of NZ – 0800 664 262