

## Stressed, locked down Auckland workforce ignored in Govt's Level 3 decision

***Wellington-based Government officials have decided Level 3, Step 1 rules on Aucklanders getting together outside applies only to friends and family, not companies worried about increasingly stressed and burnt out staff. At best that's crazy, at worst it's dangerous.***

**Comment:** Business leaders (even business journalists) might be forgiven for being perplexed. Aucklanders can now have a picnic with friends, or a walk with whānau. And that's good. We know that safe connection is great for our mental health.

But what about a manager who wants to catch up with a struggling staff member in the park, or a stressed, stuck-at-home office worker looking for support from a colleague through a one-on-one, masked, stroll along a beach? Sorry, under Level 3, step 1 rules that's a no-no, according to government officials.



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If it's work-related, you have to stick to Zoom.

“The intention of the alert Level 3, Step 1 easing of restrictions is to allow increased opportunities for outdoor recreation, and to encourage social connection with close friends and / or whānau outdoors,” a COVID-19 Group, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) spokesperson said in an email to Newsroom in response to a specific question about colleagues meeting outdoors around stress and wellbeing.



Aucklanders enjoying the first weekend in Level 3, step 1. Photo: Sharon Brett Kelly

“People should continue to work from home where possible, and continue to meet and connect with their work colleagues online.”

Brett O’Riley, chief executive of the Employers and Manufacturers Association is more than perplexed about the DPMC guidance. He’s downright furious.

**“How can DPMC advocate that with a clear conscience? Do a small group of people in Wellington know what’s happening in Auckland? Do they realise how serious the situation is?”**

**– Brett O’Riley, EMA**

This isn’t an abstract conversation, O’Riley says. This is about companies with staff members at risk, maybe suicidal. It’s about telling business leaders to ignore their duty of care to an increasingly vulnerable workforce.

“How can DPMC advocate that with a clear conscience? Do a small group of people in Wellington know what’s happening in Auckland? Do they realise how serious the situation is?”



Brett O'Riley says the decision by the Government needs to be changed. Photo: Supplied

After O'Riley told a group of senior business leaders about the DPMC guidance, he received a return email from one telling him about a small business suicide the day before - not the first.

"If this was an earthquake, you'd have people from Government on the ground dealing with it," O'Riley says. "We can't ignore this stuff."

O'Riley says it's increasingly common for stressed people working from home to simply go off the grid - not reply to emails, not come to meetings. If that happened, O'Riley would have no hesitation advising a company to get someone around to knock on the door of that staff member's house to check on their wellbeing, have a chat, take them out for a walk.

Newsroom asked DPMC that question too.

Could colleagues travel across Auckland to meet up with colleagues or staff members if the reason isn't recreation but work-related mental health?

The answer was clear. No.



PM Jacinda Ardern's department's message is you can't use Level 3, step one to support stressed workmates. Photo: Mark Mitchell

“Travel within the Auckland area at Step 1 can occur for recreation, or if people are meeting up in an outdoor setting with the single other household that they wish to catch up with.

"As it's still Alert Level 3 in Auckland, we are encouraging people who need to connect with work colleagues to continue to do this online. Again the purpose of Step 1 is to allow for those important friends and whānau connections to be re-established in a safe way. While Step 1 allows increased opportunities for outdoor recreation, it is not intended that this changes the Alert Level 3 guidance around business operations.”

### **Mounting stress and burnout**

Jo Nicol, an organisational change consultant and director of Hiakai co-labs, says there are a lot of stressed executives and team members out there.





Jo Nicol says lockdown-enforced working from home is extraordinarily stressful for some people.  
Photo: Nikki Mandow

“The big themes are fatigue. People worn out at 11am and lack of motivation, feeling like you can’t be bothered, even with things you normally enjoy, like reading, gardening. People talk about a fuzzy mind, finding it harder to make decisions, conversations in Zoom meetings going in a circle; they worry about being unproductive.”

If someone starts off vulnerable, the stress of working through a series of Covid lockdowns can easily push them further down, says Amanda Maoate, a registered psychotherapist and performance coach with humansoftware.

**“I’m seeing it a lot: high stress levels, low mood, sleep disturbances, and escapism – alcohol, comfort eating, online shopping.”**  
**– Amanda Maoate, humansoftware**

“There’s a cumulative effect, which for some people can tip them over the edge. Disrupted sleep, poor concentration, poor focus, their anxiety goes up, and it can lead to depression.

“I’m seeing it a lot: high stress levels, low mood, sleep disturbances, and escapism – alcohol, comfort eating, online shopping.”

An [article from US business publication \*Forbes\*](#) suggested 94 percent of locked-down workers are stressed; it quoted [research from tech giant Oracle](#) from late last year, which concluded 2020 was the most stressful year ever – people are now at breaking point.

“Some 78 percent believe the coronavirus pandemic has severely affected their mental health; 40 percent are making more flawed decisions, and 90 percent say newfound work-related stress affects their home lives,” the *Forbes* article says. “The culmination of which is unprecedented levels of depression (up 53 percent), anxiety (up 55 percent), and even post-traumatic stress disorder (up 32 percent). Closer to home, a 2020 survey of 900 workers by local recruitment company Frog found 64 percent of workers feel more burnt out than they did before the first Covid lockdown.



Shannon Barlow says working parents, managers, extroverts and new hires are most at risk of burnout. Photo: Supplied

In an [editorial on Frog’s website in March](#) this year, managing director Shannon Barlow pointed to locked-down working parents, managers, extroverts and new hires as most at risk from burnout - a World Health Organisation-recognised condition arising from poorly-managed work-related stress.

“Businesses today need to identify those who are at risk to provide the support needed,” Barlow says.

## **Staff say they are fine, but are they?**

The Government's Level 3, step 1 provisions aren't going to fix all the problems, but allowing companies to use safe face-to-face, or even side-to-side walking interactions to help staff would be an important step, the experts say.

And companies should ideally be doing it now, Nicol says, not waiting for some unknown future time when Aucklanders might be able to go back to work.

**“Physical presence is very important because you get a much deeper sense of what's happening for people.”  
– Jo Nicol, Hiakai co-labs**

Companies need to be proactive with their staff - looking for teams and individuals in difficulty, she says. “Go and assess the mental health of your people.

“Physical presence is very important because you get a much deeper sense of what's happening for people.”



Matt Doocey says 50 percent of small businesses have identified mental health concerns. Photo: Lynn Grieveson

National Party MP Andrew Bayly agrees. A couple of weeks ago he hosted an online SME-focused panel discussion, including O'Riley from EMA and [National's](#)

mental health spokesman Matt Doocey, a former mental health practitioner with his own history with depression.

“Recent research shows up to 50 percent of small businesses have identified mental health concerns,” Doocey says. “Businesses are under huge stress and are also supporting staff. We need to be mindful of this.”

Doocey lives in the South Island, but Bayly is in rural Auckland. For him the Government restrictions on providing real-life support for staff members feels personal. Bayly is worried about one member of his team who is alone at home, struggling with technology and pretty isolated in lockdown.

**“If I ask how she is, she says she’s fine, but is she? The only way to find out if she’s really okay is to meet up with her.”**

**– Andrew Bayly, National Party**

“A Zoom call is restrictive, it’s very difficult to gauge people’s reaction, particularly if you are trying to discuss something emotive.

“If I ask how she is, she says she’s fine, but is she? The only way to find out if she’s really okay is to meet up with her.

“If she was a family member I could do that, but because she’s a staff member, the DPMC says I can’t.”

### **The problems with Zoom**

Brett O’Riley says says the sort of eyeball-to-eyeball interaction you get on a video call doesn’t work for some people.

“You may not want to look at someone face-to-face and some cultures don’t want to do that. I’ve been on Zoom calls where people have turned their camera off because something has been too painful to talk about - that’s the first sign something is wrong.

"What do you do - nothing or do you get into the car and drive over to see if they're okay?"

Nicol says trying to resolve a problem via Zoom can sometimes make things worse. “People are uptight, they have a low tolerance for banter, they are losing their sense of humour - it’s easy to say the wrong thing.”



**“Talking directly with someone, in the same physical place, gives them a better chance to vent their concerns, to talk about things, to work through misunderstandings.”**

## **Jo Nicol**

Both she and Maoate have also noticed people turning off their cameras on video calls, and agree it’s a bad sign.

“Talking directly with someone, in the same physical place, gives them a better chance to vent their concerns, to talk about things, to work through misunderstandings,” Nicol says.

Even the opportunity to leave the house during a work day, to get in the car and drive somewhere can have mental health benefits, Maoate says. but staff often don’t feel they have time or permission to abandon the job.

A company encouraging management and staff to take some of their interactions out of their homes can lower stress levels enormously, Maoate says.

“[In a non-lockdown situation] what going outside to your workplace does is give some definition to your day and ring fence your roles. When I get in car and drive to my practice, it gives me thinking time, and it’s the same when I come home, it’s a debrief time, and both are really crucial - they can have positive upbeat impact on your brain.”



Just getting out of the house and into nature can lower stress levels. Photo: Tim Murphy

Lockdown has taken all of that away, Maoate says. “I can be doing my work and as soon as I open my door, I’m in the kitchen and have three kids looking at me. ‘What’s for dinner?’ There’s no period of debrief, and the stress just builds up.

“We are missing these punctuated parts of the day and people don’t realise that. We need to draw attention to that.”

“I’m not working from home, I’m living at work”, researchers from Kennesaw State University wrote in a study on the relationship between stress, work-related burnout, and Covid-enforced remote working and stay at home orders.

And there’s plenty of research literature around the benefits of being in the open air, particularly natural environments - on stress, on fatigue, motivation, focus, even potentially anxiety and depression

### **Feeling valued**

There’s one more crucial benefit of arranging a face-to-face meeting with a staff member, safe, masked and outside, rather than having a quick chat on Zoom, Maoate says. Making them feel valued.

“If the CEO or my manager tells me ‘We haven’t seen each other for a long time. Let’s go out and chat about how you are doing’, what does that say to me? How does that make me feel? I feel great, valued, important, worthy of their time.

“What does it do for motivation? My CEO wants to see me today. And it’s about connecting – real time, real life connection. It’s about having someone that will do whatever it takes to make sure I’m okay,” Maoate says.

Of course, it's unlikely the police will turn up to question two people walking, masks-on, through a park on a Tuesday afternoon and ask whether they are whānau or work colleagues. They are looking for safe, responsible behaviour.

But Maoate and Nicol would like to see companies formalising this sort of interaction, particularly with staff who may be struggling or vulnerable.

And that's not possible when the Government so clearly says it's not allowed.

## **Stick to a yoga mat**

Bizarrely, what a concerned workplace is allowed to do for its stressed, working-from-home staffers is to organise an exercise session in the park or on the beach. And there, the business isn't limited to two staff members. Up to 10 people from different bubbles can attend.

The Prime Minister mentioned this specifically for Level 3, step 1 in her briefing last week:

"The final change for this first phase is the ability to move around Auckland for recreation purposes. You'll be able to visit the beach, play bowls, sail, hunt, do outdoor CrossFit or yoga classes – all must continue to comply with the rule of being outside and keeping it to 10 people physically distanced."

Really? Really. The fact this particular option was available for workplace groups as well as social or whānau groupings was confirmed by Covid-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins at a 1pm press conference last week, and again by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet email to Newsroom. We asked, "could a business organise a group exercise class for up to 10 colleagues. A mindfulness session? A group discussion (sensibly distanced) around how people are coping with lockdown?"

And the answer was yes. Certainly the exercise bit is okay, though it's unclear about the 'how are you coping?' discussion.

"If people at Step 1 wish to take part in an organised, outdoor class to assist with mental health and wellbeing, then that would be considered appropriate under the Step 1 settings, as long as they remain physically distanced," the DPMC spokesperson said.

There's something that feels heartless, almost cruel about even having to ask these questions about businesses being able to use Step 1 to support workers. More particularly the answer, sorry, no.

As Brett O'Riley puts it, this isn't an abstract conversation, an interesting debate about the semantics of what we Aucklanders are allowed to do in different steps of Level 3 lockdown.

This is about people's lives and in the worst cases, deaths.

***If you have a message for the Government around mental health in your own business and what measures would help the wellbeing of your staff or colleagues, please get in touch. [contact@newsroom.co.nz](mailto:contact@newsroom.co.nz)***